

A Review On The Social Life Of Mising Tribe Of Assam

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Abstract: North – East India is a land of conglomeration of multiple ethnic groups. Among the eight sisters of north – east , Assam is significant where around seventeen tribes resides. Their tradition , culture, dress, language, food habit and unique way of life enriches Assamese society and culture. Next to Bodo tribe , the Mising formerly referred to as Miri is considered as the second largest ethnic group of Assam. They belong to Indo - Mongoloid group. Basically they are riverine tribe. Their marriage system is typical enough. Generally there are different ways that the Mising get married. The traditional religious beliefs of the Mising are animistic in nature. The people of Misig consider themselves to be the descendent of donyi polo. Significantly all rites are performed by the Mibu. But in due course of time many rites and rituals have already been lost from the society. Ali – Aye-Ligang and Po:rag are the chief traditional festivals observed by the Mising. Notably contribution of Mising tribe towards building a strong democracy is remarkable one. In this paper an attempt has been made to understand the socio cultural life of Mising tribe of Assam.

Keywords: Ali aye Ligang, do:nyi polo, democracy, Mising tribe, marriage system, , mibu, po:rag.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, India has been a melting pot of diverse linguistic, cultural, religious ethnic groups and races. The North Eastern part of India is a hub of multiethnicity speaking different languages, using diverse dialects. There are more than 220 ethnic groups in the North East India alone that reside with their own entity. Assam, the North East frontier state of India is found to be lived by both tribal and non tribal population.. Major tribes include – Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Deori, Sonowal Kacharis, Rabha, Tiwa, Dimasa etc [1]. Significantly in 2001 the tribal population of Assam is much higher(12.40%) than that of the country as a whole(8.20%) [2]. As per 2011 Census of India, the population of Mising in Assam is 6,80,424 of which 3,45,786 are male and 3,34,638 are female, with sex ratio of 967 per thousand [3]. The Mising people are Mongoloid and belong to Tibeto – Burmese group. Many centuries ago, they came down to Arunachal Pradesh from North West China. They settled in the hills lying north of the upper Brahmaputra Valley in Siang and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. In the early part of the 12th century they migrated down to the plains of Assam in quest of a peaceful and conducive economic life. Basically the Mising tribe resides on the bank of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Mostly are scattered in North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Jorhat [4]. As a riverine tribe, Mising indicates blend of mi ‘man’ and asi ‘water’. Some other argued it to be a blend of mi ‘man’ and yasing ‘white’ i.e good (figuratively) [5].

2 ‘MIRI’, ‘MISHING’ AND ‘MISING

Miri is an exonym, the people of Assam earlier called them Miri. Mishing is an autonym which is used by the tribe to identify themselves. According to E. A. Gait, the word Miri means middle man who act as a channel of communication between the people of Assam and Abors of Arunachal Pradesh by which they are known in Assam which means go between [6].

Edward Tuite Dalton opined “For long period under the Assam Government managed to keep themselves the entire trade between Assam and the Abors; and as being thus the only medium of communication between the two peoples, they obtained the name Miri, which means mediator or go between”[7]. As per Assam District Gazetteer “The Miris living in the plains are riverian people dwelling on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, and called themselves Mishing, ‘Miri’ being Assamese word for go between or interpreter”[8]. Infact the Mising is officially recorded as Miri in the list of Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of India [5]. A British administrator named J.F. Needham in his publication of Outline Grammar of the Shaiyang Miri Language in 1886 was the first to mention that the Miris call themselves Mishing using ‘h’ in spelling the word. J.H.Lorrain , in his A Dictionary of the Abor – Miri Language(1910) and others , who wrote about the Misings, also used the same spelling [5]. However the apex body of Mising working for the development of Mising language and literature – “Mising Agom Kebang” used the word ‘Mising’ since the 1970s as the Mising language ,as it is spoken today, has in its phonemic system only one unvoiced sibilant sound that can be written as ‘s’, but none that can be written as ‘sh’ [5]. In contemporary times, Mising is preferred to identify the tribe and consider Miri as a derogatory term [9] .

3. HOUSEHOLDS

As a riverine people, the village Mising people have to face flood every year during rainy season. So as a protection they have been continuing their practice of living in a ‘Changhar’ – a thatched house , raised about 4 -5 feet from the ground with a bamboo and wooden stilts. It is a platform house which is traditionally known as Taleng Okum. The length of the house varies from 20 to 70 meters and 4 to 6 meters in breadth.. The house is looked like a rectangular in shape. Joint family system is practiced significantly among the Mising [10]. There is a fire place within a Mising house called as ‘Merum’ where daily meals are cooked and offerings are performed in the fire place. Its peculiarity is that it has been looked upon with much respect. The granary has been built in nearby house [11].

