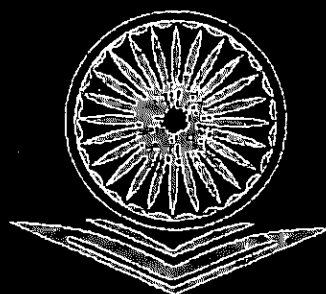


A MINOR RESEARCH PROJECT  
ON  
RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES OF THE MISINGS  
OF ASSAM : CONTINUITY AND CHANGES  
from 16th to 20th Century



ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये

Submitted by  
Dr. Sadananda Payeng  
Associate Professor of History  
ADP College, Nagaon (Assam)

Sponsored by  
UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION  
NORTH-EAST REGIONAL OFFICE, GUWAHATI

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Date : 20-07-2018

  
(Dr. Sadananda Payeng)

## PREFACE

The tribes of India who are estimated to be 86 millions in persons are no longer in the primitive stage of living. One upon a time the tribes were called *asura* (uncivilized), *danava* (barbarious), *adi manava* (primitive man) *adivasi* (indigenous), *banavasi* (forest dwellers) etc. indicating that the tribals were completely separate groups from rest of the other culturally advanced people of the country. Now, the Indian tribes are no longer living in the primitive stage to be called *asura*, *danava* or *banavasi*. They have become parts of the national life participating in the country's economic, political, educational and cultural systems. They are in the process of social transition from primitive to modern stage. The transition has been going on through different processes – such as religious conversion, production system, education, political system etc. Some tribes are reforming their own beliefs and practices and others are adopting the cultural traits of high castes etc. In North- East India, many tribal groups have converted to either Hinduism or Christianity. The non-convert tribes are generally Hindu oriented. Such tribes use to worship Hindu deities and offer *puza* (ritual) at Hindu *mandir*, consult Hindu astrology and show respect to the Hindu *sadhu* (monk); but at the same time maintain their traditional customs, beliefs and practices which are not necessarily part of Hindu system. Such tribes tend to reform their culture within the framework of Hinduism. The hypothesis, however, needs further empirical inquiry in the context of semi-hinduised tribes who maintain some elements of their traditional beliefs and practices. Accordingly the Misings of Assam have been selected for the present study. It becomes important to understand how the tribes *change* their culture and how *a change helps* in social integration among the castes and tribes. It is in this context – present study has been undertaken.

The Misings are an Indo-Mongoloid tribe settled in the plains of Assam. They are, in terms of population, second largest tribe in Assam. Originally they were hill dwellers and lived in present Arunachal Pradesh. According to their legends and available historical records, they migrated to the present habitate around the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. After their migration to the plains, many changes have taken place in their socio-economic and political life. Under the influence of neo-vaisnavite movement, led by saint Sankaradeva, the tribe converted themselves into Hinduism. Nevertheless the Misings have not given up their traditional customs, beliefs and practices which are not necessarily part of neo- vaisnavite system. The present dissertation is an attempt in understanding the process of religious changes and continuity among the Misings of Assam.

Date : 20-07-2018

  
(Dr. Sadananda Payeng)

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# **CHAPTER- I**

## **INTRODUCTION**



## **CHAPTER- I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

India is the land of castes and tribes who belong to quite different historical backgrounds and social systems. The castes belong to the Hindu system and the tribe conceptually to primitive way of living in forest, depending on hunting and food gathering for survival. Thus in the past the castes and the tribes were spatially and socially separate from each other. In course of time, however, interactions between them began under varying circumstances. But it is difficult to specify a period during which the process of interactions between castes and tribes really developed. According to Soraf (1982:16-17), it were the 'enterprising British administrators, adventure loving travellers, profit making traders and humanists missionaries rediscovered them for us. Moreover, the exigencies of maintenance of law and order of administration, of justice and of promotion of trade and commerce coupled with the growing humanists concern, however, inaugurated the phase of their cultural transformation when social, political, economic, and religious and the like forces of the non-tribal world clearly invaded the tribal precincts'. As the colonial rule began the Christian Missionaries also started coming to India for proselytizing Christianity among the tribes in particular and depressed castes in general. Apart from other things the Missionaries introduced modern education among the tribes which enabled them to know about the people and their culture of other places more and more. The expansion of administration incorporating interior forest areas including the tribal land and habitats, by the colonial rule provided opportunities for close contacts between castes and other tribes. Tribals began to be engaged in their hitherto unknown industrial works like mining, plantation, road and building construction etc. in which they worked with people of other castes and communities.

The introduction of modern roads and communication system further enabled the tribes to travel to urban industrial and other places meeting people of different castes and creeds. Introduction of modern education by the British administration for common people of the country further help the exposure of the tribes to modern society and culture.

Thus under the impacts of the British rule far reaching changes have taken place among the tribals of India. In the course, the broad-spectrum process of change, the tribals had to work out many adjustments, make many shifts and attempts many redefinitions. Generally two polar models were available for them. They adopted one model or the other (or it was thrust on them)

in the past. These have been the Hindu and Christian models. Through the former model they discovered a way of life and thought not very radically dissimilar from their own” (Soraf: 1982:17). As such, any tribals gradually adopted Hindu beliefs and practices in their religious systems. According to Ahuja (2007:32) the urban area or in the midst of the numerically dominant non-tribal population has changed due to imbibing a large number of cultural traits of advanced Hindus.”

In Assam some of the tribes like the Kacharis, Pati Rabhas, and a section of the Bodos living in the valleys have adopted Hinduism as their religious faith. The Misings and the Deories also claim themselves to be Hindus by religion. Other studies elsewhere in India also find tribals becoming hinduised even before the advent of the British rule. In Risely’s (1915) view tribal transformation into castes has been going on from the “beginning of time”, which he meant from the pre-historic time. According to some thinkers the development and spread of the Hindu society is nothing but a gigantic special process of absorbing the tribal population of India into the original caste system. Some of them go to the extent of asserting that the present tribes are the relics of which have remained unassimilated into the Hindu society because of the British intervention.

Change is the law of nature. Society like other things of the world also undergoes changes of various types and seldom remains static. A social change becomes necessary to enable people to march with the times and register progress. G M Trevelyan (1942) in his *'English Social History'* writes 'Social changes moves like an underground river, obeying its own law or those of economic changes, rather than following the direction of political happenings that move on the surface of life.' It is clear that all societies are characterized both by continuity and changes. Continuity is maintained by social controls, particularly by the methods used in childrearing and educations which transmit the accumulated social heritage to the new generation. Social change as such is a continuous historical process that involves a series of developments or alterations within the structure of the social system. For better understanding of the process of social change we may consider some of the definitions of social change. Ginsberg (1958:205-229) opines 'a change in social structure i.e. the size of society, the composition of balance of its parts or the types of its organization. The term social change must also include change in attitudes or beliefs in so far as they sustain institutions and changes with them.' Nordscog (1960:31-36) stated that social change is a process of borrowing of cultural elements

from some other contemporary culture. This may happen by adoptions 'which means the act of taking and applying gamuting or putting into practice as one's own trait or complex which was not so originally.

In the Indian context of social Change, M N Srinivas put forward two concepts- Sanskritization and Westernization to explain some features of religious, cultural and social change. The concept of Sanskritization was developed by M.N. Srinivas (1952) while studying the "*Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*". In his study Srinivas discovered that the low castes emulate the life of the neighbouring high caste – that is, the Brahmins. On the basis of the observation he defined Sanskritization as a process by which "low castes take over the beliefs, rituals, life style and other cultural traits of those of the upper castes, especially the Brahmins. But since the model group might not be necessarily Brahmin alone and it could be other high castes he re-defined it as "a process by which a low caste or a tribe or other groups change their customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in direction of a high twice born caste" (Srinivas 1966:6). Thus, the concept of Sanskritization can be applied to understanding the pattern of social change of the tribes who are non-Hindu but Hindu oriented.

In the process of adaptation of high caste cultural traits, the low castes or tribes discard their own customary socio-religious practices considering them as degrading, irrational and dysfunctional in present day social environment. For, example, low castes or tribals indulge in blood sacrifices with wine in worshipping spirits and deity, marriage by forces or elopement, bride price etc. which the educated section of the low caste or tribe undesirable it. Therefore, they give up such practices and adopt those of the caste, which are considered superior to their own-that is, low caste. On the other hand Westernization means the radical change in Indian society and culture brought about by the British.

The neo-vaisnavite movement has played an important role in bringing about social change in Assam. The movement which was sponsored by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in the sixteenth century had far reaching effects in every aspects of Assamese national life. The neo vaisnavite movement emerged in Assam as a challenge to the *shaktism* and *tantrism* prevailed in early social order of the time. The religious system of *shaktism* and *tantrism* were complex and sacrifices of animals and birds were involved. On the other hand in Sankardeva's religion there were no sacrifices, no caste system or untouchability. The catholicities of this religious reformer were a step towards the establishment of a casteless society. Simple *nam prasanga* (Devotional

Services) were substituted for the pujas and sacrifices. Moreover, the conversion of the tribes to the vaisnavism did not involve a break with their indigenous customs and dietary habits. For example the Misings even after their conversion to the neo-vaisnavism continued to worship their national deities- *Do:nyi-Po:lo* and to consult their priest *Mibu*. This concession to the tribes greatly helped in the rapid spread of the neo-vaisnavite movement in Assam. This universal character of the movement curbed the growth of casteism and tribalism by enabling the diverse social groups to be integrated in one single religious community.

Thus, the tribes whom the caste Hindus once called *asura*, *vanavasis*, *adimjanjati* etc. have been in the process of integration with the castes and other communities of the country. Some tribes have converted to Christianity or Buddhism or Islam or some have been remaining in their traditional beliefs and practices but majority have remained in the Hindu fold. Some of them have become completely hinduised like the Kacharis of Assam, Bhil, Bhumini and Orangs of central India. There are some tribes like the Misings who call themselves as Hindus but in true sense of the term for they still have such beliefs and practices which are outside Hindu system. Such tribes may be called *semi-Hinduised*. It is this group of tribes who tend to change their culture by adopting the life style of the high castes to improve their social image in the society at large.

On the basis of understanding of the various definitions of social change, as mentioned above, the present study defines Religious Changes and Continuity of the Mising tribes of Assam as a historical process, highly influenced by what M N Srinivas calls Sanskritization process through which tribal or other groups change its customs, rituals, ideology etc. in direction of a high caste.

### **Origin of the Research Problem**

Problem of the study is Religious Changes and Continuity among the tribes who are Hinduised. Out of the Hinduised groups some have totally given up their traditional tribal beliefs and practices and adopted cultural traits of the high castes. They have become culturally merged into the high castes though not necessarily admitted to the same status position. The tribals remain outside caste hierarchy despite completely Hinduised. For example, in Assam the Thengal Kacharis, Sharaniya Kacharis, the Mech-kacharis, Pati-Rabha etc. have completely neo-vaisnavites in belief and practice by giving up their traditional traits. They follow the lifestyle of

the neo-vaishnavite non-tribal communities. A section of the Bodo tribe has also become Hinduised by adopting Brahma Dharma – cult of worshipping one of the principal Gods of the Hindus and by giving up totally Bodo traditional beliefs and practices. There are other groups of tribe in the region which have become so Hinduised that no trace of tribal elements is found in their cultural system. They have lost even their language by speaking Assamese with the caste peoples. Their food habits, dress pattern, dwelling system etc. have become completely neo-vaishnavite. But they have not become a part of the system. The Hinduised tribes have not states position in the caste hierarchy. So, Hinduisation does not necessarily mean – tribals remain semi-Hinduised by maintaining their cultural identity. The tribals having lived independently in their own cultural system do not prefer to the system hierarchy where community status is determined by birth. Being Hindus they do not gain status equal to those of the high caste. So, tribal efforts to improve their culture is not to attain caste hierarchy but to improve their own cultural system by giving up spirit worships, which is considered as practice of primitive people. Coming into contacts with caste and other developed communities the tribals realize the bizarre of their religious functions and practices which involve blood sacrifices and at the same time find the systematic worship of gods and goddess by chanting hymns quite appealing. The hypothesis, however, needs further empirical inquiry in the context of semi-Hinduised tribes who maintain some elements of their traditional beliefs and practices. Accordingly the Misings of Assam have been selected for the present study.

The Misings are one of the indigenous tribes of Assam. They had become Hinduised under the impacts of neo-vaishnavite movement which emerged in Assam in the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Misings adopted the cult of *kalasamhati* of the neo-vaishnavism and had become disciples of some of the satras (neo-vaishnavite monasteries) of *kalasamhati*, but they did not give up their traditional beliefs and practices related to spirits. These are still maintained along with the Hindu concepts of gods and goddesses. They call it *keoliya dharma*, which is a dilution of Hindu and tribal religious system. The new system has given rise to a new system of performing rites and rituals called *bhakatiya* method. Bhakats are the senior devotees of the neo-vaishnavism. On the other hand, during the tenure of the British Rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Assam, the Christian Missionaries had tried to convert the Misings into Christianity by opening Missionary Schools etc. in the Mising dominated areas. A good number of books were also published in Mising language to popularise the Christian religion among the tribe. But they

failed in achieving their goals. However, of late, some of the Mising families have converted into Christianity in upper Assam for various socio-economic reasons.

### **Interdisciplinary Relevance**

Assam is a multi-castes and multi-tribal state. Here we have many *jaties and upo-jaties*, tribes and sub-tribes. There are tribes living in the hills and in the plains in the State. The Misings are one of the plains tribes living in the midst of many other cultural, linguistic and religious groups. As such, it is natural that they are culturally and socially influenced by so many divergent cultural groups of the state and historical study of a tribe of Assam like the Misings may be quite rewarding for understanding of the problem of human group in plural society.

The study is about the changes and continuity of the tribal Religion from animism to Hinduism, Christianity etc. through contacts between tribes and Hindus in production and political system and process of cultural assimilation. There are important questions for the students of History, Sociology, Political science and Anthropology. But the problem are least studied so far. As such the study involves interdisciplinary approaches of social sciences.

### **Review of Research and Development in the Subject**

Study on Religious Changes and Continuity of the tribes in Assam is still quite limited. In Indian context Barnaba (1961) mentions three case studies related to Sanskritization process – (1) Berreman's study of a village in Himalayan region (1959), (2) Barnaba's social change in a village on north Indian Village (1960) and (3) Cohn's Chamars of Senapur (1954). These studies revealed that there have been some efforts on the parts of some low castes to improve their social status through Sanskritization process.

Brahma (2006) in his work on "*Religion of the Bodos*" discusses how Sanskritization has started in the Bodo society as result of Brahma Dharma Movement that emerged in the early part of the last century among the Bodos. Brahma Dharma is based on Hinduism worshipping the God Brahma, one of the three principal gods of the Hindus. It is a monotheist religion prohibiting sacrificial worship of various deities and spirits in which the Bodos indulged in the earlier days. The new dharma prohibit use of liquor, pig breeding, bride price above Rs. 51 and deity and spirit worships.

Besides Brahma dharma some reformatory sects of Hinduism emerged in the Bodo society involving many Bodos to them. "The process of Conversion" to different sects of Hinduism, as Brahma states "has accentuated a new process of Sanskritization in the Bodo society. He further states that "the tribal Bodo society, which was outside the realm of Hindu society came into contact with Hinduism long back and gradually, came within the fold of that society. The Bodo society which was despised by the upper caste Hindu society underwent a great change as result of Sanskritization of the Bodo culture. As a first step of Sanskritization the Bodos gave up beef eating and some of their tribal habits. In the second stage they partially abandoned the traditional non-Hindu deities in the traditional pantheon. Thirdly, Bodos gave up many traditional social customs and accepted new customs, which were acceptable to Hindu society. Fourthly, they were directly converted to the Hindu religion and adopted *sanskritic culture*."

Thus, Bodos tried to improve their social status through Sanskritization Process in the society of Assam. The Bodos are now regarded as one of the socially developed ethnic groups of Assam.

Neog (2002) prepared a Ph.D. dissertation entitled "*Sanskritization in the Brahmaputra Valley*" in which she observes that the social change of various groups of the Valley from the earliest time to 13th century onward can be accounted for Sanskritization process under the impacts of the Brahminization. "Social change towards development was brought about mainly through Brahminization of the society, which was possible due to the migration to and settlement of the Aryan Brahmins in the region and their impact on the socio-economic and political systems of the land since the early centuries.

Chouhan and Baruah's (1974:49) article entitled '*Religion and Social Change: Neo-vaisnavite Movement of Assam*' shows how the tribes and the low castes of Assam have changed cultural pattern under the impacts of neo-vaisnavite movement that emerged in the region in the 16th century. Having converted to the neo-vaisnavism, many of the tribes gave up their traditional beliefs and practices and adopted the cultural norms and values of the advanced neo-vainavite groups which were economically and politically dominant in the valley. The low castes also embraced the new faith and adopted the cultural pattern of the high castes.

Majumdar (1990:263) conducted a study on "*Tribe-Caste Continuum and the Process of Sanskritization Among the Bodo-speaking Tribes of the Garo Hills*" to understand the process

and pattern of sanskritization among the Bodo-speaking tribe he 'carried out investigation among a series of groups which may be said to form a tribe caste continuum.' In the context of the study Majumdar defines 'tribe' as homogeneous group of people (culturally and linguistically showing some amount of homogeneity) which do not claim themselves as followers of any of the major religions of India, such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity etc. and caste as 'endogamous group, which has gained some position in the Hindu hierarchy, topped by the three high castes, Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya'.

By sanskritization he meant the elements by accepting which is non-caste group (tribal group) gets acceptance in the Hindu society and which give vertical mobility to a group which has already been accepted in the Hindu society. (Majumdar 1990:265)

In the light of the above definitions Majumdar first classified three groups of tribe viz. Rabha, Koch and Hazong and examines the process of Sanskritization in each group. He found that in each group there are some sub-groups which have different degree of Sanskritization. For example, among the Rabhas, the sub-group Pati-Rabhas have become fully caste Hindu by virtue of their sanskritization and the Rongdani Rabhas have remained least Sanskritized because they have not absorbed the elements of caste culture. Similarly, in the Koch Group the sub-group Chapras have become highly sanskritized for which they are acceptable to the caste and Wanang the least sanskritized.

