CHAPTER-3

Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Mishings

3.1 Religion: An Introduction

Religion, being a powerful source of collective identity, plays a central role in human civilization. As a particular system of faith and worship it generates the sense of sacredness and provides the normative basis to the society. Every religion manifests in the society through its system of beliefs and practices according to which the stakeholders organize their lives, individually and collectively. It is one of the great sustaining forces, which pervades major areas of people’s lives and deeds and primarily concerned with people and society. Hence, naturally religion plays all an embracing role in the human life and thought. It reflects the values, norms and cultural ethos of a society.

3.2 Etymological meaning of the term ‘Religion’

The etymology of ‘religion’ is indeed disputed and there is no universally accepted origin of the word. Cicero derived it from ‘re-legere’, “to gather up again, to take up, to consider, to ponder”. Agreeing to Cicero’s etymology, Indologist Max Muller however notes that “if ‘religio’ meant originally attention, regard, reverence, it is quite clear that it did not continue long to retain that simple meaning.”

According to Max Muller, the Latin root religio of ‘religion’ was “more and more exclusively applied to the inward feeling of reverence for the gods and to the outward manifestation of that reverence in worship and sacrifice.” Many other scholars believe that the word religion
was derived from 're-ligare', which means “to bind up” or “to hold people back”. This view was supported by some high authorities of religion such as Servicus, Lactantius and St. Augustin.

In Indian philosophy, there is no distinctive synonym for religion. The word ‘religion’ is many times considered equivalent to the Sanskrit word ‘dharma’. Etymologically, the word ‘dharma’ is derived from ‘dhr’ which means to sustain, to hold, to support, to maintain, etc. Thus, dharma is the generic term for anything that has the sense of supporting or sustaining.

3.3 Definitions of Religion

Ninian Smart postulates that to understand human history and human life it is necessary to understand religion. The manifestations of religious behaviour are intricately related to various aspects of human life. In fact, it is woven into the fabric of social life even in the modern world.

The Oxford English Dictionary caters a number of distinct definitions of the term ‘religion’ as follows:

‘Action or conduct indicating a belief in, reverence for and desire to please a divine ruling power, the exercise or practice of rites or observances implies this.’

Or

‘Recognition on the part of man higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship; the general mental and moral attitude resulting from this belief, with reference to its effect upon the
individual or the community; personal or general acceptance of this feeling as a standard of spiritual or practical life.’

The Encyclopedia of Religion, on the other hand, describes religion as “a system of beliefs and practices involving a god or some other higher power beyond the everyday reality of life on Earth. Religious beliefs are expressed both in the form of rituals and in the way believers lead their lives. There are many different religions… they all offer explanations of the meaning and purpose of life and provide moral advice and instruction for their believers.”

In the Indian scriptures, and in Indian philosophy, the word ‘dharma’ is regarded as an all encompassing ideology which stands for religion, duty, norms and justice, custom, morality, virtue, etc. Thus ‘dharma’ comprises the whole context of religious and moral duties. Regarding the multivalent character of ‘dharma’ Bhagavan Das observes, “Dharma is not mere other world-religion, but is also every duty, every law, every proper and specific function of everything or being in this and in all other worlds.” The concept is frequently encountered in any examination of the Hindu tradition in which the life and thought are considerably structured around ‘dharma’.

In the widest sense of the term, ‘dharma’ not only sustains the individuals, but also upholds the society as a whole. However, the nature of ‘dharma’ is that it is not static, rather the concept and content of ‘dharma’ change in accordance with changing circumstances and social context.

The ongoing discussion enlightens us about the fact that religion is a holistic idea with multi-layered meanings. In the history of the study of religion, different thinkers offered different definitions of religion. However, scholars proposed their definitions
suitable for their respective contexts of discussion. There has never been a universally acceptable definition; sometimes religion was equated with the sacred, while at other times it was thought of as a social institution or a particular social and cultural system. As James Frazer had pointed out, there was probably no subject in the world about which opinions differed so much and to arrive at a definition that would satisfy everyone would be nearly impossible. Max Weber never offered a definition of religion. He began his work *The Sociology of Religion* with this statement, “To define religion, to say what it is, is not possible at the start of presentation such as this.” Nevertheless, in order to bring more precision to our study, it is necessary to briefly discuss the prime notions of religion put forward by the thinkers from their varied viewpoints.

According to the famous theologian Paul Tillich, “Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other, concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life.” He described religion as a system of beliefs and practices directed towards the two aspects of ultimate concern of a society: (a) ‘meaning’ in the sense of ultimate meaning of the central values of a society, and (b) ‘power’ in the sense of the ultimate, sacred or supernatural power, which upheld those values.

For James Frazer, religion is propitiation or a conciliation of powers superior to man, which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life. Here, religion consists of two aspects: the theoretical, which includes a belief in powers higher than human, and the practical, which is aimed at attempting to propitiate them.

Max Muller made intensive study of many cultures around the world, especially India. According to Max Muller, “Religion is something which has passed and a still
passing through a historical evolution, and all we can do is to follow it up to its origin, and then to try to comprehend it in its later historical developments."

He argues that what religion was in ancient times, today would have been only called ‘law’. One cannot have comprehensive study of religion without considering its social context, because the relation between society and religion is fundamental to the nature of religion. In the words of W.H. Capps, “societies are characterized by the values they embody, the individual and collective motivations they encourage, the inceptives they inspire and sanction, and the ideals by which belief, attitude and behaviour are established and secured. Accordingly, religion can hardly be identified or defined except in terms of human social relations.” Thus, religion can not be seen in isolation from the society. In fact, religion evolves from the society either by confirming or as reaction to the prevailing social norms.