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4. MARRIAGE SYSTEM

As the Mising families are patriarchal, a girl goes to live with her husband's family after marriage. Generally marriage systems are such as – Da : roMidang i.e formal marriage through negotiation of parents of both boys and girls. It may be a love marriage or arrange marriage but the marriage is done formally. In this system marriage is performed as per social norms. In today's Mising society, the educated and well to do parents prefer to arrange formal marriage. Dugla la nam i.e marriage by elopement (at the consent of bride). It has been common and chief form of marriage sanctioned by the Mising village society since earlier. Because of inability to sustain the cost of formal marriage and family's opposition to the marriage may compel the boys and girl to choose such type of marriage system. And Kumna sola La:nam i.e a marriage through a simple ceremony. In such system heavy cost is not consumed. Usually the less affluent section of the people due to poverty or inconvenience practise such system of marriage. Marriage is celebrated by inviting a few elders and by offering Apong (rice beer) to them[9]. However in earlier days marriage by force was practiced widely in which a man considers a woman his wife without her will by way of taking her way from some place. But such forceful marriage is no more in modern sophisticated society [5]. Earlier, endogamy marriage was prominent. But now in modern society exogamous marriages are permissible. Monogamy is exercised widely although polygamy is permissible. However today polygamy is considered as a taboo in Mising society. Widow remarriage is accepted[9]. Significantly marriage between the same surnames does not take place even if the sun rises in the west. For example Pegu boy cannot marry a Pegu girl, because people sharing the same surname are considered as brother and sisters in the community. Besides marriage between allied groups of families cannot take place[12]. In the Mising society cross cousin marriage is prevalent also. One can marry father's sister's daughter or mother's brother's daughter. Other than these no cross cousin marriage is prescribed [13].

5. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The Mising follow three major religious belief system viz beliefs about the creator of the universe, beliefs about the existence of spirits around human habitats and beliefs about human souls. The traditional religious beliefs of the Mising are animistic in nature. They believe in different supernatural beings haunting the earth usually unseen [14]. As per Mising religious belief the universe was created by "Sedi Babu(father Sedi) and "Melo"(Mother). Prior to them there was absolutely nothing, no air, water, any objects etc. From Sedi-Melo, Abo – Tani were born who were the creator of human race. From Abo – Tani, Do;nyi (Sun) and Polo (Moon) were born. The Mising consider themselves to be the descendent of the Sun and Moon. On all auspicious occasions, the Sun who they call Ane Do:nyi-'Mother Sun' and the Moon who they call Abu Po:lo 'Father Moon' are worshiped [15]. Mising people have a faith on yalo (soul)[9]. Yalo indicates two meaning that is the soul human body is called "Wee Yalo" and "Wee Among" which goes to the abode of spirits after death. The soul as per the belief of Mising people is invisible and immortal. Their belief about soul is a little bit difference to that of the belief of Hindu religion. Mising pay homage to "Wee Yalo" sacrificing pig, owl, and offering Apong (indigenous liquor-rice beer) etc. which is known as 'Orom' performed in a year or so and if not, in every

five years. This is done by the Mising people as they believe that even after the demise the "Wee Yalo" remains within this earthly world but are not visible to us, moves like a living human being, wants to have drink, desires for food and are doing all such activities which a man possesses during his life. As the "Wee Yalo" are invisible they have a privilege to take revenge to human beings if people will do harm to them [15]. According to Kuli, Mising people worship the spirits underlying thunder and lightening (Mukling Teleng), earth and water (Among Asi), air and fire (Esar Emi). As per Mising beliefs, they are benevolent to human beings, protect their farms and families from damages and misfortune. These spirits have to be kept appeased with occasional offerings called Taleng Uie and Rokpu Done (eater of white cock). There are various other evil spirits such as Asi uie, Adi uie, Umrang uie etc. to whom all calamities are attributed. Another important spirit is Dopum Dorum who is believed to be a three headed demon. The Mibu or the village expert is the only person who can appease these spirits. The Mibu is the chief priest and he is invited to conduct all religious occasions. [15]. Now Hinduism has been influencing in their religious beliefs. The impact of Vaishnava religion of Srimanta Sankardeva is notable one in their religious belief. Today every Mising village has a Namghar (prayer hall) where they perform Nam Kirtan (chanting the name of Bishnu, the God) and offer some uncooked food items like gams, pulses, banana, coconut etc. which is offered as oblation called Prasad. In the Vaishnavite rituals no apong or meat of pig or fowl is used [16]. It is seen that in the traditional religious system 'Mibu' was the only priest of the Mising. But since the days when Mising accepted Vaishnava religion, a new type of religious leadership emerged known as 'Satual'. But the importance of 'Mibu' have not totally disappeared from the Mising society. Now a days the Mising society practise animistic, worshipping of spirits, ancestors, sacrificing of fowls as well as follows vaishnavite religion according to their elders choice [17]. It has also been observed that recently many of Mising have been converting Christianity recently Thus the Mising people have been divided into numerous religious sects [17].