The process of sanskritization is shown as gradually giving up of food habits, keeping of pigs and fowls. The second step is the abandonment of non-Hindu deities and gradual adaptation of deities of Hindu pantheon along with their traditional rituals. The third step is the abandonment of all the major elements of tribal social customs such as the clan organization with all its ancillary aspects such as matrilineal inheritance, unrilocal residence, a clan oriented kinship system and taking up in their place the patrilineal complex. At the final stage of sanskritization a group abandons all traces of its pre-sanskritized birth, death and marriage, customs and adopt the traditional Hindu rites performed by a professional Brahmin priest.

Further, Majumdar states that the process of sanskritization can be considered as complete when the group abandons its non-Aryan language in favour of an Aryan language.

As regards the two very important aspects of sanskritization, endogamy and observance of strict rules of commensality, Majumdar states that while linguistic endogamy is a universal phenomenon it is not relevant in the process of sanskritization in case of tribal group because the



group itself is endogamous and therefore, not much difference is maintained between the sanskritized and less sanskritized or non- sanskritized sections of the group. Inter-marriage between the sanskritized and non- sanskritized groups of the same tribe studied is not so restricted.

Majumdar also found that unlike endogamy rules or commensality appears to be the attribute of sanskritization, for it was found that at the very first stage of sanskritization they strictly prohibit inter-dining with those groups which have not abandoned the unclean habits (especially beef eating). So, this attribute can be taken as a corollary to the first stage of sanskritization.

These are studies on Hinduised tribes. These tribes have totally abandoned their tribal beliefs and practices and have become caste-Hindus. They have nothing to improve by sanskritization. It appears that once tribal cultural traits are given up by accepting Hindu religion a tribal group becomes a caste. On the other hand, there are few studies on the Misings related to history and culture. Pegu (1981) in his book entitled "*The Misings of the Brahmaputra Valley*" has described briefly about the history and religious beliefs and practices of the community. Discussing the religion of the Adis, Choudhury (1917) in his study, *A Comparative Study of Adi Religion* says that at higher level of conception Adi religion is not very far from Hindu Vedic conception. Roy's (1966) '*Aspects of Padam Minyong Culture*' and Elwin's (1964) '*Philosophy for Arunachal Pradesh*' devote chapters on religion and culture of the Adi tribe.

Kagyung's (Ed) 1989) '*Mising Sanskritir Alekhya*' is a collection of 57 articles written by different authors of the community. The articles deal with different aspects of culture including language. In Kuli's (1998) publication, '*The Misings: Their History and Culture*' some research based articles written by Nath and Doley throw light on the history of the Misings. Doley's paper discusses the socio-economic life of the community. Kuli himself provides a glimpse on the Mising Language and Literature in the volume. The other papers published in the volume are written by Sharma Thakur (1998) on "Socio-Economic Changes in the post-Independence in the Tribal village in Assam."

'*Misings Through Misings Eyes*' is another volume edited by Padun (2005). The papers included in the volume deal on Religious belief system, folk culture, language, social traditions development problem, women's role and status in the society, rights and privileges and freedom of Mising women.

Mipun (1981) has tried to highlight the interrelationship between communications and development in the contact of the Mising Tribe in his Ph.D. thesis – *“Acculturation, Communication and development among the Misings (Miri) in Assam”*. Chutia (2004) submitted a dissertation on *‘Change and Continuity Among the Misings of Assam: A case study two Mising Villages of Dhemaji District of Assam.*

Besides these studies, there are other works on the Misings published in journals, souvenirs, magazines and news papers but none of these works deal with the problem of Religious Change and Continuity in the community, although Misings have become partly Hinduised. From tribal perspective Hinduisation may be viewed as sanskritization of tribal culture in the model of high caste so as to come closer to the caste in social interactions. So, Hinduism is not necessarily an overnight conversion to Hinduism. This is the phenomenon which is not inquired in any of the works reviewed. So, present study is an attempt to fill up the gap of our knowledge about Religious Changes and continuity in tribal society.

### **International Status**

Linguistically the Misings are the Tibeto- Burman language speaking tribe who came down from the Yangzekiyang Valley of South - West China (Pegu: 2002:21) to the sub-Himalayan region to the north of the Brahmaputra. But till now, scholars, specially the historian have not deeply studied the origin of the Mising community; the 'outsider opinion' has not influenced the world perception about the Misings. As such, the present study is expected to help in asserting the identity of the Misings as a tribe and also to appraise the world about their values and rich culture. In the process the Misings will also be enriched by the world community. The study may enlarge the world view of the Misings as well as enrich the vision of the larger society and refine their outlook and attitude towards the Misings. Through such study the world will understand the socio- cultural life of this community. Moreover, the Hinduisation is hardly found among the tribes of the other countries of the world, which is unique for the Misings. The tribes in other countries become converted to either the Christianity or Islam, or Buddhism through proslytization process. Present study therefore, may become a model for such studies elsewhere in India and abroad.

## **National Status**

In Indian context changes and continuity of religion is a universal phenomenon among its tribes. Continuity of animism as in the days of yore is becoming difficult with the spread of education. They have been gradually emerging out of the state and are in a process of transition from tribal to modern way of living, striving for development. The religious beliefs and customs also got changed in the process. In the process some of them converted to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism etc. and others by modifying traditional beliefs and practices in the framework of Hinduism. But it is interesting that Buddhism did not penetrate the Mising society although the tribe surrounded on the north, the east and west by Mongoloid Buddhists. One of the reasons for this might be an aggressive tribalism on the part of the tribe that did not brook intrusions of any kind. Whatever the reasons, the Misings appear to have been content for many centuries to pursue their own religious beliefs and customs, unaware of the teachings of the great religions. Coming into contact with the valley the Misings assimilated many a socio-cultural elements which they found in the plains, a notable example being the three *bihus*. Many words from the language of their neighbours, the Assamese speakers, have formed part of the active vocabulary of Misings. However, it is the phenomenon of their Hinduisation that brought them closer to the pan-Indian cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the Hinduisation is not yet adequately studied particularly from Historical perspectives in India.

## **Significance of the Study**

Cultural change is basically a qualitative concept of change from inferior to superior culture. Some of the low castes or tribes perceive their culture inferior to those of high castes and therefore they attempt to improve their culture borrowing the elements of high caste culture and integrate them in way of life of the formers' life style – that is low caste or tribe. The attempt also reflects the desire of the low castes or tribes to assimilate themselves with the high castes in terms of cultural homogeneity. These are important questions for India where we have so many divergent groups belonging to castes and tribes. For social development cultural integration is essential and religious change is a process which helps in the growth of caste tribe integration. It is, therefore, important to understand the problems and prospects of Social change among the tribes who form a large section of the country's population. It is also observed that the question of tribal identities have been widely raised among the tribes which tend to generate disruptive

forces in the process of national integration. These are important questions for the students of History, Sociology and Anthropology but the problem are least studied so far. At this stage of our knowledge about Social change we need micro level study among different tribal communities which are spread all over the country. Present study is expected to provide some basic information about the problem of tribal religious changes and continuity. It is, therefore, considered as an important academic exercise.

Present study is a historical and sociological approach to understand the process of religious changes and continuity in Mising tribal community. It is concerned with only the Mising tribe of Assam. The facts are related to the Mising tribe only and the inference and conclusions are based on the facts gathered from the villages under study.

### **Objective**

The basic objective of the study is to understand the process and pattern of Religious Changes and Continuity in tribal community with special reference to the Misings of Assam.

First it attempt to understand the pattern of changes in the community under study and what are the problems associated with the process.

Secondly, the study attempts to understand how far changes have promoted social integration between the Misings and the neighbouring caste Hindu communities.

Thirdly, the study inquires the question of maintaining ethnic identity in the process of change.

Lastly, the study attempts to draw a general conclusion on the processes of Religious Changes and Continuity in tribal society and to suggest for future study on the problem in light of experience of present study.

### **Methodology**

This is an exploratory study conducted by survey method. It attempts to find out the pattern of Religious Changes and Continuity of tribal communities. The universe of the study is the Mising community living in the midst of non-Mising population. At first a survey was conducted to find out the Mising concentrated areas and thereafter the villages to be selected for field observation. The criteria for the sample villages were determined as follows:

1. The number of households of the village belonging to Mising community must not be less than one hundred.
2. One of the sample village must have more than 25 families belonging to religious group of either *Keoliya*, *Bhagawatiya* or *Do:nyi-Po:lo*
3. Only one village from one district of the Brahmaputra valley where Misings are concentrated would be selected.
4. The village must be pre-dominated by permanent Mising families living for the last 25 years or more.

On the basis of the above criteria following three villages were selected purposively from the Districts mentioned against each village –

Ghunasuti Oyan, Lakhimpur District, Assam

Dolopha gaon, Dhemaji District, Assam

Panimiri gaon, Dibrugarh District, Assam

It may be pointed out that the Misings had the highest concentration of population in these three districts of Assam.

Due to small sizes of the sample village, complete enumeration is done. In this process 766 households were found from all the three religious groups viz. 678 from *keoliya*, 60 from *bhagawatiya* and 28 from *Do:nyi-Po:lo* group.

### **Technique of Data Collection**

The primary data were collected through field observation and interview schedules. Each sample village was visited for field observation for a period of one to two times depending on the number of respondents to interview. The interview schedules were canvassed with every respondent individually and separately in both Mising and Assamese languages. As the researcher himself belongs to Mising community and received his education in Assamese language in the undergraduate level there was no difficulty at all in conducting the interview in both Mising and Assamese languages according to necessity.

The secondary data were collected from various documentary sources available in the villages and districts offices concerned. Field observation was concentrated on the life style of the families belonging to different religious groups, public institutions and organizations and the

religious, social and cultural functions and also day to day activities of the families of each of the sample village.

For obtaining information on historical, traditional customary, religious and cultural life of the respondents informal discussions were held with the religious leaders, village head and two or three of the senior educated men of every sample village. Thus, the field study was completed in the year 2016, despite occasional interruptions by floods and erosions and other inimical weather conditions. The researcher was fortunate enough to get full cooperation and help from the village folks in conducting the field study.

### **Data Analyses**

On completion of the field study data were processed by classifying and distributing them in simple frequency tables. Analyses of the data were made by statistical methods and inferences were made on the basis of the results obtained by statistical analyses.

At the end of the analyses general conclusion has drawn on the bases of logical and empirical relationships of the facts established by statistical data. From the experience gained from present study it can be understood that without support of historical facts and logical analyses statistical data can not necessarily establish the validity of historical theory whatever it may be.

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## **CHAPTER- II**

### **FIELD OF STUDY**

## CHAPTER- II

### FIELD OF STUDY

The universe of the study is the Mising (Miri) community, who are part of the indigenous people of Assam. They have been living in Assam since the beginning of its formation, which may be traced back to the early thirteenth century. Assam can be therefore, called motherland of the Misings in which their culture has developed under the impacts of its physical, social and cultural environments and historical process. As such, it is important to have an idea about its people and culture to understand the problems of the present study in proper perspective. Accordingly, this chapter is devoted to describing the historical background of Assam, its geo-physical characters and socio-cultural scenario. The field data were collected from three Mising (Miri) villages. So, a brief description of each village is also given in the part of this chapter. First, Assam is described as follows –

#### **Assam**

Assam is located within 24.30N and 280N latitudes and 89.50E and 96.10E longitudes. It is one of the states of North-East India, which is surrounded by Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland in the East, Meghalaya and West Bengal in the West, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in the North and Manipur and Tripura in the South. The state has an area of 78,438 square km, consists of 28 administrative districts. The state can be divided into three major zones viz. a) The Brahmaputra Valley B) The Barak Valley C) The Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hill Districts.

#### **Historical Background**

Assam is an ancient land with a long history. In the ancient days it was known as Pragjyotishpur and later on as Kamarupa (Borpujari: 1990:59). People of various strains, i.e. Indo-Mongoloid, Tibeto-Barman, Aryan, Dravidian, Occasian etc. migrated to this land long past contributing to the growth of composite society and culture.

Prior to the emergence of Ahom rule in the 13th century there were no state called Assam in the region. Before the Ahoms the region was divided into a number of small kingdoms under



dynastic rule of different ethnic groups known as Chutia, Kacharis, Barahis, and Morans etc. The Ahoms, who belong to the Tai group of great Mongoloid stock, came to the region from south China and entered the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 A.D. under the leadership of Sukapha and settled in the upper valley of Brahmaputra. They gradually expanded their rule towards the west along the Brahmaputra valleys. The Barahis, Chutiyas, Kacharies and the Bhuyan chiefs were brought under the control of the Ahom. Thus the State of Assam ultimately emerged. The Ahom rule lasted for about six hundred years. The '*Moamoriya uprisings*' and the *Burmese invasion* made the situation favorable for its ultimate downfall which finally resulted in the occupation of Assam by the British in 1826. (Borpujari: 2003:363)

### **Tribes**

In studying tribes, Shah (2003:12) suggested that one should be cautious in studying tribal problem because tribe is a generic term which covers number of human groups having divergent social characters in its connotation. Dube (1984:4) also held the same view that – “Despite its wide currency, the term has not been defined with scientific rigour and precision and continues to be used to describe a wide range or forms of social organization and levels of techno-economic development” Similarly, Hasnain (2001) states, “Interestingly but sadly the anthropologists, sociologists, social workers, administrators and people who have been involved with the tribes and their problems either on theoretical plane or on practical grounds are still not on the same wave length regarding the concept and definition of their subject matter.” For example – In Imperial Gazetteer of India a tribe is stated to be a collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous, though originally it might have been so.

In Oxford Dictionary, it is defined as a group of people in a primitive or barbarous stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding themselves as having a common ancestor.

According to Mair (1972) ‘A tribe is an independent political decision of a population with a common culture.’

In Majumdar’s (1950) view – ‘A tribe is a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous with no specialization of functions ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise united in language or dialect, hereditary or otherwise united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes without any social obloquy attaching to the, as it does

in the caste structure, following tribal traditions, beliefs and customs, illiberal of naturalization of ideas from alien sources above all conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration.'

Thus there is no unanimous definition of tribe. Different authors emphasize on different characters of social group to be called tribe. According to Dube, (1998:4) 'in Indian context the term has been used and is being used somewhat indiscriminately. Several groups of the inhabitants of India, before the advent of the Aryans, were regarded as tribes. The Aryan groups pouring into India were themselves described as tribe by some.

He, however, preferred to state that it would be safe to view a tribe as an ethnic category defined by real or putative descent and characterized by a corporate identity and wide range or commonly shared traits of culture. The characteristics implied in this definition appear to be common to most of the communities defined to be tribe in present day situation. Accordingly we adopt Dube's conception as working definition of our present study.

In terms of cultural diversities, Assam is aptly called miniature India. Waves of people belonging to different ethnic groups poured into this region from the pre-historic time. It is really difficult to know the peoples of how many racial origins live in Assam; as the different races and ethnicities such as the Negrits, Austroloid, Mongoloid and Cacasoids came from west and east directions and settled in the region in different phases of times. B.M. Das (1974) has divided the Assamese people into two major racial groups such as the Indies Assamese comprising the Hindu castes and the Muslims who come from Cocasic blood, Karbis, Bodos, Misings, Sonowal Kacharies, Dimachas, Tiwas, Chutiyas, Kochas, Hajongs, Mech, Borahis, and Deories etc. belong to Mongloid stock. Nine of them living in the valleys are recognized as scheduled tribes. They are – (1) Burmans of Cachar (2) Bodo (3) Deori (4) Hujai (5) Sonowal Kachari (6) Lalung (Tiwas) (7) Mech (8) Miri (Mising) and (9) Rabha.

**Table – 2.1***Distribution of Tribe of Assam by Population*

<b>Tribe</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>% of the total tribal population</b>
Bodo/Bodo Kachari	13,52,771	6,82,710	6,70,061	40.98%
Miri (Mising)	5,87,310	2,99,790	2,87,520	17.75%
Mikir	3,53,513	1,80,136	1,73,377	10.68%
Rabha	2,77,517	1,40,614	1,36,907	08.39%
Kachari, Sonowal	2,35,881	1,19,470	1,16,411	07.13%
Lalung (Tiwa)	1,70,622	85,964	84,658	05.16%
Dimacha Kachari	1,10,976	56,876	54,100	03.35%
Deori	41,161	20,809	20,352	01.24%
Kuki Tribes	28,273	14,666	13,607	00.85%
Naga Tribes	21,706	11,077	10,629	00.66%
Garos	21,112	10,739	10,373	00.64%
Burmans of Cachar	15,877	8,024	7,853	00.48%
Hmar	14,460	7,429	7,031	00.44%
Khasi, Jaintia, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lingam	12,722	6,354	6,368	00.38%
Mech	8,997	4,597	4,400	00.27%
Mizos Tribes	2,957	1,504	1,453	00.09%
Chakma	2,478	1,329	1,149	00.07%
Hujai	1,882	932	950	00.06%
Mau (Tai Phake)	739	375	364	00.02%
Synteng	336	164	172	00.01%
Hajong	256	139	117	00.008%
Lakher	11	5	6	00.003%
General Tribes	47,013	24,414	22,599	1.42%
<b>Total</b>	<b>33,08,570</b>	<b>16,78,117</b>	<b>16,30,453</b>	<b>99.99</b>

Source: Census, 2001

Fourteen tribes living in the hill districts of Assam are scheduled as S/T hills. The Karbis and the Dimacha Kacharis form the majority of the hills tribes. All of them have their own socio-cultural and historical backgrounds. Besides these castes and tribes, there are many other ethnic groups who migrated from the other parts of the country during the time of the British rule. Now, they have become a part and parcel of the Assamese society and culture. As such, Assam is called mini-India in terms of ethnic diversities.

### **The Caste**

The population of Assam consists of many castes and sub-castes. They are— the *Brahmin*, *Kayastha*, *Kalita*, *Ganak*, *Koivarta*, *Keot*, *Konch*, *Nath*, *Mali*, *Haloi*, *Hari*, *Baniya*, *Kumar* and other minor castes.

The *Ahoms* are by and large Hindus by religion, but they do not form a part of caste population. Though majority of them profess Hinduism in general the *Ahoms* do not call themselves as caste. They are non-caste Hindu maintaining some of their traditional customs and practices which are different from those of Hindu beliefs and practices.

The *Kacharis* have become completely hinduised but they are not treated as caste. Some of them are scheduled as plains tribe of Assam.

### **Religion**

Assam is one of the multi- religious states of India. Since the ancient days people of Assam have been following different types of religions. Hinduism has been the religion of the large majority of Assam's populace since long past. Of late Hinduism, the cults of *Saivism*, *Shaktism* and *Vaisnavism* are more prominent in the state population.

Savism refers to worship of lord Siva who is one of them principal three Hindu gods called Siva, Brahma and Vishnu. Siva is worshipped in linga form (Barpujari: 1990:347). *Mahvairava* temple at Tezpur is well known for linga worship. *Linga* worship is also held at Numaligarh, Tezpur, Guwahati and other places of Assam. The worship of linga is believed to be early tribal worship of their god called *Sri Barai* or *Sibrai* or *Bathou Barai* in form of a cactus shoot symbolizing a fertility cult. Sholars believe that the old male god Budha or Yakha or Bathou Barai or Sri Barai or Sivrai has been aryanised to being worshipped as Siva

(Bhattacharya: 1995:50). In the Kalita (Barpujari:1990:313) Purana it is stated that Lord Siva was regarded as the guardian deity of the valley in ancient times when mother goddess was yet to be introduced in the land of Naraka (Barpujari : Rulers of the ancient Kamrupa (present Assam) worship Siva.

Saktim is the cult of worshipping goddess Durgadevi, who symbolizes power. The goddess Durgadevi is believed to be the spouse of Lord Siva. Locally the Devi is known as Kamakhya. Scholars believe that in the past goddess Kamakhya was worshipped by the local people in large scale. According to B.P. Rabha (1986:12) this goddess was earlier worshipped by the Dimasa-Kacharies and the Bodo-Kacharies who called it as Kamalakhi and Kamakha (kha) Kamkha respectively. The Aryans, entering the valley, drove away the Austric speakers to the hills but retained their cult which were so popular and extensively practiced and sanskritized them. The Tamreswari temple, malinithan etc. also bears evidences of popularity of the sakti worship in Assam. The Kamakhya temple of Nilachal hill became the principal centre of sakti worship in India.

Another popular cult of Assam was vaisnavism. The worship of Lord Vishnu was prevalent in the Brahmaputra valley in the ancient time. All the early ruling dynasties traced their descent from Vishnu. (Sharma: IAA: 25) Neo-vaisnavism introduced by Srimanta Sankardeva had become the dominant religion of Assam. Now large majority of Assamese people follow neo-vaisnavism as their religion. It is the cult of worshipping god Vishnu as the incarnation of Lord Krishna – the Almighty God. The introduction of neo-vaisnavism brought sea-change in the socio-cultural system of Assam's populace. Apart from religion neo-vaisnavism gave rise to new socio-religious institution like satra and namghar and contributed to growth of art and literature.

Worship of surya or solar cult had been also prevalent in ancient Assam, and it is still continued among some sections of the people of Assam. Sri Surya pahar in Goalpara is known to be the perpetual abode of the sun in the pre-historic days. The remains of sun temples are found at Surya pahar, Dah-parvatia, Gohpur, Sualkuchi, Mongoldoi, Sukreswar etc. (Bhattacharya: 1995:63)

Worship of Ganesha the god of trade and commerce is also prevalent in Assam. In the hill areas the tribals follow their own traditional beliefs and practices. Some of them have converted to Christianity and some others have to neo-vaisnavism.

Next to Hinduism is Islam. According to the 2001 census, the followers of Islam in the state constitute 30 per cent of its total population. Beginning with the 13th century till the close of the 17th century, the Turko-Afghans and the Mughals repeatedly invaded Assam for which, the Muslims formed a district minority in the population of the state.

Besides Hindu and Muslims, the followers of Christian, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism etc. are also there in Assam. Some of its tribes call themselves Hindus but they have not completely given up their animistic faiths which are outside Hindu faith. Thus Assam's population comprises population of various religious faiths but till now there have never been any incident of conflict in connection with religion in Assam.

### **Cultural and Religious Celebration**

The cultural heritage of Assam is very rich. There are varieties of festivals and celebration in Assam as in the rest of India. The bihu is the national and the most famous and popular festival of Assam. There are three bihus viz; Bahag bihu or Bangali bihu (spring festival), Kati bihu or Kangali bihu (autumn festival) and Magh bihu or Bhugali Bihu (winter harvest festival). All tribes and castes observe these festivals.

Bahag bihu is known as Rangali bihu meaning the festival of merriment. It is celebrated in the mid-April or last of the Assamese month of *Chaitra* (Chot). Earlier Bahag bihu was celebrated for seven days together.

The Kati bihu, comes off on the last day of the Assamese month of '*ahin*'- that is the mid October. It is observed with out mirth and merriment in this bihu is observed. Tulsi plants are planted on the eastern side of the courtyards and oil lamps made of earthen vessels are put near those plants. In the evening, paddy fields are also illuminated with oil lamps. In this way goddess of wealth Lakhimi is propitiated for good harvest.

Magh bihu is celebrated on the mid-January. By mid-January harvest of paddy crop is completed. So, the families celebrate the end of harvest by arranging feast and offering prayer to fire god for all its blessings.

Besides bihus, *durga puja* i.e. worship of goddess *durga lakhimi puja* (worship of goddess of wealth), *saraswati puja* (worship of goddess of learning). The tribes and other ethnic and religious groups have their own festivals and celebrations which are held throughout the year.

The people of Assam also observe the birth and death anniversaries of Mahapurosh Sankardev and his principal disciple Madhabdeva who were regarded the founders of neo-vaisnavism in Assam. Thus Assam can be called the land of numerous festivals and celebrations observed by different cultural and religious groups.

Religion accounts for a large varieties of festivals and ceremonies in Assam as in the rest of India. These are – ras-utsava, falgutsava, shivarati, ambubachi mela, diwali, mohrum of Islam, Christmas etc.

Ras-utsava is a great sacred celebration for the Hindus. It is celebrated on the full moon of the lunar kartick month. Ras-utsava is mainly concerned with the attributes of “Vindravan Krishna” in dramatic form.

Falgutsava is celebrated in the March-April. The period of this festival starts a fortnight before the actual day and it continuous for three or four days. For the Hindu Assamese it is a festival of colors.

Sivaratri is one of the most popular festivals of Assam. This festival falls in the night of the fourteenth lunar day of the month of Phagun (February).

Ambubachi mela is celebrated in the month of aahar (June-July). It is associated with the conception of mother earth which becomes impure (because of menstruation as believed) for three days. All household goods are washed as the mother earth regains her purity. Ambubachi mela is held at Kamakhya temple.

In Assam the goddess Durga has been worshipped from time immemorial but in different forms and manifestations. The celebration lasts for three days in the month of October. Durga is believed to be the goddess of strength. So, people worship her for peace and prosperity of the society.

Diwali is another most popular festival of the Hindus in Assam. It is celebrated all over India. The festivals are associated with so many forces and legends. It makes the victory of Rama over Ravana. As a matter of fact, Diwali is the symbol of the victory of good over evil forces. The festival at night the people illumine their houses, walls and terraces with earthen pots.

Me-Dam-Me-Phi festival is observed by the Ahoms annually. It is a kind of ancestor worship of the community rite.

Karam Puja is celebrated bny the tea tribes of Assam; Karam Puja is have two kinds. *Rajah Karam and Jitiya Karam*. Rajah Karam is celebrated on the 5th day of Bhadra month. But

there is no hard and fast rule for Jitiya Karam. Songs like Bandana, Khemta, Jhumur, Dat, Rang and Bhincheria etc. are sung on the occasion of Karam Puja.

Tusu Pujas, is another popular festival of the tea tribes, which is celebrated in the month of December-January. In a clean place an idol of Tusu Devi is installed to perform worship in her honor. Next day, the idol is immersed in water. On this day people take bath which is known as Makar Snan.

The Mising community observes a festival called *Ali-Aye-Ligang* which means sowing seeds. It is held in the second half of February. Community feast and 'Gumrag' dance (a kind of line-group dancing) are main attractions of the festival.

### **Summing up**

Assam is an old state which was known as Pragjyotishpur and Kamarupa in the ancient time. People of all races, and ethnicity have been pouring into the state since long past. The land is blended by hills and valleys which are covered by ever green grass, bushes and jungles and quite rich in flora and fauna. Assam is the land which is climatically and topographically quite hospitable for men and animals including various kinds of birds and reptiles.

Assam's population comprises divergent cultural groups belonging to different linguistic, religious and tribal groups. Large majority of its population depends on agriculture producing mainly rice, oil seeds, pulses, maize and varieties of vegetables.

Assam is also known for its various festivals and celebrations observed by various religious and cultural groups throughout the year.

In social sphere Assam is a multi-castes and multi-tribal state. Here we have many jaties and upo-jaties, tribes and sub-tribes. There are tribes living in the hills and in the plains in state. The Misings are one of the plains tribes living in the midst of many other cultural, linguistic and religious groups. As such, it is natural that they are culturally and socially influenced by so many divergent cultural groups of the state and historical study of a tribe of Assam like the Misings may be quite rewarding for understanding of the problem of human group in plural society.



## Villages Studied

### Ghunasuti Oyan (Lakhimpur)

Ghunasuti Oyan gaon is located at the distance of 12 km. Away from its nearest urban centre Lakhimpur, the head quarter of the district. The village is bounded by Subansiri River by east, Nahoroni gaon by west, Donga forest and Ghagar River by north and Dambukial gaon by south. Ghunasuti Oyan gaon is connected only by one graveled road between the village and it's nearest urban centre North Lakhimpur town. There is no means of modern communication, any electricity and hospital in the village.

The total Population in the village was 1960 out of which male were 1061 and female 899. Traditionally the Misings lived in the joint family system. In Ghunasuti Oyan out of 280 families there were 110 nuclear and 170 joint families. The houses are traditional changghar (piled house). There are 253 changghar, 25 half concrete and only 02 full concrete houses in the village.

In Ghunasuti Oyan there are 03 Primary School, 02 Middle English School and 02 High School. The educational status of the village is as shown below –

Table : 2.2  
Educational Standard of the Village

Standard	Sex				Total
	Male	p.c.	Female	p.c	
Matriculate	194	51.05	66	17.36	260
Higher Secondary	62	16.31	26	6.84	72
Graduate	26	6.84	10	2.63	36
Post-Graduate	05	1.31	02	0.52	07
Doctor	03	0.78	00	00	03
Engineer	02	0.52	00	00	02
Total	292	76.84	104	27.36	380

Beside agriculture the villagers also accepted new occupations like neighboring non-tribal people. Table 2.3 shows the new occupations adopted by the villagers.

Table : 2.3  
New Occupations adopted by the Village

Occupation	f
Govt. Service	79
Contractor	06
Mansion	02
Carpenter	02
Fish seller	12
Meat seller	09
Vegetable trades	05
Milk seller	12
Shop keeper	18
Cloth seller	01
Others (thela/rickshaw puller, labor etc.)	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>167</b>

Source: field study

In the village under study, followers of both traditional, that is *keoliya* and *bhagawatiya* sects of neo-vaisnavism were found. The numbers of *bhagawatiya* are 60 and *keoliya* are 220. In the village there are only one traditional murang house, where all socio-religious functions are held. Rites and Rituals performed by the villagers are both traditional and non-traditional. In addition to traditional rites and rituals like dodging, Taléng uyu, Dobur, Urom, Ba:mid, etc. the people also performed the non-traditional Hindu Tiloni, Shuchi, Barsewa, Satjonia, Ekoishjoniya, Aai Sakam, Pejab wie Arig Dangoria, Ghar Dangoria etc. The villagers observe Ali-Aye-Lígang and three Bihus of Assam annually and the Mising traditional community feast Po:rag is also celebrated occasionally. Others like Diwali, Durgapuja, Janmastomi, Sankarutsava, tithi of Madhabdeva and Rasutsava also observed by the Ghunasuti Misings. But the *bhagawatiyas*, belong to Sankar Sangha have completely given up the traditional rites and rituals. They perform ritual like dodging in the ways of neo-vaisnavism. There are 02 namghar, and 01 murang institutions in the village.

Families of Ghunasuti Oyan Gaon eat mostly rice, fish and vegetables curry both in the morning and evening. Meat is occasionally taken. Apong is the popular beverage among the elderly persons. Now-a-days tea has become more common drink than apong for the villagers.

There are two types of traditional organizations found in the village. One is *do:lung kebang* (village council), and the another is *yame mimbir* (Youth Organization).

### Observation

Misings of Ghunasuti Oyan gaon are in state of transition of from traditional to modernity particularly in economic sphere. Apart from agriculture they are getting into the types of occupations which Misings as a community considered degrading and undersirable. Now, they are prepared to accept any occupation that pays them.

In matters of socio-religious practices the Misings of the village are divided into two groups – *keoliyas* and *bhagavatiyas*. Basically both of them are neo-vaisnavites but the *keoliya* are dilution of neo-vaisnavism and traditional beliefs and practices of the tribe which the *bhagavatiyas* reject. The *bhagavatiyas* have given up sacrificial spirit and deity worships but maintain their ancestral worship without use of wine and bird/animal sacrifices.

The Misings of the village observe their traditional festival Lígang (seed sowing as well as spring festival) regularly with some cultural programme; and other festivals celebrated by the Assamese communities.

Formal marriage is insisted upon by the financially sound families but it is less frequent than elopement or simple ritualistic marriage among the less educated and poor young boys and girls. Forced or service marriage and also polygyny have been given up if not prohibited in the village.

Traditional rites and rituals are performed by both *keoliyas* and *bhagavatiyas* but in different manners. The *keoliyas* perform them by *poka bhakats* (senior devotees initiated at Satra) and offering wine and live sacrifices, but the *bhagavatiyas* by *kacha bhakats* (non-initiated devotee) without wine and meat and by chanting only the verses of *nam-kriton* composed by Sankardeva or *nam-ghosa* composed by Madhabdeva.

The Misings of Ghunasuti Oyan also consult *panjika* for some personal problems but they do not worship any deity or plant if suggested by astrology.

### Dolopha gaon (Dhemaji)

Dolopha gaon is located at the distance of 23 km. from its nearest urban centre, Dhemaji. It is bounded by the villages Lakhpathar on east, Panchali on the west, Adikoliya pahar on the north and Ahom gaon on the south. It is connected by a motor abole graveled road with its nearest urban city. The village is composed of Mising sub-group Delu. The total household of the village is 240 and its population is 1206 out of which 616 are male and 590 female. They live in the traditional piled house (*chang ghar*). There are 222 *chang ghar* and 18 semi pucca and only 04 Assam type buildings in the village. The people of Dolopha prepared nuclear family. There are 150 nuclear and 90 joint families out of 176 families of the village.

Educationally the person of the village is far behind from the national level rate. In the village there are 02 primary, 01 M.E. School and 01 High School. The total literacy rate of the village was 51 per cent at the time of our field visits. During the time of our field visit the educational status of the village was as follows –

Table : 2.4  
Educational Standard of the Village

Standard	Male	PC	Female	PC	Total
Matriculate	24	51.06	11	23.40	35
Higher Secondary	06	12.76	03	6.38	09
Graduate	02	4.25	00	00	02
Post-Graduate	01	2.12	00	00	01
Total	33	70.21	13	27.65	47

Source : field study

The villagers practices both neo-vaisnavite Hindu religion and *Do:nyi-Po:loism* . There are one namghar and one ganging (place of worship) of *Do:nyi-Po:lo* group in the village. Out of 240 households, 28 households are the followers of *Do:nyi-Po:loism* and rest 212 are keoliya of neo-vaisnavism. Rites and rituals performed by the villagers are both traditional and non-traditional. In addition to traditional rites and rituals like *dodgang*, *taléng uyu*, *dobur*, *urom*, *ba:mud*, etc. The people also performed the non-traditional Hindu *tiloni*, *shuchi*, *barsewa*, *sat*

joniya, asi sakam, pejab uyu arig dangoria, ghar dangoria etc. The villagers observe Ali-aye-Ligang and three bihus of Assam annually and the Mising traditional community feast po:rag is also celebrated occasionally. Others like diwali, durgapuja, janmastomi, sankarutsava, tithi of Madhabdeba also observed by the Baligaon Misings. However the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* group completely given up the keoliya system of worship.

Misings have their own traditional food habits. Rice and fish curry with vegetables and occasionally chicken or pork constitutes their traditional foods. *Apong* (rice beer) is their community beverage. Families of Dolopha gaon prepare only white variety which is the common rice beer of the other tribal communities of the state. Now-a-days however, the families of Dolopha drink tea with sugar and milk regularly and serve friends and visitors with sweet and snacks. Still the villagers have been maintaining their traditional political system *do:lung kebang* (village council) and *yame-mimbir* (youth organization).

### Observation

The families of Dolopha gaon are not settled in the present site of the village. They were flood affected people. As such, economically the families of the village are weak but they are reformative in socio-religious beliefs and practices. Twelve percent families have rejected neo-vaishnavism and adopted a new religious faith called *Do:nyi-Po:loism*, which worship only the Sun and the Moon together conceiving them as the creators of the universe including human race. The followers of the faith do not worship any spirit or deity and offer no wine and sacrifice at the time of worship. They worship only the Sun and the Moon by chanting hymns and nothing else. The Misings believe that they are the progenies of the Sun and the Moon.

Among the young boys and girls marriage by elopement or simple ritualistic manner has become the only means of getting life partner. Formal marriage – midang has become very rare in the village. Forced and service marriages are also totally dropped from the community.

The families of Dolopha observe their traditional *Ligang* festival regularly, but they have less enthusiastic in celebrating the Bihus feeling that these are not Mising festivals. These are borrowed by the Misings from the non-Mising Assamese communities. Families of Dolopha eat mostly rice, fish and vegetables curry both in the morning and evening. Meat is occasionally taken. *Apong* is the popular beverage among the elderly persons. Now-a-days tea has become more common drink than *apong* for the villagers.