6. FESTIVALS

The traditional chief festivals – Ali – Aye- Ligang and Po:rag are observed by the Mising. These festivals are connected with agriculture. The very colourful festival Ali Aye –Ligang is the most significant festival for the Mising community celebrated with zest and zeal. 'Ali' means roots 'Aye' means fruits, 'Ligang' means sowing. Thus it is celebrated by sowing of rice paddy(especially ahu paddy) seeds and praying for a good crop for the whole year and for wellbeing. Ahu paddy was the first product cultivated by the Mising when they first came to Assam. Ali aye Ligang marks the start of agrarian activities when the Mising people sow the seeds for a new season [9]. This festival is celebrated on the first Wednesday of Fagun month which falls mostly in the month of February all over Assam. In earlier times although this festival is held at fagun month of Assam, no any particular day is considered to celebrate. Since 1956, Mising Bane Kebang considered Wednesday as a good day to be held. Since then onwards Ali Aye Ligang has been celebrated on Wednesday [11]. Centuries ago the main function of the festival, liggad (sowing of seeds for a new agrarian season) was performed by Mibu(traditional priest). Now because of the change of the society, the work of liggad is led by head of the family and

Mibu is not invited [18]. Ali Aye Ligang is not only an agricultural festival but also it reflects the socio cultural scenario and religious thought. The invocation of Sedi – Melo, Do:nyi – Polo accompanied by ritual songs praying to witness the sowing function on the bosom of the mother earth, appealing to her to make the soil fertile without any harmful effect of animal, insects, birds makes us understand about the religious touch in this festival. Thus this festival is a symbol of greenery, nature and thanksgiving to forefathers [19]. Prayers, dancing, singing is the characteristic feature of this festival where men and women celebrate the occasion by singing and dancing in the courtyard of every household in the village. The whole atmosphere is surcharged with dance known as 'gumrag', with musical instrument of 'Dhol or drums', 'Pepa', 'Siphung'(flutes), 'cymbals' etc. and 'oinitom'(Mising song). Through such dance ,hunting, fishing, weaving acts are performed. It is notable that this festival shows unity of the community as irrespective of rich and poor, all younger and age old people come forward to celebrate this festival. The dance and songs performed in this festival also indicates their power of unity [18]. Essential food items of this festivals include pork, Apong (homemade rice wine), namsing, purang (a kind of sticky rice, packed in leaves of wild cardamom and boiled) etc. The last day of festival is called 'Lilen' observed with a grand community feast[14]. In the past, before the beginning of this festival a community hunting party was out from the villages in search of food for the festival. However this trend has been lost to a some of great extent. The animal conservation planning of the forest department is mainly responsible behind the loss of this trend of hunting (14). Po:rag is one of the socio religious festivals of Mising. The festival is celebrated as a post harvest festival i.e after complete harvest of Guni Amro (Ahu) crops. The main function of the Po:rag begins on any Wednesday after the harvest. Unlike Ali Aye Ligang, The Po:rag is celebrated after a break of around five to ten years since its celebration needs huge force and expenditure. Po:rag is celebrated in Murong with zest and zeal. In some villages where no permanent Murong is available, a temporary house is built to perform the function [19]. The Mibu performed all the sacrificial rituals of the festivals. The celebration takes place for around three to four days. Apong and pigs are essential food items for the celebration since pork and apong are considered indispensable in various ceremonial functions [20]. Of late some changes are taking place in practicing these rites. With changing course of time the ritual rigidity is relaxed and in certain cases the Mibu is not invited to perform the ritual. In some places mostly in urban areas, the festivals are celebrated as a social festivals giving more emphasis on feast and merry making without laying stress on the religious sides [21]]

7. FOOD HABITS

Food habits of the Mising are now a days similar to those of non tribal neighbouring Hindus of Assam. But to a certain extent , their food habits still have a similarity with the Adis of Arunachal [22].The Mising tribes favours non veg items such as fowl, pork, dried fish, namsing (prepared in the hot rays of the sun or over the hearth of a fire placed and then preserved in bamboo sieve) etc. Apong (rice beer) is valuable item for entertaining guests. Apong is considered prominent one used in various ceremonial functions and in worshipping of spirits. Rice is the staple food of the Mising. Purang item is used in

various celebrations. Along with rice they take leafy vegetables, edible roots and fish. The use of betel nuts cannot be denied in Mising society [14]. There are certain food taboos among the Misings. If any member of the family dies then taking of meat is prohibited to all the members of the family until the obsequial performances of the deceased are over. Again if a party is out on hunting , the villagers must not take any meat, no animal is killed or sacrificed till the hunting party return to the village. Taking of milk, egg, mustard oil and spices is not very popular, but gradually greater use of such products is gaining ground[22]. The various food items of this ethnic group has got demand now a days. Infact such food items are famous now among the non Mising community of Assam [15].