### Panimiri gaon (Dibrugarh)

Panimiri gaon is located at the distance of 25 km. from its nearest urban centre Dibrugarh. The village is surrounded by the villages named Ahom Panigaon by north, Jamjimukh gaon by south, Burhi Dihing River by east and Maina gaon by the west. Panimiri gaon is connected by PWD road with the Head quarters of Dibrugarh city and as such one can easily go to the village at any time by any vehicles. 24 hours motors services are there. The total population of the village is 1610 persons in soul out of which male 850 and female 760. There are 246 households where 106 joint and 140 nuclear families live in the village. The type of housing is mainly changghar. In the village there are 206 changghar, 29 half concrete and 11 full concrete building are found during time of our visit.

In the village studies there are 02 Primary School, 01 M.E. School, and 01 High School, and the educational status of the village is as shown below –

Table : 2.5  
Educational Standard of the Village

Standard	Sex				
	Male	p.c.	Female	p.c	Total
Matriculate	98	53.55	21	11.47	119
Higher Secondary	26	14.20	12	6.55	38
Graduate	21	11.47	01	0.54	22
Post-Graduate	02	1.09	01	0.54	03
Doctor	01	0.54	00	00	01
<b>Total</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>80.87</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>19.12</b>	<b>183</b>

The village is mainly dependent on agriculture. But other modern occupations are also accepted by the villagers as highlighted in the following table-

The villagers of Panimari gaon are the followers of Kalasamhati sect of neo-vaisnavism, called keoliya. There are one namghar and one murong social institutions in the village. Rites and Rituals performed by the villagers are taléng uyu, dobur, urom uyu, dodging, and non-traditional rituals like tiloni, suschi, barsewa, sat jonia, ekoish jonia, dangoria, pejab uyu etc.

The Panimari Misings observed the socio-religious festivals like ali-aye-logang po:rag, bihus, durga puja, janmastomi, lakhipuja, saraswati puja etc.

Families of Panimari eat mostly rice, fish and vegetables curry both in the morning and evening. Meat is occasionally taken. Apong is the popular beverage among the elderly persons. Now-a-days tea has become more common drink than apong for the villagers. Traditional political organizations found in the village are- do:lung kebang (Village council) and ya:me-mimbir (Youth Organization).

### **Observation**

The Misings of Panimari gaon have been advancing in education and economy as compared to positions in the last two decades or so; and progress is towards modernization. But so far traditional customs and religious beliefs and practices they seem to be conservative. All the families belonged to keoliya dharma and perform all rites and rituals by poka bhakats in which wine and live sacrifice are offered. They also continue to perform the same traditional rites and rituals with some additional rituals borrowed from the other non-Mising Assamese communities.

So far marriage is concerned elopement is much more popular and frequent among the boys and girls of the village. Formal marriage midang is a rare occasion in the village. It has become a proud privilege of the children of educated and financially sound families. Forced and marriage by service are no longer prevalent in the village. Widow marriage is allowed but rarely prevalent. The families of the village observe the traditional Lígang and Assamese festivals enthusiastically.

Thus Misings of Panimari gaon have not changed in social customs and beliefs. They remain adherent to the traditional beliefs and practices despite the fact that they are very near to Dibrugarh town.

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## **CHAPTER- III**

### **THE MISINGS**

## CHAPTER-III

### THE MISINGS

Change is a cultural phenomenon. It refers to process of reformation and improvement of culture of a community which may be a caste or tribe. It involves all aspects of life style of the community in the process. It is therefore, necessary to be acquired with its cultural system for understanding the problem in proper perspective. Accordingly, this chapter is devoted to describing the historical and cultural backgrounds of the Misings. The other parts of the social systems such as the marriage, family and religion which need elaborate discussions in the context of social change are presented in the subsequent chapters.

#### Origin

The Misings are one of the indigenous tribes of Assam. Racially they are identified as Mongoloid and ethnically one of the groups of tribes called Adis of the Arunachal Pradesh, who believe that they originated from the same ancestor called *Abutani* – the father of man or human race (Nyori 1993:2). According to Lego (2005:1) “the Adis, Apatanis, Hill-Miris, Lobas, Misings, Nishis, Puroiks and Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh (India), Asom (India) and Tibet (China) belong to great Tani group of Tibeto-Chinese family of Mongoloid stock. Linguistically, they speak the languages of upper Asom group of Tibeto- Mynmarese”.

Lego further contends that genealogically the Adis, Apatanis, Hill Miris, Misings, Puroiks and Tangins universally accepts *Abo-Tani* as their common ancestor. The Adi-Mising groups Nilo-Mibo cover Bomi, Bogun, Botung, Bogen, Bori, Bokar, and Bonpo, Nilo-Loba group of Arunachal Pradesh, Asom and Tibet (China).

Thus the Misings were originally hill tribes living in the Siyang district of Arunachal Pradesh where Adis are mostly concentrated. They have very close, physical, linguistic and cultural affinities with those of the tribes who call themselves as the Adis. As such, the Misings also claim to be one of the Adi tribes.

At the time of their settlement in Assam the Misings were called *Miris* by the non-Misings in the plains and still officially they are recorded as *Miri*. In his “A History of Assam” Gait (1984:305) interpreted the meaning of the term *Miri* as “*go between*” in view of the fact

that the Misings performed more or less the role of interpreter of both the hill tribes and the plains people, who were ignorant of the languages of each other. But Pegu (1981:4) contends that "The proposition that the word *Miri* is derived from the socio-religious functions prevalent among the Pasi-Minyongs, the Padams, and the Galongs of the Abor Hills and the Misings of the plains is generally agreed upon to be genuine". But many others hold the view that the term *Miri* was already in use among the Adi tribes to refer to a lead man in rituals (Roy: 1966). Padam-Minyong and other cognate tribes call their priest as *miri*. The Misings might also use the same term to denote a particular type of ritual man as *miri*. Therefore, at the time of the migration to the plains the Misings might have introduced themselves to the plains men as the followers of *miri priest* or *magic man*. In any case, the origin of the term *miri* to mean to Misings is indeterminate. Now-a-days, the term is replaced by the appellation "Mising" which means man of "*pure relatives*" (Nyori: 1993:66) – that is, real member of the community by blood. Person who does not belong to the community by blood or who is expelled from the community for some serious misconduct is called '*mipak*' meaning-impure (Nyori:1993:66) or '*mepak*' meaning non-Mising or rejected Mising. Thus Misings are distinctive tribal community having affinity with the Adi hills tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

### **Migration**

From both oral and written literatures it is clear that Misings of the plains migrated from the present state of Arunachal Pradesh. Before migration the Misings of the plains belonged to different clans or groups of the Adi tribes. At that time there was no any particular group called Mising. The community known as Misings is the conglomeration of the different clans of Adi group which left their abodes in the hills and settled in the valley. There was no occasion for different clans to get together and move down the plain at a time. Different clans gradually migrated in different points of time and through different routs under different circumstances settled in different localities in the valley. A section of the Misings was once called *chutiya Miri*, because they settled first in chutiya kingdom. The Chutiyas ruled a part of upper Assam from the early part of the 12th to the first half of the 16th centuries with their capital at Sadiya, which had close border with present district of Siyang of Arunachal Pradesh (Baruah:2007). So, it can be said that some Misings settled in Assam before 15th century. But no where in any historical literature of Assam it is mentioned why and when did the miris come into contact with the

Chutiyas and settled in their kingdom. It was the *pagro* group of the Misings who were at that time called Chutiya Miri (Rajkumar: 2000). There are another group of Misings, which is known as *samoguriya*. They do not know the Mising language. According to a folk story this group of Misings under some unfortunate circumstances happened to kill their own men and women in a dark night while they were living in the hills. Having come to know about the incident in the next morning they had become totally upset and out of remorse the group immediately left the place and flouted down on a raft in river Dibang and landed on the bank of the river Brahmaputra in Assam. The Ahom monarch appointed them to kill a big python which swallowed many men and animals of some villages of locality. The skilled Mising archers killed the python by a poisonous arrow for which the king settled them in a plave where there were plenty of kinds of tree called *sham*. So, they came to be known as *Samoguriya* Mising that is, Misings settled in the area of sham tree. Since they did not come with any women, they married some local non-Mising woman for whom they lost their own language but retained their social customs, religious beliefs and practices.

Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1569) also mentioned in his *Kirtana Ghosa-*

*Kirat Kachari, Khasi Garo Miri, Jowana Kangka Goalo  
Asom Muluka, Dhubaje Turuka, Kubas Mlecha Chandal  
(Bhagawati: 2/53).*

So, from these facts it can be ascertained that different clans of Misings were already settled in Assam before fifteenth century. They came batch by batch mainly to find better land in the plains for cultivation.

### **Settlement**

Prior to migration to Assam the different clans of Misings lived in the present undivided Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh (Pegu: 2008). The district has border with the Chepakhowa sub-division of Tinsukia and Jonai sub-division of Dhemaji District of Assam. As such, while migrating to the plains the Misings first settled along the bank of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. They preferred the river banks mainly for water and cultivation of summer varieties of paddy crops which the Misings used to produce while they were in the hills. The riverrine areas of the valley are suitable not only for such crops but also for growing various vegetables which are Misings used to take plenty in the hills. Moreover, the Misings find river banks cool

due to breeze coming from the rivers and therefore, suitable for habitation. Thus in the first phase of their migration the Misings settled in the present districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur and Tinsukia though which innumerable tributaries of the Brahmaputra flows. From there they gradually dispersed to the districts of Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur.

At present their population is estimated to be 5, 87,310 souls as per 2001 census. Their villages are located mostly on the banks of rivers for which the Misings are called riverine tribe.

### **Dwelling System**

Misings traditionally live in piled house which they call taléng okum or chang ghar (house with raised platform). The platform is raised five feet above the ground level. It is a long rectangular type single house containing one or more living rooms. Each room is marked by a fire place where children of each single family sit around in the evening time before going to bed. In case of joint family the head lives in the last room of the house where foods and drinks are generally prepared and taken. All members of the family come together and sit around the fire place of the head's room and take foods together and also discuss family matters. The house has only two entrances – one in the front and the other at the back of the house. At both ends spacious verandas are kept. The veranda is called *tunggeng*, where new visitors to the family are first seated for introduction. No unknown person or non-Mising is taken inside the house without being properly acquainted. The ordinary visitors are seated in the front veranda or in the first room of the house. The back space is used mainly by the female members of the family for changing cloths used in outdoors works and for keeping some household things. The Mising houses are constructed by wood, bamboo and cane materials and thatch for roofing. Wooden ladders are fitted in the front and the back of the house for climbing to the raised platform. One or two spacious platforms called *kare*, attached to the main house are maintained mainly for drying paddy grain in the day time and to sit and goosing in the evening in the summer time. On every fire place a piece of ceiling made of bamboo splits is kept hanging for the purpose of smoking fish and meat which Misings relish most. The ceiling is called *perap* and another *chang* made of bamboo split called *rapte perap* is kept suspending on *perap* to keep earthen jars which are used in keeing rice beer. It is important to note that Mising regard fire place most sacred. It is constructed in the middle of the platform dividing it into upper area (*ri: sing*) and lower area (*koktog*). Important male persons are seated in the *ri:sing* and womenfolk and children and less

important male persons are seated in the lower part including *koktog*. Rituals are performed only in the rising marked off by the fire place (*meram*). Members of the family also sleep only in the rising. Thus rising has ritual significance and social status. The fire place must be kept cleaned and safe from damage. It is the important duty of the Mising housewife to clean all the fire places of the house in the morning and sweep the whole platform from one end to another, every day.

Mising house does not have any separate prayer house or room. The room where the Head lives are used a place of worship. There is also no practice of everyday prayer among the Misings. Prayers are offered only on the occasions of performing rituals. However, the Head offers prayer alone when he goes to some distant places on some pieces of business or start sowing seeds or harvesting crops. Prayer is offered by touching eastern corner of the fire place and pouring down a few drops of apong in the name of family ancestor.

Thus a Mising house serves all purposes of the family such as preparing and eating foods, entertaining guests, performing rituals, and sleeping. It is a living house in all sense of the term.

The Misings are traditionally cultivators producing rice which is their staple food. As such every Mising household maintained a grain house called *kumsung* carefully. It is constructed at the distance of at least one hundred meters away from the residential house to its eastern side. There are two reasons for it one, safety from fire, which may be caught in the residential house where fire is frequently used and secondly, Misings regard eastern side where the sun rises as sacred and therefore, the granary which is also considered sacred must be constructed in the eastern side. The granary is treated most revered house or place. Any person without bath and clean cloths or women in manustration is not allowed to enter in the granary. Generally it is the senior most women of the families who alone enters the granary and take out the grains out of it. The male persons enter only for some heavy or repairing works. Thus granary has also some cultural significance for the Misings.

### **Village System**

The Misings of Assam live in villages in sporadic manner in the midst of other non-Mising communities. As different groups came down from the hills through different routes and in different points of time they settled in different areas though mainly on the banks of river. A group of family consisted of different clans form a village. So, a Mising village contains a

number households belonging to different clans. There is hardly any single clan village among the Misings. In a village, however, there may be a cluster of households belonging to the same clan.

A Mising village contains generally not less than 50 households and its number goes up to five hundred or so in a stretch. The houses are built scatteredly mainly for the reason that the house site is selected by divination. The house is built only in the site which is found to be proper by test of divination. As proper sites are not necessarily found in row, so houses are built scatteredly in the village.

### **Village Organization**

Misings live in villages without any central authority. They do not have any particular land or region to be called Mising mother land under any single authority or ruler. They are self ruled people by democratic political system called *kebang*, in which every person irrespective of age and sex freely express his / her view. As such, every Mising village has an independent organization, called *do:lung kebang* (village council) headed by a *Gam* (Chief). A senior man of personal integrity and well versed in Mising customs and traditions is selected as gam. He may belong to any clan but he must be able to earn confidence, respect and good will of the fellow villagers. This is the principle of selecting a gam for the village community. He holds the office so long he earns the confidence and appreciation of the people. He may be removed from gamship if he loses confidence of the members of the village community. He may be succeeded by his son if the son is found worthy of the office. So, *Gamship* is not hereditary (Kagyung: 1989:12). It is a democratic institution established by the common people of the unanimously.

Literarily the *kebang* means public meeting to discuss and to decide any problem. So, the *do:lung kebang* is concerned with every type of problems of the village community. The nature of problem may be personal or family disputes, a criminal offence, violation of customs, inter-village conflict, natural calamities, epidemics, socio-religious function etc. Whenever some problems arise a *kebang* is held and decision is taken on consensus of opinions of the people attending the *kebang*. Any person irrespective of sex and age can attend the *kebang* and participate in the deliberation. The session of the *kebang* is presided by the gam. Having heard the views of the participants the gam gives his considered views and asks for approval of the *kebang*. The *kebang* approve of gam's decision which is considered as final and irrevocable.

Once the gam declares the final decision it is abide by all without question and carried out without fail. If consensus is not arrived at decision is differed and in such a case another session of the kebang is held on another day for further discussion and consensus of opinion. Such situation, however, arises rarely. If problem is related to inter-clan dispute, senior members of the clans involved from another village or two may be invited for advice and suggestion in settling the dispute. In case of inter-village problem kebangs of both the villages hold a joint meeting and settle the problem. Thus the Misings have long tradition of resolving their problems democratically by themselves. Until recent past the Misings did not resort to police and court for settling any interpersonal dispute among them. Even violent crimes like kidnapping, maiming, murder etc. were tried and settled by the kebang.

Thus the village administration was carried out by the kebang under the leadership of the gam who acted as friend, philosopher and guide to the village community. Justice and security of the community was maintained through the kebang and the gam. In recent time however, the institution has become weakened under the impacts of the emerging changes in the general society of the country. The British administration introduced appointment of gaonburah (village head) for the Mising village also and the system is continued till now. The gaonburah is granted some power and privileges to act on behalf of the district administration for maintaining peace and order in the village and also to look after some other problems. Now, gaonburah presides over the kebang in discussing all the problems which were discussed and solved earlier under the leadership of the gam. At the same time, panchayati raj has been introduced in the country after independence. Now all problems including minor crimes are dealt with by the gaon panchayat. Introduction of these two institutions rendered the institution of *Gamship* defunct and kebang too weak. Now, kebang is rarely held to discuss some problems relating to traditional customs and socio-religious matters. Under the changing situations Mising people have started taking their personal problems to state authorities for solution. Thus the traditional perfect democratic system of Mising village administration has been replaced by modern institutions like gaonburah, village panchayat, development committees etc. which have generated conflicts and discussion, among the Misings who once lived in amity and unity.



## Marriage system

Marriage is regarded as necessary in the life of the Hindus, because without a wife he can not enter the *Grihostasram*, the second of the four stages of life (ashrama) ordained by the holy givers. The marriage ceremony consists of a series of rituals to be performed. In the Misings society also marriage is an important stage of life. They consider marriage as part of the life and regarded as holistic act. Misings call marriage, *midang* which means to take woman home for the purpose of procreation of offspring, which is very important for survival and continuity of clan.

The Misings practice clan exogamy and tribal endogamy in their matrimonial system. Marriage within the same clan is never sanctioned. Payeng can not marry payeng, Doley can not marry Doley. The cross-cousin marriage is common very popular among them. The Misings are monogamous. However a man is allowed to marry more than one wife if he is economically capable of maintaining his wives and children. Polygamy is common but polyandry is unknown to the society. They called themselves Hindu by religion but they never called a Brahmin priest for solemnisation of their marriage. The Misings sacrificed pig in the name of Do:nyi Po:lo and ancestors of the family for the well being of the newly married couple. The married women take the vermilion mark in their forehead after marriage.

In their society basically there are three forms of marriage. These are- (a) *Da:ro Midang* (Arranged marriage) (b) *Kumsu: Jo:sul La:nam* (simple marriage by understanding) (c) *Dugla la:nam* or *Sola La:nam* (Marriage by Elopment). Elopment or Gandharva form of marriage is also socially recognised marriage as the elopement takes place due to understanding of the boy and the girl.

In view of the lengthy process and money and material costs, *midang* (arranged marriage) is not very popular among the common Misings. During the period of our field visit only 30 percent of the total *midang* was held in the villages studied.

## Food Habits

The Misings may be called voracious eaters of rice with meat and fish, cooked in curry mixing mainly leafy vegetables. They eat all varieties of fish but not eat meat of all animals. They eat chicken, pork and deer meat and avoid horse, dog, monkey, snake etc. They strictly prohibit beef. A beef eater may be ex-communicated. Misings do not prohibit duck and goat

meats but they hardly relish them. These are not used in socio religious functions – not even entertaining a guest. A Mising family or the village community honor a guest by killing a hog and offering its meats with a kind of rice beer called *po:ro apong* (pure wine). They also prepare white variety of rice-beer but the blackish variety called *po:ro* is their original preparation which other communities using rice-beer cannot prepare.

Like any other tribes Mising never used tea as a part of daily beverage. Similarly, they hardly used milk as food until recent past although they used to keep milk cattle for milk business. Misings also hardly used dal (lentil) and other varieties of grams except black pulse and cooking oil preparing various types of food items except meat. Misings used mustard oil only in cooking meat not in other varieties of food items. Now-a-days, however, these food items have become common to them. Many Misings families take tea regularly instead of *apong* (rice beer) to visitor. *Apong* has become rich man's drink and rare item for socio-religious functions. It is prepared mainly for religious function in which it is a must item. Without *apong* a religious function is considered incomplete and it serves no purpose. They believe that the spirits propitiated are not satisfied without *apong*. Similarly, no social function without *apong* is significant and meaningful. Some quantity of *apong* must be served to the invitees to a social function. Thus the *apong* continued to be a cultural item for the Misings.

### Dress

Writing on Mising dress Pegu (2005) rightly states in his publication entitled – “*The Misings of the Brahmaputra Valley*” that is difficult to say with precision how the Mising men and women dressed centuries back in the hills. However, it appears that they did dress better covered than their counterparts in the hills from the very beginning. They are now found dressed in anything from shirt, pant, by man, salwar-kurta and sharees by women. Yet their traditional dresses are very much in use till to-day particularly the women dress. Men folk use the same dress as non-Misings wear. But the womenfolk wear modern as well as their traditional cloths made by themselves particularly the married ones. After marriage traditional dress called *ege* (cloth to cover the lower part of the body from the waist) and *gero* (cloth to cover the upper part from hips to the neck) are compulsory for a Mising woman. Wearing *ege-gero* symbolizes the marital status of a Mising woman. The unmarried girls wear only the *ege* to cover the lower part

of and blouse the upper parts of the body. The girls also use a piece of cloth sufficient to cover the chest called *Ku:pop*.

All the Mising traditional dress for men and women are home made or home spun. In the past more or less every Mising families used to grow cotton for making cloths for its members – both male and female. The male clothe to cover the lower part of the body from waist to below knee is called *ugon* and the shirt called *gaaluk*. Mising use different colours such as black, yellow, deep, red and bottle-green. Female clothes are made very colourful making them quite attractive. In fact, Mising *ege* (*mekhela in Assames*), *ribi*, *gaseng* and *mibu galuk* (priest-shirt) have good market demand for their colourful designs as well as quality. Mising *Gadu* is not a dress but a heavy cotton rug made for family use. But it is also wanted by many non-Mising buyers to keep it a piece of decoration for its attractive design and quality. Thus Misings have their own dress pattern.

### Languages

Like many other tribes the Misings have also their language which is called *tani agom* (human language). Originally it is the same language spoken by the Adi group of tribes of Arunachal Pradesh with little varieties in words, ancient and pronunciation. According to the linguistic survey of India, the Mising language belongs to north Assam group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. The north Assam group consists mainly of Miris (Misings), Dufala (Nishi), Abors (Adis), but least with the Mishimis. These languages could be termed as *tani agom* or *tani language* (Pegu: 2005:101).

The Mising language abounds in oral literature which are maintained in forms of folktales (*do: ying*), folk songs (*ni:tom*) elegies or rhapsodies (*a:bangs*) etc. Apart from using it day to day conversation among the Misings the language is maintained in forms of folk tales, folk songs and elegies or rhapsodies called *a:bangs*. The language was developed in written form by a British Missionary named William Robinson who prepared a brief grammar of Miri language published in the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1849 A.D. Later on J.F. Needham, an assistant political officer of Sadiya prepared an "*Outline Grammar of Shayang Miri Language*" as per back in 1885. In 1907, J.H. Lorrain brought out a "*Dictionary of the Miri- Abor Language*". Now, three more dictionary have been published, two edited by Taburam Taid (*A Dictionary of the Mising Language and Mising Gompir Kumsung*) and one by Jitmal Doley.

In 1967 a formal Mising literary organization called *Mising Agom Kebang* (Mising Language Conference) was formed and since then some efforts have been made systematically to develop the language. Meanwhile some primers, grammars and other books and articles have been published in Mising language. It is also introduced as a language to learn at primary levels at the primary schools of the Mising dominated areas. Thus the Mising language has been in progress.

### **Education**

In 2001 census the literary rate of the Mising community has been shown as 60 per cent. So, as compared to the national rate 58 per cent the Misings are not so backward in getting modern education. Now-a-days, primary schools, secondary and higher secondary schools are established in Mising areas and every year a number of young boys and girls of the community have been getting out of colleges and universities with graduate and post-graduate degrees. Meanwhile many individuals of the community have been working in schools, colleges and universities as teachers, as high ranking government – both State and Central officials and professionals in various organizations. Thus, the Misings are not lagging too far in education.

### **Festivals**

#### **Ali-Aye-Ligang**

Main festival of the Misings is *Ali-A:ye-Ligang* meaning sowing of seeds. Misings have been paddy cultivators since time immemorial. They grow the summer varieties of paddy for which sowing are started from the month of January. The festival is however, observed on the first Wednesday of the month of *falguna* that is in mid of February.

On that day the head of every family goes to his field and broad cast a handful of paddy grain in the eastern corner of the field and offer prayer asking blessings of the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* (The Sun and the Moon), *Sé:di-Mé:lo* (creator of the universe), and the ancestor of the family for safe and healthy growth of the crops. He then comes back home and offers prayer to the departed souls of the family by offering few drops of *apong* in their names. Meanwhile the female members of the family engaged themselves in sweeping and clearing the yards and platform of the house, washing old cloths and preparing *purang* and *apong* for the family and the visitors. *Purang* is a boiled packet rice or particular variety which is soft and tasteful. It is taken with milk

or meat curry or *dal* etc. It is a typical Mising snack prepared for the occasion of *Ali-Aye-Ligang*. The young boys and the girls enjoyed very much. The adult persons exchange family visits and enjoy *apong* with smoked fish which Misings relish very much.

In the afternoon the grown up young boys and girls start a kind of singing and dancing called *gumrag so:man* – a group dance in steps. The party holds *gumrag* in each and every house of the village offering prayer to the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* for wellbeing of the family and their property. The family offers *po:ro apongs*, *purang* and other food stuffs available at that time to the *gumrag* party. In this way the collection becomes quite large and on the next third or fourth day, the young boys and girls feast the collections. Thus the *Ligang* festive is performed as traditional festival of the Mising community. The day is observed by entering friends and neighbours with food and drink. The young boys and girls hold singing and dancing called *gumrag* in every household of the village and enjoy a feast on the next day. *Ali-Aye-Ligang* is also regarded as spring festival; welcoming New Year. So, on that day, the Misings wear new cloths, prepare special snacks foods and drink and entertain fellow villager. It is a one day celebration, observed by the individual villages.

### **Po:rag**

It is a community feast for the village folk. According to Tabu Taid, (2007:108) *po:rag* is a festival of reunion of the people staying outside the village. In the process some people particularly the female members leave their own village on marriage and they can not come back to the village frequently. The village people remain busy from morning till evening in day to day works finding no free time visits their friend and relatives of their own village. Therefore, the village youths feel the necessity of arranging a feast where the old and young men and women of the village as well as those who are staying out may get together at a feast where they can freely and leisurely enjoys foods and drinks for a day or two. With such objective in view the village youths arrange a grand feast called *po:rag*, with some program of dance and music. For that, a decorative open hall is constructed to accommodate atleast a hundred persons to take food and drink at a time. The hall is called *murong* (open house). The hall is built at sufficiently open space either in the middle or at one end of the village suitable for the purpose. Since the feast is arrange in open space and open hall it is called *murong* which means open space.

Po:rag is held at the interval of every five years because it needs good amount of money and materials to entertain more than thousand of people. So, it required considerable time and labour to arrange it properly. First requirement is the construction of the murong, which must be quite strong and spacious to accommodate more than a hundred people to take foods and drinks at a time; and at the same time it must decorative to be pleasant looking. So, the murong is constructed more or less as permanent structure and as such after po:rag it is used as a public hall where young boys of the village get together in evening for gossip and public meeting is held occasionally. So, it takes atleast a year or so to build a murong.

For feast in the po:rag atleast 10 to 15 matured hogs and 500 packets containing atleast 3 kgs. Fermented rice and 10 to 15 quintals of rice are required along with many food staffs like vegetables, fish, chicken etc. As such, considerable preparation is necessary quite ahead of holding a po:rag. For the hogs the individual households are requested to rear pig lings to become matured. The Youths of the village help the families to grow more crops and vegetables and collect fund by performing some works for the families or individuals in need of labour or wage basis either in cash or in kind. For all these it needs more than a year to arrange a po:rag, It is, therefore, held at the interval of not less than five years. Since it depends of favorable socio-economic condition of a village, therefore, po:rag is an individual village festival and not a community festival for the Misings as whole. So, it is not regularly held by every village, yet as a mater of tradition more or less every Mising village tries to hold po:rag from time to time though the gap may be more than five years.

Once the date is fixed for po:rag the village folks become alert for their duties and responsibilities in performing the programme properly. Every person feels that question of prestige and reputation of the village community is also involved in holding the po:rag which would be attended by the distinguished invitees from outside the village. Invitations are sent out to those who are born and brought up in the village and now staying outside, particularly the women members who are living elsewhere after marriage. The next important groups to invitees are the youths of the neighbouring villages who perform dance and music at the po:rag. Besides these groups important personalities of the community are invited to the function. Apart from entertainment po:rag is also held to pray for peace and prosperity of the village community.

Thus po:rag has social and cultural significance. However, now-a-days, it is not regularly held. In fact, many villages have stopped celebrating the festival. Apart from heavy financial

involvement there is hardly any time for the boys and the girls to arrange such a huge feast. Mising youths like those of other communities are becoming too busy in career making activities. They can no longer afford to spare time and labour for festivals like po:rag, which needs considerable time to prepare. Thus, it appears that the po:rag is going to be lost totally.

### **Bihu**

Bihu which refer to marry-making festivals of Assam are the original festivals of plains. They do not belong to Mising tradition. The Misings adopted them from the non-Mising Assamese communities in the plains. Now, the bihus have become part and parcels of their cultural system and accordingly observe them enthusiastically. On the day of kati hibu (autumn festival) the Misings also observe it by putting earthen lights in front of their individual house, granary and in the paddy field for prosperity and good harvest. The magh bihu, the harvest festival is observed in the midst of January. The Misings offer prayer to the celestial gods for good crops and harvest in the coming season. They also like the other non-Misings Assamese communities arrange family feast on the occasion of the magh bihu, that is, the winter harvest festival. The bohag bihu is observed as New Year festival in the mid-April. They follow the same procedures and programs of observing the bohag bihu as the other non-Mising communities of Assam. Thus the Misings observe both Mising and non-Mising festivals of Assam. They have adopted the musical instruments like the *dhool* (drum), *pepa* (triumphed made of buffalo horn), *taal* (cymbal) etc.

### **Summing up**

The Misings were originally hill tribe belonging to the group of tribes called Adi of Arunachal Pradesh. At that time there was no particular tribe called Misings. The community of Mising has been formed by different clans of the Adi tribes. The clans migrated to the plains in different periods of time and through different routs and such settled in different places of mainly on the banks of the river Brahmaputra. Since all the clans belonged to the same original group adi, therefore, they formed the Mising community in the plains calling each clan as true sub-group of the adis who claim the same ancestral origin the Abutani meaning the father of human race. All the tribes of Adi group believed that Abutani was the first man to be born out of the

union of the Do:nyi-Po:lo for which the Adis Arunachal Pradesh the Misings of Assam consider themselves as the progenies of Do:nyi-Po:lo.

The period of migration of the Misings to the plains is determined to be from 12th century when the Chutiyas ruled the upper most part of Assam border, present Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. They migrated batch by batch continuing up to the end of the Ahom rule in the early part of the 19th century. The Misings are settled mostly in the upper region of the Brahmaputra Valley.

The Misings are clan based society having as many as 51 exogamous clans. They have the same way of life living in villages which are located scattered in the midst of non-Mising castes and tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley.

Like the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Misings also live in piled house called *changhar* which is made of wood, bamboo, cane and cane materials. Every Mising village has its own village organizations called *do:lung kebang* (village council) headed by a chief called gam and yame-mimbir (youth organization of both sex), functioning under the leadership of a young man and a girl. All problems of the village community are dealt by these two organizations. Now-a-days, these two organizations have been rendered insignificant if not defunct by the emergence of the new institutions like gaonburah (village headman), panchayat, development committees, clubs, students, organizations etc.

Misings have their own language which has been developed into written language by using Roman scripts, primers, grammars, dictionaries, books and journals have been already published in the language. A literary society called Mising Agom Kebang has been formed. The language is introduced at primary schools of Mising dominated areas as language to be learnt.

The staple food of the Misings is rice with meat or fish and leafy vegetables. Unlike many other tribes the Misings do not take dog, beef, monkey, snake etc. They eat only chicken, pork, mutton and duck meat. Their national beverage is rice beer called *Apong*. Of late Tea and Milk have become popular among them.

Misings have two important festivals called *Ali-Aye-Ligang* (seed sowing) and *Po:rag* (community feast of reunion). *Ligang* is celebrated on the first Wednesday of Falgun i.e. February. It is observed by the entire community on the same day but *po:rag* is observed by individual villages according to their conveniences.



Apart from these two festivals the Misings also observe the three bihus of Assam along with the non-Mising communities. Thus, the Misings are in dual cultural system maintaining their own as well as those of other non-Misings culture. It indicates the process of sanskritization in the cultural system of the community.

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**CHAPTER- IV**

**RELIGION OF THE MISINGS**

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### RELIGION OF THE MISINGS

Religion is defined by different thinkers in different ways according to their own perception of the phenomenon. McIver and Page (1967:167) says that "*Religion, as we understand the term, implies a relationship not merely between man and man but also between man and some higher power*". H.M. Johnson (1989:392) defines "*Religion*" as "*more or less coherent system of beliefs and practices concerning a supernatural order of beings, forces places or other entities.*" According to E.B. Taylor (1951) "*Religion is the belief in supernatural beings*". But all the definitions lead to the conclusion that it is coherent system of beliefs and practices pertaining to some supernatural powers which are believed to control the events of natural and human worlds. The system may differ from society to society depending upon its cultural system but the fact remains that it exists in every society irrespective of its types and level of socio-economic development. As such, religion has relevance in understanding the phenomenon of sanskritization in tribal society which is characterized by primitive type of beliefs and practices. Accordingly, this chapter is devoted to throwing light on religious system of Mising tribal community for understanding the process of Change and Continuity under the impacts of Hinduisation.

#### **Mising Concept of Supernatural Power**

Misings believe that there is a creator of the universe and all things both animate and inanimate on it and the creator was the *Sé:di-Mé:lo*, which emerged out of *nothingness* (Pegu: 2008:110) *Sé:di-Mé:lo* gave birth to the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* (the sun and the moon) from which human race including the Mising emerged. So, the Misings call themselves as the progenies of the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* the sun and the moon.

The Misings believe that the universe and all animate and inanimate objects in it emerged out of the conjugal union of *se:di-ba:bu* (father *se:di*) and *melo-na:ne* (mother *me:lo*) – two imaginary beings representing male and female without whose union any life can not be born. *Sé:di* first emerged out of '*tapapu:mang*' (Panyang Kotoky:1935:6) nearning vast expanse of floating mist and then he created *melo*; and "out of conjugal efforts of *se:di* with mother *me:lo*,

ditem (earth), adi-ditem (hills), neyi-nengan (trees with different leaves), peyyi-pettang (birth with different feathers), rukji-merang (ants and insects) were created and gave them their respective voices” (Pegu:2005:137) The sun and the moon are believed to be the first creation of *Sé:di-Mé:lo* and from the conjugal union of these two plants (imagined to be deities), abu-tani – the first man on earth was born and from abu-tani (abu – father, tani – man) human race including the Misings emerged. The Misings, therefore, regard the Sun (Do:nyí) and the Moon (Po:lo) as their original mother and father respectively and accordingly they call themselves as the progenies of the Do:nyí-Po:lo. As such, in the beginning of every solemn functions the Misings invariably invoke Do:nyí-Po:lo for blessing. Do:nyí-Po:lo are regarded as the custodian of truth and justice. It is believed that nothing can be concealed from the luminous eyes of Do:nyí and po:lo and “he who ever tries to do so will sure to meet his doom.” (Pegu: 2005:139)

However, the Misings do not worship the Sun and the Moon directly and specifically thinking that the mystery of these two planets are far beyond the comprehension of man and they are the saviours of the entire universe, and inadequate for the great power and service of the sun and the moon for mankind and all things and events of the universe. So, they think that prayer by heart is enough for Do:nyí-Na:ne and Po:lo-Ba:bu (mother Do:nyí – and father po:lo), which they do every auspicious occasion.