8. CONTRIBUTION OF THE MISING TOWARDS BUILDING A STRONG DEMOCRACY

Democracy has been prevailing in Mising society since time immemorial. The Mising society is utterly controlled through democratic system. There is no historical evidence of the prevalence of monarchy. The selection of the chief of Mising village is conducted through democratic system. Generally the eldest person who are socially conscious and experienced holder are selected as a village chief in a public meeting or Kebang. The village chief is known as 'Gam' or 'Gaonburha' [9]. Kebang and Bane Kebang is a democratic institution that wishes and aspirations of the members of Mising society are expressed. It can be termed as village council of the Mising which are entrusted all legal and judicial powers that directs and regulates all matters of common interest as well as adjudicates matters of disputes. At present Kebang can be compared to village panchayats. Matters like marriage , divorce, theft, assault, homicide are settled by Kebang. Kebang can be considered as the supreme body within the traditional self governance system. The judicial, social, cultural, political , morality and administration of the villages – all such matters are tackled by Kebang. It is constituted by elders and the jurisdiction of Kebang is limited to its own village only. Inter village disputes are settled by Bane Kebang constituted by all the Gams of the villages. [23]. Morung is bachelor's dormitory of the Mising. It is a public hall where public gatherings and participations are seen to serve the purpose of annual porag and other festivals. Public gatherings are held here. It is the usual venue where the village Gams (head) deliver judgement in certain cases and punish the offenders. Thus it is prime socio cultural institution for the youths that helps to attain social education and life experience . It is a symbol of village unity , integrity and assimilation [9]. The decentralized governing unit Mising Autonomous Council established under the Mising Autonomous Council Act, 1995 is a democratic system that leads a positive initiative in contributing towards progressive democracy. The Mising Autonomous Council acts as a supervisory power and come forward for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural development of the Mising community [17]. Even today Mising Autonomous Council collaborates with the Centre for Microfinance & Livelihood (CML) to implement livelihood interventions to help the Mising people. Their focus areas of development are – supporting women to earn more through handloom weaving, increasing farm incomes through integrated fishery – duckery – horticulture project etc.[24]. The Takam Mising Porin Kebang (TMPK) is a Mising students' organization that works for socio economic upliftment of Mising

community and has been playing a significant political role in Assam. Ever since its inception the TMPK started movement demanding identity of Mising people, linguistic right etc.[17] The development of the Mising has been largely dependent on the extend of involvement in the political process of the state. Hence they want to be politically powerful. In this regard TMPK political involvement is notable one. As such the Mising people for the first time participated in the general election of 1996 with demand for autonomy. However none of them could win a single seat. But their involvement in election politics clearly signifies the emotion and sentiment of the Mising in the game of power politics [14]. It is seen that TMPK took various democratic agitation programmes on different issues and pressurize the government at different phases. On their demands such as recognition of Mising language as medium of instructions on Mising inhabited areas, creation of Autonomous Council under the Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution, removal of their socio economic backwardness and so on issues, TMPK held a series of discussions in different times between Central and State government [20]. Participation of Mising women in the democratic system is notable today. Earlier participation of Mising women in the political affairs was negligible. However in course of time under the influence of modern education Mising women began to participate actively in the political affairs. The formation of All Mising Women Organisation (Takam Mising Mime Kebang) indicates the involvement of women in the democratic system. Even today also Mising women join politics and sustain in it. It is to be said that this organization is responsible for their identity movement, for upliftment of socio cultural, language from time to time [21] .

9. CONCLUSION

From the discussions it is seen that the Mising tribe is a major tribe of Assam. They migrated to the plains of Assam for livelihood. The traditional lifestyles of the Mising is changing in due course of time. Through assimilation of other groups of Assam, the culture and life of the Mising constantly been changed. Change is visible in every sphere of their life. In religious sphere, a large number of Mising people have given up some age old traditional religious beliefs and converts them into various form of Hinduism. Significantly many rites and rituals have already been lost from the society. In the system of marriage also, some modifications are seen. While observing festivals it is seen that in some places especially I township the traditional tract has been changed. While observe such festival it should be noticed that the change shouldnot be untowards change. The various socio cultural and poltical institutions of the Mising society should be given utmost importance for their structural development as these institutions are symbol of unity , identity and integrity of Mising society. Remarkably, there is no any system of monarchy of Mising society. Traditionally Mising society is a democratic society. They strengthen democracy at grassroots level.

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