### **Concepts of Spirits and Deity**

Before coming into contact the plains men particularly the Hindus, the Misings did not have any concept of deity in some shape or image. They simply believed that there exist some spirits in an around human habitats. Some of the spirits are benevolent and some others are malevolent. It is believed that the malevolent spirits are always bent on creating troubles for men and the benevolent protect men from the attack of the malevolent spirits. The Misings, therefore, feel the need of propitiating both the benevolent and the malevolent spirits by offering some sacrifices depend on the nature and function of the spirits and therefore, there are varieties of rituals prevalent among the Misings. There is a story about the origin of the spirits as follows:

## **Origin of Spirits**

*Abotani* the first ancestor of man gave birth to two sons named Nibo and Robo. Nibo was honest and benvolent in character. But his brother Robo was dishonest and jealous of Nibo. Robo always tried to cheat and harm Nibo. So, Nibo drove Robo to jungle where he gave birth to many children. The children growing up in jungle turned into various spirits and developed ill feeling against human beings. On the other hand the offspring of Nibo having imbibed their father's character had become benevolent spirits. As such, the evil spirits live in deep forests, high hills, deep rivers and tanks etc. and always look forward to doing harm to men. On the other hand the benevolent spirits originating from Nibo stay with men guarding their life and properties. (Pegu: 2005:149)

## **Rites and Rituals**

The Misings like any other tribes have some rites and rituals which characterize their religious system. These are briefly described as follows-

### **Dodgang**

Dodgang is the last post-death ritual performed by the Misings. It is performed to bid farewell to the departed soul for good. The Misings believe that the soul (*urom*) does not leave human world for the land where the departed souls live eternally. The family therefore, holds a grand farewell ritual which is attended by the relatives, friends and well wishers of the death person and the heads of families of the village. The function must be initiated and conducted by a very senior and experienced religious devotee call *Sadhuburah* (senior most religious man) and a dozen of other *bhakats* (initiated devotees). In the preceding evening of the dodging day a ritual is performed praying the *ghar-dangoriya* (deity guarding home) and the ancestors for smooth holding of the dodging. On the next day the ritual dodging is performed. The members of the family, relatives, friends and all the invitees pay homage by offering prayer to the departed soul as well as for its safe and smooth journey to the abode of the eternal peaceful rest. The participants and the invitees are entertained by sumptuous foods and drinks on that day. For the purpose a huge amount of meat, fish, rice, vegetables and rice beer are required for which at least three to four full grown matured pigs are killed. As some of the relatives of the family stay outside the village and come back to the family after a long gap of time in connection with

dodging, a family feast is arranged on the third day; and at least a large size pig is necessary for the occasion. This is more or less a part of the ritual- dodgang.

There is no defining period during which dodging to be held after the death of a person concerned. It is, however, held after a year or so of the death. Many families defer it for several years as Dodgang is a very expensive ritual. It needs a long time preparation for collecting the materials including the pigs which are reared by the family and its relatives. In fact, it is a group affair involving the relatives and friends who also contribute to the family in kind and labor.

Dodgang is considered as the last rite to the journey of the soul to eternal abode where it is believed the departed soul forget everything of the earthly life including the family; and as such, the family no longer performs any ritual for the soul but its name is mentioned in all occasions of socio-religious functions.

### **Urom**

Urom uyu is an ancestral worship. The Misings believe that as soon as person dies his or her soul leaves the body and becomes a kind of spirit called urom. The urom goes to 'uyu among' – the land of spirit and resides in it eternally, but it does not de-link its relation totally with its earthly family. The urom revisits its original family in the earth from time to time for food and drink. The desire is indicated by showing some unusual happenings or sign generally in the fire place of the family house. Once the sign is observed urom uyu is arranged offering food and drink to the urom and pray for wellbeing of the family.

It is also believed that the urom does not immediately forget or gives up its earlier earthly desire for foods and drinks. It suffers from hunger and thirst like any human being on earth. Therefore, the family arranges a ritual called *urom aapin* (food for the departed soul) in which the urom is offered a dish of rice with pork curry and a bowlful rice beer. The ritual is performed within a period of one to three months after the death of the person. In the urom-apin at least one matured pig is sacrificed in the name of departed soul and offered prayer to be satisfied and happy. Co-villagers are invited and entertain with rice, meat and vegetable and rice beer. The relatives and the friends of the family offer their homage to the departed soul on the occasion.

The ritual is performed by the neo-vaisnavite devotees called bhakats. The senior most bhakat is called satula or sadhubura who acts as the priest of the function. They recite hymns composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and his principal disciple Madhabdeva.

Now-a-days some Misings perform *sushi* (purification) in place of *urom apin*, within a period of one month of death of a person. The concept of *sushi* is borrowed from non-Mising neo-vaisnavite communities in which it is prevalent. According to them, death of a person pollutes the entire home and therefore, it must be purified by a ritual. Unlike *urom suchi* is not for satisfying the desires of the departed soul but for purifying the pollution caused by death contrasting to the objective of *urom apin*. But interestingly the Mising *sushi* is practically same with the *urom apin* in its objective and mode of performance. It is also performed to satisfy the hunger and thirst of the departed soul and to offer homage to it. In *sushi* also pig is sacrificed and rice beer is served with non-vegetarian foods,

It is also observed that those who practice *urom-apin* they perform a ritual called *tiloni* on the third day of the death of a person. On death of a person the family immediately suspends its entire outdoor works and observe fasting by avoiding solid food. On the third day the *tiloni* is performed and outdoor works are resumed. This is also borrowed from the non-Mising neo-vaisnavite Assamese communities. The term *tiloni* is an Assamese word to mean purificatory ritual in three (*tini*) days. *Sushi* system is also a non-Mising ritual in origin. They did not perform *tiloni*. It may be mentioned here that until recent past *sushi* was not prevalent among the Misings at all. It has been started from the last four decades or so whereas *urom apin* is the traditional ritual practiced from the long past.

There are another form of *urom uyu*, performed by the Misings. It is an ancestral worship. It is believed that the departed soul of a person resides in the land of spirits called *uyu* among, for a period of five generation or so. During these times the soul (*urom*) comes back from time to time to see its near and dear ones, once again. The visit is indicated by some unusual signs in the family. Once the sign is observed an immediate step is taken for propitiatory ritual for the *urom* (spirit of soul). As it needs some time to arrange the ritual with adequate food and *apong*, which are indispensable for such function, a promise is made in presence of a *bhakat* and *chaki* (an earthen light) that the worship would be held as early as possible. It is called *urom aagnam* (promise to hold *urom uyu*). It is believed that if it is not immediately promised or the promise is not materialized serious events such as unnatural death, women may die in process of delivering baby, baby itself may die, death by lightning etc. may take place in the family. Therefore, the worship is performed offering food with meat and drink to the ancestors (*urom*) for their satisfaction and blessings for the families. This is called *urom po:sum* worship to the

ancestors. Thus the families which worship the latest two of three generational ancestors are regarded as the closest kin.

### **Dobur**

One of the important religious functions of the Mising community is the *dobur*. This is a propitiatory worship to celestial entities believed to be responsible for storm, lightening and thundering, rain and draught, and fire. These phenomena are dangerous to life and properties of man. Therefore, the Misings worship the celestial entities praying to protect their life and properties from the events of such happenings. There are three types of *dobur* viz. *do:lung* *dobuir*, *burte* *dobur* and *aarig* *dobur*.

*Do:lung* *dobur* refers to the *dobur* organized by the village (*do:lung*) community. It is meant for general wellbeings of the families of the village. It is held more or less regularly just before the onset of the summer during which storms, lightening and thunder, heavy rain, flood, epidemic etc. occur. To be safe from such events the heavenly bodies are propitiated by holding a sacrificial rituals collectively by the families of a village. The function is organized by the male youths of the village. Female members remain totally abstain from participating in the function believing that they may pollute the ritual.

On the day of the *dobur*, the youths start beating the platform of every house by sticks from outside to drive out the evil spirits believed to be hiding in the corners of the house. As the beating goes on from one end to another the inmates of the house announce that the spirits are running out. Then beating is stopped and the team is offered some food materials for the job. The youths pray for peace and prosperity of the family. This is why the ritual is called by the non-Mising Assamese as *chang kubua utsab* (festival of beating platform).

By having completed beating all the houses worship to celestial deities is arranged in an open space at outskirts of the village. Fowls are sacrificed at the worship and pray for the well being of the village community. After prayers the youths arrange feast on the food materials collected from the families.

The *dobur* is considered to be a sacred function for which women are not allowed to participate in it. On the *dobur* day the women in manustration or in a stage of child delivery are asked to stay away from the village. Strangers coming from outside are not allowed entering the village on the *dobur* day. If any one enters out of ignorance he or she is detained in the village till



end of the function. If the stranger wants to leave before the end of the function he may part with something which may be cash or kind with the organizers.

On the *dobur* day, all outdoor activities of the village are suspended. The day is observed as holiday in the village. The senior men and women of the village exchange family visits by entertaining and enjoying among (rice beer).

The *dobur* is also performed by an individual family. When some kind of serious crimes like murder, incestuous act etc. is committed by a person; his or her family performs a *dobur*. Misings consider such acts as great sins for which not only the offender but also family is believed to suffer from the evil consequences of the sin. Therefore, to expedite the sin and to be safe from its consequences *dobur* is performed. The offender's family is required to arrange the *dobur* by sacrificing and entertaining considerable number of guests with which is demand to be punishment to the offender and his/her family. Such *dobur* is called *burte dobur* (big *dobur*).

*Dobur* is also held for wellbeing of crops. Such *dobur* is called *arig* (crop field) *dobur* held by a family to ward off attack of pest and pestilence and for good harvest.

### **Taléng uyu (Deities of upper world)**

*Taléng uyu* is performed to propitiate the spirits that are believed to reside above the sky. (Doley: 1998:75-79) The deities are held responsible for lightening, storms, raining as well as draught. Lightening may kill man and animals, storm may destroy houses, heavy rain, prolonged draught, insects etc. may destroy crops, the residential house or granary may catch fire etc. These are unpredictable dangers in the course of living. The ethereal deities, particularly the sun and the moon can foresee the impending dangers and stop them from taking place. Every Mising family, therefore perform *taléng uyu* by offering live sacrifices, foods and drinks to propitiate the heavenly deities.

The ritual is performed in the court yard of the family granary. The Misings regard granary most important and sacred place. So, it must be kept safe and free from fire, lightening, storm and pollution from any source. Accordingly, the granary is built at a distance of a few yards from the residential house so that it is quite safe from fire. Similarly, ordinary persons particularly menstruating woman are not allowed to enter into it. One can enter it only in clean dress after bath.

Ethereal deities are believed to be very sensitive and they get easily offended on slight error in the performance of rituals. Therefore, they take every care in performing ritual properly.

Taléng uyu is also regarded as most sacred ritual. It must be performed properly and in clean place. Therefore, granary is selected as the proper site for holding the ritual.

Taléng uyu is generally performed at the interval of every five years. The ritual is performed by the initiated bhakats. The senior bhakat designated as satula leads the function. He is flanked by other junior bhakats. A pair of chicken, one cock and one hen, are needed to be sacrificed for the deities. A pig or more chicken may be killed to entertain the bhakats and other participants in the function. Large quantity of rice and rice-beer are also prepared and served to the participants. Thus taléng uyu is an expensive ritual for which it is held after five years or so from the preceding one. Taléng uyu is also held if a person or domestic animal is killed or a house or a tree in crop field or in a compound of a house is destroyed by lightening. The incident is viewed as a sign of unhappiness or anger of the heavenly deity responsible for such happenings against the family concerned. In fear of more serious happening the family performed taléng uyu propitiating the deity believed to be responsible for death or destruction of life or property. So, it is an individual family ritual though it reflects the same common belief about the celestial entities as supernatural power to control the happening in human life and properties.

Now-a-days, however, taléng uyu has become a rare occasion among the Misings. Many families have given it up. The followers of the bhagavatiya sect of neo-vaisnavism do not perform taléng uyu. It is prevalent only among the *keoliya Mising*.

### **The Mibu (Mising priest / witch doctor)**

Misings have also priest who lead the performance of rituals. They call him as *mibu* which means father of man (mi-man, abu-father). In religious sphere mibu is the chief because he is the only man who can communicate with the spirits in a language not comprehensible to man. He knows the language of the deities and talk to them about the problem for which the ritual is performed. Mibu also knows the *a:bang* which is rhymatic narration of the creation of the universe and human race and also the genealogy of clans. In the words of J N Chaudhury (1971), 'they' (meaning the mibus/nyibus/miris) the shamans for par excellence with the knowledge and power of negotiating with spirit world.' Their services are sought after during

sickness or other misfortunes when they prescribe the necessary rites or sacrifices for propitiating the inimical spirits or urom.

For the Misings mibu is not an ordinary person. Anybody and every body cannot become a mibu by his will. He is believed to be chosen by epom- a kind of semi-human beings which live in large tree in deep forest. The epom look for a gifted male child and if such child is found he kidnapped and taken to forest and kept with epom for a week or so during which the child is given lessons for perform the role of a mibu in the human society. When the initiation is over the boy is allowed to go back home with some instructions to avoid some food habits and activities. Accordingly the boy grown up learning aabangs from the senior mibus and collects *special dress, Yoksa (sword), Dogne (bids)* and other materials for his role.

The Misings believe that sometime some evil spirit steal the yalo (soul) of person intending to demand some foods and drinks as result of which the person falls sick. So, in order to restore the health of the sick person mibu engaged to coax the spirit and convince it that spirits would be offered foods with meat and drink it returns the yalo (soul) of the sick person. The mibu in his language and style coax and appeals the spirit to release the yalo of the man and let him recover his health.

Mibu is also engaged in performing rituals in socio-religious celebrations. Before introduction of the bhakatiya system Mibu was the only religious men to perform all the rites and rituals of the Mising community. But the institution has declined where Misings have become disciple of the satras and developed the bhakatiya system of worship. Now-a-days, mibus are not available in the community. In our enquiry it was found that all religious functions are performed by satula or sadhuburah who are the neo-vaisnavite priest. Even the celebration of po:rag which is to be initiated by mibu, satula or sadhuburah is engaged to language the function. However, the followers of the Do:nyi-Po:loism have mibu system but not like the traditional one. In the new system any man well-versed in Do:nyi-Po:lo A:bang and the norms of performing the ritual acts as mibu.

### **Bor Sewa**

Bor (large, great) sewa (worship) is an annual ritual performed collectively by the village community for its wellbeing. The village youths collect materials from every family and deposit the same in the village namghar. Devotees from neighboring villages are invited to the function.

A senior sadhuburah, who may belong to non-Mising community, is specially invited to act as the chief priest called *guru* to conduct the function. In the past, the *guru* was invariably from either Ahom or Chutiya or Satradhikar of a satra (monasteries). The function is generally held in the month of either February or March, during which cultivation of summer varieties of paddy crops goes on in full swing. Therefore, community worship is felt necessary to offer prayer to the deities and departed souls of the village to protect the village community from epidemic and other unnatural happenings in the village. Apart from prayer couples intending to become *poka bhakat* (senior bhakat) are further initiated in the function. This is a grade system among initiated devotees of the kalasamhati Misings. In the young age a man gets initiated at the satra. After marriage when they become more than 40. The sadhuburah (old devotee or religious man) who acts chief priest of the function initiate (sharana) the new bhakats and the satula.

It is held in the village *namghar* (community prayer hall) in the night for which it is called *rati khowa sakam* meaning nocturnal ritual. Every Mising village has a *namghar* for the purpose. It is completely enclosed by a wall made of bamboo splits to make invisible from outside at all. It does not have any window. There is only one door in the front-side for entrance and exit. The ritual is performed inside the house in such a secret manner that no one can see it from outside. Except the bhakats and their respective spouses no other persons are allowed to enter inside the house. The bhakats are also strictly warned against disclosing the procedures and activities of the ritual to any non-bhakats any time and anywhere. The method of performing the ritual must be kept secret. However, what transpires from inside is that the bhakats and their spouses after taking plenty of strong rice-beer with meat, fish, vegetable etc. dance around their *guru* the religious chief chanting the verse of praise and submission of him absolutely.

### **Dangoriang Uyu**

This is worship to the deity guarding the household called *ghar-dangoriya*, who guards the house and its inmates, against attack of malevolent spirits. The *ghar-dangoriya* (the house guard) wards off the evil spirits and keeps the house safe from fire, lightning, storm etc. Therefore, every family offers prayer to the *ghar dangoriya* at least once in a year for its service. In fact, on every occasion of religious or social celebrating, *ghar dangoriya* is mentioned in the prayer for its blessing. Thus *dangoriang uyu* has become an integral part of Mising religion.

### **Asi uyu (spirit live in water)**

Misings are riverrine people and as such they conception about water living spirits, which is believed to cause some problem for human beings. Accordingly, prayer is offered to the spirits believed to be live in water from time to time. The ritual is performed by a single priest on the bank of a river or water pond.

### **Aai uyu or Aai-sewang**

It is performed in connection with small-fox and measles. It is believed that the female deity called aai (mother) is responsible for small pox and therefore she is propitiated by chanting aai-nam a lyrical hymn specially composed for the purpose. In this worship only fresh rice power, ripe banana and similar other fruits are offered. Non-vegetarian victuals are strictly prohibited. This is borrowed from communities. Misings have no concept of any deity causing small pox.

### **The Joniya Uyu**

This is a kind of rituals which performed by three or seven or nine bhakats. The worship are so called according to the number of bhakats engaged in performing a particular worship. A worship performed in attendance of three bhakats is called tini-janiya, of seven bhakats is sat-janiya, and of nine-bhakats is no-janiya and so on. Formerly eghara-janiya (eleven bhakats) and ekois-janiya (twenty one bhakats) were also performed. Now-a-days, these two are given up. The other janiyas are continued.

The janiya worship are meant for propitiating the grahas (planets) which are believed to be responsible for some constant troubles like illness, or damage of crops and properties, physical injuries by accident etc. In the plains the Misings have also developed the concept of planets effects on human life. Like the other caste Hindus now the Misings also believe Saturn (sani) and mars (mongol) as evil planets (grahas), which cast evil effects on man's health and property. So, they have started worshipping grahas by offering live sacrifices, food and drinks. Number of bhakats depends on number of grahas to be propitiated. The family ancestors are also worshipped along with the grahas. Thus the janiyas are grahas cum ancestral worship.

### **Yumrang uyu (spirit of forest)**

This is another ritual performed by the Mising families. It is believed that there are some spirits which live in deep forests. These spirits never come out of the forest to create trouble for human beings. They keep on close watch on the forest and the birds, animals, reptiles etc. for their safety. Therefore, when a man enters forest the spirit immediately attacks him. As such, one has to propitiate the forest deity by offering some live sacrifices, foods and drinks for entering forest for some works. The ritual is performed nearby a forest beyond the watch of common people.

### **Deities**

Like many other tribes, the Mising have also conception about some deities as follows –

*Sé:di-Mé:lo* : Creator of the universe with all the objects living or non-living in it. He is regarded as the Supreme Lord of the universe.

*Do:nyi-Po:lo* : The progenitor of human race, including the Misings.

*Taléng uyu* : Eternal deity.

*Koje-yango* : Goddess of wealth and fertility.

*Pedong Na:ne* : Goddess of rain.

*Kine-Na:ne* : Goddess of land beneath the earth.

*Karsin-Kartang* : Goddess of crops.

*Yi:dum Botte* : Goddess of wind.

These are only abstract conception of god and goddesses. The Misings do not conceive them in particular shape or image. Writing about Mising deities N.C. Pegu (2005:149) states that apart from principal deities like *Sé:di-Mé:lo*, *Donyi-Polo*, *Mukling-Mirém* (thunder and lightning), *Among* (earth), *Asi* (water), *Meruk* or *Ímí* (fire), *Esar* (air), there are number of spiritual being possessing lower much greater than man". Further, he writes "Evidently, the deities of the Misings could be compared with the deities of early Aryan like *Indra* (*Mukling-Taléng*), *Agni* (*imi* or *meruk*), *Varun* (*asi*) *Vayu* (*esar*), *Basumoti* (*Aamong*), *Laxmidévi* (*Koje-yango*) of Vedic gods and goddesses."

These are the high gods and goddesses of the Mising community of Assam. The Adi tribes have also similar gods and goddesses but by different names in different communities.

## Divination

The Misings like any other tribal have also divination practice, which is called *tagir kanam*. They consult mainly pig liver to find out any sign of the impending death or danger to the family concerned.

When a pig is killed on some religious or social occasions its liver is invariably examined to find out any sign of calamities of the family. Generally the mibus are considered as expert in detecting and interpreting the signs correctly. In absence of mibu elderly man does the divination. Some signs are believed to be the indication of death of a member of in the family or breaking out of devastating fire in the family or village. Some other signs suggest some public scandals. On the basis of the sign prediction are made about the ensuing dangers and difficulties and advice proprietary ritual offering sacrifices to the spirit believed to be responsible is performed.

Besides asin tagir, there are also several other methods of divination adopted by the Misings known as *amo-yukang* (divination by soil test), *aki-uk kang*, *ponyok tagir*, *asin tagir* etc.

The old ways of divination have been still prevalent among the Misings as found in the present study. Now-a-days, the Misings also consult astrology in connection with various matters.

## Conversion of Neo-Vaisnavism

Neo-vaisnavite movement emerged in Assam in the last part of the 15th century under the leadership of versatile scholar Srimanta Sankardeva. Meanwhile the Misings were settled in the Brahmaputra valley. Many ethnic groups including tribes converted to neo-vaisnavism. It is said that Srimanta Sankardeva appointed one Miri (Mising) youth as one of his disciples and sanskritised his name as Paramananda, (Pegu:2005:154) but nothing is known about his place of birth and parents. According to N.C. Pegu (1981:153) some Misings converted to '*keoliya dharma*' which is based on the tantrik part of kala samhati – another sect of neo-vaisnavism as early as the second part of the nineteenth century. The Misings were subjected to the influences of the Gosains of Sencha, Na-mati, Katonipara, Jokai, Elengi, Budhbari and Muamora satra and to their alluring doctrines" All these satras belong to kala-samhati sect. Mising disciples of other sects with Mahapurushiya, Brahma samhati, Nika samhati are very few if not absent.

### **Do:nyi-Po:lo Movement**

Do:nyi-Po:loism is the latest development among the Misings. It is a new religion of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh of which the Misings of Assam are a part. These tribes including the Misings have the belief that they are the progenies of the *Do:nyi-Po:lo*. They, therefore, developed the new faith in the name of *Do:nyi-Po:loism*. According to the faith Do:nyi-Po:lo is the creator of the universe and all things animates and inanimate are the creation of Do:nyi-Po:lo. So, *Do:nyi-Po:lo* is the real god. The new faith was developed by a section of educated men belonging to Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh in 1960s.

Since the Misings are also a part of the Adis, naturally they become attracted to it and as such a group of educated Mising people started the movement for Do:nyi-Po:loism in Assam. They formed committee in 1993 and established a prayer hall called *Ganging* at Jonai town propagating the new faith. The movement is spreading to almost all the areas of Mising concentration. Meanwhile as many as 90 gangings have been established throughout Assam and several thousand converts have been enrolled in this new faith. Donyi-Poloism stands for their cultural identity and unity with the Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Thus Do:nyi-Po:loism is becoming a religious force to dominate the Mising religion in near future. It also counters the Christian movement among the Misings in recent time.

### **Christianization in Mising society**

Misings are one of those ethnic groups of North-East India among whom mass conversion to Christianity have not take place till now, though many tribes of the region such as the Khasis, Garos, Mizos, Nagas etc. converted to Christianity in large number as early as the first half of the last century. According to N.C. Pegu (2002: 56) the cultural force of Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhabdeva the great scholars of the sixteenth century, Assam and the epic stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata have become so popular it is doubtful any religion other than having rich India heritage could flourish in this spiritual concourse. This is probably the foremost cause of refusal to accept Christianity the influential force of which visited their country in the first half of the last century. So, in those days Mising conversion to Christianity was a rare case. But of late, many Christian churches and schools have been established in Mising populated areas and many families have converted to it.



## Summing up

The Misings call themselves as Hindus by religion following the sect of *kalasamhati* of neo-vaishnavism. But in practice they follow own traditional religious beliefs and practices which may be called spiritism – that is, beliefs in existence of various benevolent and malevolent spirits and propitiating them by scarifying lives and offering foods and drinks. Formerly the rituals were performed by the help of Shaman-called *mibu*. But after having adopted a sect of the neo-vaishnavism which they called *keoliya* dharma, the Misings started performing their religious functions by what may be called *bhakatiya* system. *Bhakats* are the initiated devotees of the *satras* which is the monasteries of neo-vaishnavism. Every *satra* have principal devotees who initiate the young boys to the doctrine and norms of neo-vaishnavism. The Misings started getting initiated to neo-vaishnavism from sixteenth century or so when neo-vaishnavite movement emerged in Assam. They become more influenced by the sect of *kalasamhati* and as such majority of them had become the followers of the *satras* of *kalasamhati*; but without giving up their traditional beliefs and practices. Thus parallel religious systems- that is, Hindu and tribal system have been still continuing.

The Misings have their own concepts of the creators of the universe and all things in it. They call the creator as *Sé:di-Mé:lo* and the sun and moon which are called *Do:nyi-Po:lo* as the progenitors of mankind including the Misings. They have also concepts of origins of the malevolent and the benevolent spirits which the Misings propitiate.

The Misings have a number of rituals some of which are performed for general wellbeings of the village community and other are family rituals connected with individual problems.

According to the Mising belief human soul turns into spirit called *urom* after death. It goes to the land spirits where the departed souls live in peace eternally though it revisits the family on earth seeking foods and drinks from time to time for which the Misings perform ancestral worships.

After becoming Hinduised the Misings have started performing some new rites and rituals borrowed from the neighboring non-Mising communities. Of late, some Misings are given up *keoliya* dharma and adopted *bhagawatiya*, *Do:nyi-Po:lo* and Christianity. The *bhagawatiyas* are neo-vaishnavite in origin but not necessarily followers of either *brahmasamhati* or *nika samhati* or *mahapurushia* sects of neo-vaishnavism. The *bhagawatiyas* do not worship any deity or

spirit and sacrifices lives and use alcohol in worship. They worship only lord Krishna by chanting hymns. The do:nmyi-po:lo is the faith based on the concept of sun and moon as manifestation of the supreme power of the universe created by god. The followers of the faith worship only the donyi-po:lo (sun and moon together) as the real god and none else. They also do not offer any sacrifice and drink in the ritual. This may be called sun (surya) worship. Thus the process of sanskritization has been started in Mising religious system.

### Conclusion

The facts revealed in the foregoing sections clearly show that present religious system of the Misings is diluted considerably with the religious system of the dominant neighboring Hindu communities. Except the beliefs about some deities and spirits and the sacrifices all the manners by which the rituals performed are adopted from the neo-vaisnavite system. The traditional mibu priest is replaced by *satula* or *medhi* who are the senior devotees of neo-vaisnavism and authors by the satras to perform religious functions of the Misings. However, since the beliefs in spirits and worshipping by live sacrifices, the adaptation of the neo- vaisnavite system by the Misings can not be considered as sanskritization of adaptation of superior culture.

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## **CHAPTER- V**

### **FINDINGS AND ANALYSES**

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At present the Misings are found to be in three major groups viz. (a) *keoliya*, (b) *bhagawatiya* and (c) *Do:nyi-Po:lo*

(a) The *keoliya* worships varieties of spirits and deities in various manners of offering live sacrifices with rice and beer. Most of the rituals are performed by *bhakatiya* system which was introduced after having adopted the *kalasamhati* sect of neo-*vaisnavism*, as early as the nineteenth century. The *keoliya* is found to be mixed with animism and Hinduism. Majority (678) of the respondents belonged to *keoliya sect*. Following are the rituals the *keoliya* perform-  
Dodgang, Tiloni, Urom, Gyati (clan worship), Sani puza (worship to Saturn), Napurukiya (worship of nine generation), Risto (worship to planets), Pejab uyu (propitiation to spirit which loves duck meat), Arig Dangoria (protection of crops in the field), Okum Dangoria (Household Protector), Kanipan (worship to opium eater), Satjania (worship to seven planets / ancestor), Nojaniya (worship to nine planets / ancestors), Ekaishjania (worship to 21 ancestors), Sora ollung yutnam (worship to water deity), Atum Dangoria, Bamud, Barsewa, Uchi, Ai uyu, Asi uyu, yumrang uyu, Sorai ollung yutnam, Dobur Taléng uyu, Rokpu done, Boka done, kalika dangoria, Go:ru Bor Bura-Burhi, yapom uyu, kanya kal etc.

(b) The *bhagawatiyas* may be called Hindu (neo-*vaisnavism*) without elements of animism. They worship only Almighty god-the Lord Krishna and none else. They do not offer live sacrifices and rice beer at any ritual. The *bhagawatiyas* regarded the *Bhagawat-Geeta* as sacred book. Among the respondents studied 60 households belonged to *bhagawatiya* faith.

(c) The *Do:nyi-Po:los* are the worshippers of sun (*Do:nyi*) and moon (*Po:lo*). They worship the *donyi-polo* only without offering any live sacrifice. Only 28 families of the respondents belonged to this faith.

Table : 5.1

Distribution Respondents by Religious Groups

Religion	f	P.C
Keoliya	678	88
Bhagawatiya	60	08
Do:nyi-Po:lo	28	04
Total	766	100

Of late, Christianity is also reported to be entering into Mising community. In some Mising villages particularly in Majuli District a good number of Churches belonging to different denominations have been established and several families of the villages have already converted to Christianity. However, in the sample villages no single Christian family was found.

### Namghar (Prayer Hall)

Namghar which is one of the indispensable parts of neo-vaisnavite system was found to be established in the sample villages. In Dolopha there is *murong* (open public hall) where all kinds of socio-religious functions are held. In Ghunasuti there are two namghars – one for the *keoliya* and the other for the *bhagawatiyas*. In village Dolopha there are one *ganging* for the *Do:nyi-Po:lo*. On the otherhand there are only one namghar in the village Panimiri. The religious institutions of the sample villages are as shown in Table 7.10

Table : 5.2

Distribution of the Villages by Religious Institutions

Village	Namghar	Ganging	Murong
Ghunasuti	02	Nil	01
Dolopha	01	01	01
Panimiri	01	Nil	01
Total	04	01	03

The *keoliya namghar* is occasionally used and mainly for holding the annual religious function called *barsewa*. It remains closed in most of the time. The *bhagawatiya namghar* is used daily. The elderly ladies of the faith come to the namghar every morning and hold group prayer by chanting *namkirtan* (hymns). In the evening the elderly male devotees hold prayer from time to time in the namghar.

In Ghunasuti Oyan both the *keoliyas* and *bhagawatiyas* have their respective namghars. *Keoliyas* may come and offer prayer at *bhagawatiya namghar* sitting along with the *bhagawatiyas* but the *bhagawatiyas* do not visits *keoliya namghar*. They also do not participate in any religious functions of *keoliyas*. The *bhagawatiya namghars* were found to be more or less similar to those of non-Mising neo-vaisnavite communities. The Mising *bhagawatiya namghar* is

also an open hall where male and female devotees recite hymns of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva every morning and evening. The namghar is regarded as most sacred hall for which they bow down at the front door before entering the hall. Foot wears are taken off and left outside door and be seated in most discipline manner. The devotees also come in porter dress wearing white dhoti, full sleeved Punjabi shirt or *ganji* in the summer with a piece of white *gamucha* (cotton towel) around neck. Thus the bhagawatiya imbibe the norms of neo-vaisnavite in matters of religious behaviours.

### **Ganging**

*Ganging* is the institution of the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* religion. It is the place where the followers of the faith gather and offer prayer. The followers of the *Do:ny-Po:lo* congregate at the *ganging* on every Saturday in the forenoon and hold prayer session as well as religious discourses. Like the bhagawatiyas the Donyi-Polos maintain their *ganging* well protected from trespassers and clean considering it sacred place.

Religious discourses and functions are also held at *ganging*. It is regarded as most sacred place for the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* followers. The devotees come to *ganging* in proper dress and take off foot wears. The lead man of the prayer is called *mibu* who acts as priest for any rituals performed by the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* followers but he is not a professional priest. He lives like any ordinary person doing mundane jobs for living. He performs the role of priest only on the occasion of religious function.

Now-a-days Mising population is also gradually increasing in urban centres. As such, *ganging* is also established in some urban centres like Dhemaji, Silapather, Jonai and in all urban centres of Siang and Subansiri districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The urban dwelling Misings belonging to bhagawatiya cult attend the namghar established by the neo-vaisnavite caste communities. The Mising bhagawatiya also offer prayer at the same namghar where other neo-vaisnavite offers. The Mising bhagawatiya sit together and offer prayer along with the non-Misings in the same namghar. But the keoliya have no namghar in any urban centre. The urban dwelling keoliya perform their rituals in their own residences.

## Visit to Namghar

Tribal in general and the Misings in particular do not have any institution like mandir, masjid, church, namghar where the common people regularly offer prayer in groups. They perform rituals either at a place away from home or inside home occasionally. The Misings had never any permanent place of worship common to all families of a village. The place of worship is determined by the priest and family concerned. However, after having adopted keoliya system they have started namghar. But they not visit their namghar unless barsewa or some socio-religious function is held by the village community. The elderly persons come to the namghar from time to time to attend discourses on socio-religious matters. Generally when some functionaries of a *Satra* come to the village the bhakats and the non-bhakats called *kencha* (non-initiated) gather at the village namghar. Otherwise normally the keoliya do not come to namghar for prayers. But the elderly bhagawatiyas in general and the retired old in particular visit their namghar regularly if not daily. Table 7.11 shows the frequency of visiting namghar and ganging by the respondents –

Table : 5.3

Frequency of Respondent attending Namghar and Ganging

Religious group	Frequency of visits			
	Frequently	Occasionally	Do not visit	Total
Keoliya	00	301	377	678
Bhagawatiya	60	00	00	60
Do:nyi-Po:lo	28	00	00	28
Total	88	301	377	766

From Table 5.3 it appears that *bhagawatiya* and the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* attend *namghar and ganging* regularly which means either daily or weekly. Persons above the age group 50 years attend almost daily. From some of old *bhagawatiya* it could be learnt that the old women attend the morning session of prayer daily and the man in the evening. This is the pattern of attending namghar of the non-Mising Assamese neo-vaisnavites. It appears that the Misings follow the non-Mising pattern, as the norm of the neo-vaisnavite system.



The followers of *Do:nyi-Po:loism* also maintain more or less the same discipline as maintained by the other advanced religious groups.

### **Visiting Satra**

Neo-vaisnavite disciples are required to pay homage to their respective satra once in year. Accordingly the Mising *keoliya* and *bhagawatiyas* are also expected to visit their own *satras* and pay homage to their *gurus*. But from the respondents it could be learnt that the Misings have stopped visiting *satras* for paying homage to their *gurus* since five decades ago.

The main reason as informed by the respondents is that initiation is no longer necessary for Misings. Moreover, the *satradhikars* are stopped to visit the Misings villages as they did earlier. They can perform their rituals without priest initiated by the Satra.

### **Sacrificial worship**

The *keoliya* still continue the same old sacrificial worships with *aapong* (rice beer). All the *keoliya* respondents stated that without live sacrifices the spirits and deities are not satisfied. They continue the practice because it was introduced by their forefathers and therefore, they could not give it up.

The *bhagawatiyas* and *Do:nyi-Po:los* however, felt that the *keoliya* practices are irrational and unethical. In this context it may be pointed out that the *bhagawatiyas* and *Do:nyi-Po:los* respondents were educated above secondary level.

### **Superstitious Beliefs in Spirits**

Superstitious beliefs about spirits and deities are still widely prevalent among the Mising folks. All the respondents irrespective of age, educational standard and religious faith stated that they believed more or less in the existence of various spirits and their influences on man's life. The *keoliya* believed that the spirits and deities need to be propitiated for remedies of their problem. The *bhagawatiyas* and the *Do:nyi-Po:los* also believe that spirits and deities are responsible for fortune and misfortune of man but they believe that Almighty God or the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* is the all in all in solving human problem. So, by the grace of God or *Do:nyi-Po:lo* human life and property can be safe. They believed that by the grace of God or *Do:nyi-Po:lo* peace and prosperity can be achieved. The spirits cannot harm man against the grace of Almighty god.

## Continuity

Despite changes in religious faith the Misings have not been able to free themselves from beliefs in spirits and their effects. They still maintain the same traditional animistic beliefs and practices associated with the beliefs.

The Misings, however, still have not given up everything of their traditional beliefs and practices which are animistic in nature. A large majority of them still continue to perform sacrificial deity worship, use wine as indispensable item of worship, tantrik type of ritual (bar-sewa), ancestral worship etc. which are antithesis of neo-vaisnavism.

They bury dead bodies and offer foods and drinks to the departed soul besides the grave and perform some other rituals in that connection.

They still call themselves as the progenies of the Do:nyi-Po:lo (Sun- Moon) and perform grah puja (planet worship), which are animistic in nature.

Polygamous marriage has become rare but socially not prohibited. A man may marry or keep second woman without disapproving reaction from the community. Such, behavior is not considered as offence in the community.

Elopment is still prevalent as method of acquiring mates in the community though otherwise illegal. Bride price though reduced to nominal amount is still not socially abolished.

Although the women take red lead (sindoor) in their forehead like Hindu women nevertheless they do not call Brahmin Priest or to conduct the ritual related to marriage

Widow re-marriage is prevalent in the Mising society and socially approved. Widow eats meat, fish etc. without any restriction.

Widows do not wear white cloths like Hindu women after become widow.

They have given up beef eating but still take pork and other wild and domestic animals. These are some of the beliefs and practices which negate the concept of Hinduisation or sanskritization among the Misings. But if we draw the balance between the loss and the gain of the culture of the community we find the balance in favor of changes.

The Misings still live in the Chang Ghar (pile house) in the village and rear all domestic animals like pig, duck, hen etc.

Despite NamGhar, there are still Murong, the traditional social institution in the society.

Leaving the inhabitants of the cities live amidst the Hindu society, the common Misings do not perform the second marriage which common in the Hindu society.

In case of dress in the time of rituals the bhakatas do not wear white dress. They also visit namghar wearing their traditional dress.

Religious functions are started from the name of Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and their guru Gopaldeva. But they never forget to mention their ancestors.

The members of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, although given up all traditional practices of the Misings, but they too buried their dead bodies instead of cremation. Interestingly the Christianized women also take Sindoor (Red Lead) in their forehead.

Thus, although many changes take place in the Misings beliefs system, but still they are not completely free from maintaining their traditional beliefs and practices.

**CHAPTER- VI**

**CONCLUSION**

## CHAPTER- VI

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter an attempt has been made to draw conclusions on the finding and analyses thereof in the present study. It may be recalled that main objective of the study is to understand the process of Religious Changes and Continuity in tribal community with special reference to the Misings of Assam and in the context of the study the concept "Change" has been defined as a process of adopting the cultural norms and values of culturally advanced community which might be it caste or non-caste by the tribes in preference of their own animistic or primitive type of beliefs and practices. The process is viewed as an attempt on the part of the tribes to project themselves as the people of modern age who are characterized by rational and secular behaviour in day to day life. In the light of the definition the conclusions have been drawn.

First, it has been found that the Misings were hinduised as early as the sixteenth century when neo-vaisnavism emerged in Assam. The Misings adopted the *kalasamhati* sect of neo-vaisnavism by getting themselves initiated into it at some of the *satras* of the sect. Among the Misings the sect is called *keoliya dharma*. Now, most of their religious functions are performed by what is called *bhakatiya* system, borrowed from the neo-vaisnavite caste communities. Namghar is a unique institution of the neo-vaisnavite religious system. The Misings have also adopted it as as part of their religious system. Besides their own traditional rituals the Misings have also adopted some additional Hindu rituals and performed them according to Hindu system. They chant the hymns from *kirtan ghoosa and namghoosa* composed by Srimanta Sabkardeva and Madhabdeva respectively, and regard Bhagawat Geeta as sacred book. The Misings call themselves as Hindus by religion following the sect of *kalasamhati of neo-vaisnavism*. The Misings also observe all the socio-religious ceremonies of the non-Mising Assamese communities. But in practice they follow own traditional religious beliefs and practices which may be called spiritism – that is, beliefs in existence of various benevolent and malevolent spirits and propitiating them by scarifying lives and offering foods and drinks. Formerly the rituals were performed by the help of Shaman-called *mibu*. But after having adopted a sect of the neo-vaisnavism which they called *keoliya dharma*, the Misings started performing their religious functions by what may be called *bhakatiya* system. *Bhakats* are the initiated devotees of the

*satras* which is the monasteries of neo-vaisnavism. They become more influenced by the sect of *kalasamhati* and as such majority of them had become the followers of the *satras* of *kalasamhati*; but without giving up their traditional beliefs and practices. Thus parallel religious systems- that is, Hindu and tribal system have been still continuing.

Second, the Misings have their own concepts of the creators of the universe and all things in it. They call the *creator* as *sedi-melo* and the sun and moon which are called *do:nyi-po:lo* as the progenitors of mankind including the Misings. They have also concepts of origins of the malevolent and the benevolent spirits which the Misings propitiate. The Misings have a number of rituals some of which are performed for general wellbeings of the village community and other are family rituals connected with individual problems.

Third, the Mising belief human *soul* turns into spirit called *urom* after death. It goes to the land of spirits where the departed souls live in peace eternally though it revisits the family on earth seeking foods and drinks from time to time for which the Misings perform ancestral worships.

Fourth, after becoming hinduised the Misings have started performing some new rites and rituals borrowed from the neighboring non-Mising communities. Of late, some Misings are giving up *keoliya dharma* and adopted *bhagawatiya*, *do:nyi-po:lo* and Christianity. The *bhagawatiyas* are neo-vaisnavite in origin but not necessarily followers of either *brahmasamhati* or *nika samhati* or *mahapurushia* sects of neo-vaisnavism. The *bhagawatiyas* do not worship any deity or spirit and sacrifices lives and use alcohol in worship. They worship only lord Krishna by chanting hymns. The *do:nmyi-po:lo* is the faith based on the concept of sun and moon as manifestation of the supreme power of the universe created by god. The followers of the faith worship only the *donyi-po:lo* (sun and moon together) as the real god and none else. They also do not offer any sacrifice and drink in the ritual. This may be called *sun (surya)* worship. Thus the process of *sanskritization* has been started in Mising religious system.

Fifth, the Misings do not eat beef, because the Hindus regard cow as sacred animal although the Misings do not regard it so.

Sixth, the Misings have given up Shamanic and magical methods of dealing with the problems of unnatural events and diseases and death. Now they consult Hindu astrology and palmistry in dealing with the problems of fortune and misfortune.

Seventh, of late, two reformative movements have emerged among the Misings- one the *bhagawatiya* and the other *Do:nyi-Po:lo*. *Bhagawatiya* is based on the tenets of neo-vaisnavism which prohibit sacrificial deity worship and as such *bhagawatiya* have given up sacrificial worships of various spirits and deities and use of wine in worship. Similarly, the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* though based on the traditional belief that Misings are progenies of the sun and the moon does not worship any deity and spirit with sacrificial offer. They worship the sun and the moon conceiving them as only the supreme deity i.e. the Almighty God which should be worshipped by chanting hymns only and not by any offer. The followers of *Do:nyi-Po:lo* have given up their earlier animistic beliefs and practices. It is, in fact the worship of Sun-Moon as prevalent in some Hindu communities. Thus, Misings have adopted many Hindu beliefs and cultural traits of the neo-vaisnavite communities of Assam.

Eight, the Misings themselves introduced some reforms in their way of life. To begin with, they simplified the traditional formal marriage called *midang*, which involved considerable time, labour, and costs of money and materials. They have also adopted Hindu way of performing the wedding ceremony except the Vedic ritual. The ritual is performed by their own priest and manner. Of late the Misings have also introduced ring ceremony and also vermilion on the forehead of married women which were not their custom at all. These are borrowed from the local Hindus. Similarly, now-a-days, Misings observe puberty ceremony by performing Hindu ritual. Formerly, puberty of a Mising girl, was marked by wearing a particular piece of cloth called *ku:pop*. From the first sign of puberty a girl wears the cloth covering her breast. Formerly, Mising marriage was arranged by the parents without prior consent of the boy and girl, but now, they are given freedom in selecting their own life partner. Parent's prior consent is not necessary now. Marriage with non-Mising was not allowed till few decades ago, but now it is not a problem except in case of inter-religious marriage. Divorce and widow remarriages had already there in the community. The practice of polygamous, sororate and levorate marriages which are common in tribal communities are also given up by the Misings. Dowry is also not a problem at all in Mising community. Thus the tribal characters in Mising marriage system have been changed by introducing some elements of Hindu system. Fatalism is another character of tribal people. Misings were no exception to it but now the character is gradually getting lost with them. This is evident from the fact they are seeking helps more and

more from various organizations mainly from government for improvement of production, and quality of life including health.

Nine, it may be mentioned that the Misings have become more liberal in their interactions with the non-Misings particularly with the neighbouring caste people. Formerly, they hardly worked as partners of business undertaking or co-workers in some organizations. Neither the caste people nor the Misings approached each other for some common work of mutual benefits. The Misings tended to keep to themselves in day to day life instead of mingling with the caste people. But now they freely interact with the non-Misings irrespective of castes and creeds. Now, Misings are working with any non-Misings in various activities.

Ten, it is clear that the Misings are in the process of Hinduisation i.e sanskritization. They have adopted many cultural traits of the neo-vaishnavite communities, which are socially and culturally more advanced than the Misings and other tribes. Under the impacts of sanskritization the Misings and the neo-vaishnavite castes have been able to come socially closer to each other. The Misings who have adopted the *bhagawatiya* sect sit together with other non-Mising caste people in the same namghar (prayer hall) and offer prayer. Both bhagawatiya and non-bhagawatiya Misings, neo-vaishnavites, irrespective of castes celebrate together the birth anniversaries of the neo-vaishnavite leaders, like Sankardeva, Madhabdeva, Janmastami (birth day of Lord Krishna), and other socio-religious functions. They organize religious discourses jointly from time to time.

Eleven, the Misings, however, still have not given up everything of their traditional beliefs and practices which are animistic in nature. A large majority of them still continue to perform sacrificial deity worship, use wine as indispensable item of worship, tantrik type of ritual (bar-sewa), ancestral worship etc. which are antithesis of neo-vaishnavism. They still call themselves as the progenies of the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* (Sun- Moon) and perform *grah puja* (planet worship), which are animistic in nature. They bury dead bodies and offer foods and drinks to the departed soul besides the grave and perform some other rituals in that connection.

These are some of the beliefs and practices which negate the religious changes among the Misings. *But if we draw the balance between the continuity and the changes of the religion of the community we find the balance in favour of Change.*

*We may, therefore, conclude that the Misings are in the process of changes by having adopted many of the cultural traits of neo-vaishnavite communities of Assam but thereby they*



*have not become a part of the caste system. They maintain their own ethnic identity by adhering to some of their own cultural traits.*

It is pointed out that change is a group phenomenon – that is the entire community should imbibe the superior cultural traits as its own culture. But in case of the Misings: it is not so. Only a smaller part of them has given up the primitive type of beliefs and practices and has become hinduaized.

Thus religious changes do not necessarily mean assimilation in *Varna Hindu* society or jati (caste) at local level. Tribal may call themselves Hindu because they worship Hindu Gods, visit Hindu temples, observe Hindu festivals etc. but they do not get absorbed in the caste hierarchy. They do not regard any castes as superior or inferior to them i.e. tribal groups. The tribals do not believe in the concept of purity and pollution of occupation. Therefore, Hinduisation of tribal community may be understood outside the purview of low caste adopting high caste life style. It may be viewed as recasting their own cultural system in the light of modern way of life which has universalistic characteristics – that is, irrespective of caste, creed and tribe.

The above conclusion is; however, subject to verification by further micro level study of different Hinduised tribes. The concepts of rationalization and universalization may be basis for constructing hypothesis for such study. Our experience shows that religious change is a multifaceted phenomenon on tribal society. As such, it requires further elaboration of meaning and scope of inquiry of the process. It would be rewarding for the students of History, sociology and anthropology in the undertaking further studies on the problem of religious change and continuity, which is the common phenomenon among the tribes of India but least studied till now.

## GLOSSARY

- MAK : Mising Agom Kebang  
MMK : Mising Mimag Kebang  
TMPK : Takam Mising Porin Kebang  
TMMK : Takam Mising Mime Kebang  
MAC : Mising Autonomous Council  
MDK : Mising Dirbi Kebang  
YA:ME – MIMBIR KEBANG : Village Youth Organization  
GAM : The Village Head Man  
MIBU : Mising Traditional Priest  
SATULA : Priest of Keoliya Dharma, who conduct religious functions  
BHAKAT : Neo-Vaisnavite (Keoliya) Devotee  
BIBAH ACHARYA : Who conducts rituals of marriages of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha  
GANGGING : Prayer hall of the Do:nyi-Po:lo faith  
MURONG : Community Hall  
GUMRAG: A Mising dance form  
EPOM-YAPOM : A kind of Deity who lives on the big tree.  
NAMGHAR : Prayer hall of the neo-vaisnavite people.  
SATRA : Socio-Cultural institution of the neo-vaisnavism.  
PO:RAG : A Mising Community feast  
OI NI:TOM : A popular Mising folk song  
A:BANG: Chants and songs of traditional Mising Priests  
TIRI BORA : Leader of the young girls  
DEKA BORA: Leader of the young boys

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**Interview Schedule for the Project**  
**on**  
**Religious Perspectives of the Misings of Assam : Continuity and Changes**  
**(from 16th to 20th Century)**

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(1) Identity:

1. Name : .....
2. Present Age : .....
3. Place of Birth : .....
4. Address : .....
5. Religion : .....
6. Education : .....

(2) Family:

1. What is the nature of your family? Nuclear / joint.
2. How many members are there in your family?
3. What is your family occupation?
4. What form of family you prefer most? Joint / nuclear.
5. What would be the ideal size of your family? 4 / 5 / 6 / 8.
6. Do you have any preference in having son or daughter? Yes / No. Boys / Girls.
7. What is the age at which you would like to marry your sons and daughters?

Sons :

Daughters :

8. Do your sons and daughters live in your family after marriage? Yes / No.

(3) Marriage:

1. Who arrange the marriage of boys and girls in your family?

Boys : .....

Girls : .....

2. Which are the clans in which marriage of boys and girls of your family is traditionally permissible? .....
3. Do you want your sons to live in your family after marriage? Yes / No.
4. Who perform the ritual of marriage?
5. Do you offer any sacrifice at the time of ritual?
6. If yes, to whom and for what? .....
7. Do you favour widow remarriage? Yes / No.
8. Is divorce of separation favoured in your family?  
Son: No / allowed but not liked/allowed Daughter: No / allowed but not liked/allowed
9. Has there been any case of divorce or separation in your family? Yes / No.
10. If yes, give the following details :  
Who :  
Why :

(4) Occupation:

1. What is your family occupation? Agriculture / business / any other.
2. If agriculture what is the total cultivable land with your family? .....
3. What are the sources of irrigation?
7. Who looks after agriculture? Self / children / relatives.
8. Are women engaged in agriculture? Yes / No.
9. If yes, in which type of activities?
10. Have you sold any land in the ten years? Yes / No.
11. If yes, how much?
12. Have you purchased land in the last ten years? Yes / No.

(5) Religion:

1. Which religion do you follow at present? Neo-vaisnavism / Christian / others.
2. If neo-vaisnavism, which cult? Keoliya / Bhagawatiya / Mahapurusia. ....
3. How long you have been following the religion? .....
4. Do you have any specific reason for following the present religion? Yes / No.
5. If yes, what is the reason? .....

6. Do you understand the doctrine of your religion? Yes / No.
7. Who is your Dharma Guru? .....
8. How have you become disciple of your Guru? .....
9. Do you follow the instructions of your Guru? Yes / No.
10. To which Satras you belong? .....
11. Do you visit your Satra from time to time? .....
12. Do you pay any fees / donation to your Guru? Yes / No.
13. Which are the deities you worship and why? .....
- .....
14. Have you ever engaged Mibu? Yes / No.
15. If yes, in what connection? .....
16. If not, why? .....
17. Do you perform any religious function in connections with –
  - (a) Sickness – Yes / No.
  - (b) Cultivation – Yes / No.
  - (c) Serious danger – Yes / No.
  - (d) Welfare of family as a whole – Yes / No.
  - (e) Atonement of sin – Yes / No.
  - (f) Success in business – Yes / No.
  - (g) For any other – Yes / No.
18. Do you offer prayer to any deity / ancestor just before you leave your home for homework for which you have travel? Yes / No.
19. What were the spirits you worship in the past? .....
20. Are these spirit still worshiped? Yes / No.
21. Do you believe in one Almighty God? Yes / No.
22. How long you have been performing these spirits as family ritual?
23. Do you believe in one Almighty God? Yes / No.
24. If yes, do you worship Him? Yes / No.
25. Do you offer prayer to that Almighty God regularly? Yes / No.
26. What are the other God and Goddesses you believe? .....
27. Do you worship them regularly? Yes / No.

28. If yes, how do you do it? .....
29. Do you perform ancestral worship? Yes / No.
30. How do you perform these worship?
31. Who conduct the rituals? Satula / Mibu.
32. Do you kill or animals to offer as sacrifice at the ritual? Yes / No.
33. If yes, is it compulsory? Yes / No. ....
34. Do you perform any ritual in connection with agriculture? Yes / No.
35. If yes, what are these rituals and how do you perform them? .....
36. Do you believe re-birth of human soul? Yes / No.
37. If yes, do you think the soul is immortal? Yes / No.
38. What do you call your religion? .....
39. Do you think that there are some changes in religious beliefs and practices? Yes / No.
40. If yes, What are this? .....
41. Do you think that reformation of your religion is necessary? Yes / No.

(6) Social Custom:

(a) Concept of crime and punishment:

1. What type of acts are considered as crime?
2. What type of punishment were awarded:-
  - (a) murder      (b) violative act to senior, close relative,
  - (c) sexual offence,      (d) theft,      (e) killing a cow

(b) Disposal of dead body:

1. What were the practices followed in disposal of dead bodies in the past in your community?
2. Are these practices followed now?
3. If not, what are the new practices of disposing dead bodies?
4. What is the ritual performs immediately after disposing the dead body?
5. What are the rules followed at the time of burying the dead body?

(7) Fatalism:

Do you agree with the following:

1. Everything depends upon luck not on work : Agree / disagree / no opinion.
2. All problems and sickness and disease are the result of men's luck : Agree / disagree / no opinion.
3. Man can not be harmed if protected by God : Agree / disagree / no opinion.
4. For the success of men faith in God is more important than hard work : Agree / disagree / no opinion.
5. Richness and poverty determined by God not by man : Agree / disagree / no opinion.

(8) Superstitions:

Do you agree with the followings?

1. Ghost and evil spirits play an important role in human life.
2. Occult treatment process miraculous where everything fails.
3. While doing anything one should take care of ill omen
4. One should care for superstitious element such as sneezing etc.