Marx and Engels observe religion as a social product, emerging out of social relations, which could be historically traced. For Marx, religion did not exist by itself, independent of the forces of society and history. The natural manifestation of social forces and movements expressed themselves in religious terms because religion had been the dominant form of ideology throughout most of the recorded history. Marx, in his economic deterministic approach, saw religion as nothing but the reflection of external forces that controlled the daily lives of humans. In his work ‘The Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’ (1844), Marx remarks, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world. It is the opium of the people”, because the faith in a better life beyond the grave pacifies the oppressed and desists them from struggle against the oppressor.
According to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, religion is an expression of social cohesion, and an expression of collective consciousness, which is the fusion of all of our individual consciousnesses, which then creates a reality of its own. In his pioneering work “Elementary Forms of Religious Life”, Durkheim’s venture was not only to find out the origins of religion, but also to understand its social function. He held the view that no society was known to have existed without a religion and that there were always some group that was sacred to its members in every society. Durkheim saw that by giving an absolute and sacred authority to the groups existing rules and values, religion powerfully reinforced a given social structure, restrained deviance and limited change.

Durkheim endeavours to define religion in a way that would encompass all the varieties of religious expressions. He observes that “all known religions, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic; they presuppose a classification of all things real and ideal, of which man think, two classes of opposed groups… designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words profane and sacred.” He then proposes a definition of religion as follows: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices, relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”

Joachim Wach holds that to be a complete religion rather than just religious elements or tendencies, one must have three characteristic universal expressions: theoretical, i.e., a system of beliefs, practical, i.e., a system of worship, and sociological, i.e., a system of social relationships.
In Indian context religion is defined differently by different scholars. In the words of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, “Religion as a way of life is the seeking of the eternal. It is more behaviour than belief…It is an experience which affects our entire being, ends our disquiet and anguish, and the sense of aimlessness of our fragile and fugitive existence.”

Swami Vivekananda is of the opinion, “Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already within man…It is not just a talk and doctrines or theories, nor visit sectarianism. It is a relationship between soul and God. He explains that religion does not consist in erecting temples or building churches or attending public worship…Religion consists in realization. It does not consist in subscribing to a particular creed or faith but in spiritual realization.”

Dharma is another form of the word religion in India. It means the law or the life lived in accordance with the law. It also signifies duties and responsibilities of a person. Thus the term ‘Karmoi Dharma’ is the most popular and sacred slogan in the Indian context. The word ‘Dharma’ is associated with every religion of Indian origin. For example, Hindu practices Sanatana-Dharma, Jain practices Jain-Dharma and the Buddhist practices Buddha- Dharma. Many religions may have organized behaviours, clergy, a definition of what constitutes adherence or membership, holy places, and scriptures. “The practice of a religion may also include rituals, sermons, sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trance, initiations, funerary services, matrimonial services, meditation, prayer, music, art, dance, public service or other aspects of human culture.”

However in the Indian context religion refers to having a spiritual mind and the fact that he/she is religious is determined by his activities i.e. karma. Even then religion in India involves lots of sacrifice and penance to appease the almighty. The major
religions of India like Hinduism, Jainism, Islam and Buddhism follow definite set of rules which are said to be scripted in their holy books. They have their own particular priest to conduct their rituals in a particular place of worship i.e. temple. Thus in other words these religions are well organized and as such people have to follow these organized set of rules. On the other hand the same cannot be said of the Mishings. The Mishings believe in different spirits which are divided into benevolent and malevolent. They believe in the supernatural power of these spirits and in order to appease them various rituals are performed. However they do not have any particular place of worship and rituals are performed as per their offerings to different spirits like inside the house, below a granary, in the forests or by the side of a river. Moreover they do not have any particular god-goddesses or their images nor do they have any written text as a guideline to their beliefs and practices. However it is the Mibu- traditional priest and his Abangs (religious hymns) that guide them in their religious affairs. In a way their religious beliefs and practices can be termed as an unorganized one without any definite set of rules.14

Every religion develops a kind of belief system which relates humanity with spirituality or moral values. Accordingly, each religion teaches its followers about some powers may be generous or melovolent, which would affect and control their activities. Hence, every religion develops some sort of ritualistic measures to get rid of evil forces and to get blessings from the generous spirits for their socio-familial welfare. This leads to participation of religion with other institutions of the society in formulating and in enforcing social norms and practices. Besides, religion not only provides beliefs and religious observances, but also prescribes social behaviour through norms, prescriptions,
injunctions and laws. In this sense, religion has been played an important role in the society in most part of the human history.

3.4 Traditional Religion

The traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Mishings are based on “Animism”. To understand the nature of Animism we can define in the following manner:-

“Animisim is the doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings. Through the medium of dreams, phantoms, and other agencies, primitive man is driven to believe in spiritual existence-this is, to refuse to identify life with matter in all cases. Thus attributing vaguely his own life to a spirit within himself, he proceeds by analogy to trace the changes and movements of the external world as being due to similar causes. He has not learned to differentiate conscious and unconscious existence, he cannot define personality, but he looks on all nature-rivers, mountains, winds, storms, rocks, stones, plants, animals, as being the abode of spirits. The drama of nature around him, its successions of repose and strife, lead him to think of these spiritual beings as capable of assuming various forms-mineral, vegetable, animals; his instinct for a unity in nature makes such a continuity of life, a transmigration of soul, appear a likely process; and this stage of thought, in which soul or spirit is attributed to all natural objects, is called Animism.”

In philosophy, the term ‘animism’ is applied to the doctrine that the principle of life called the vital force, cannot be reduced to the mechanistic laws of physics and chemistry but is separate and distinct from matter.

Edward Burnett Tylor defined religion as simply "the belief in spiritual beings" and used the term animism. He referred to two doctrines. “First, concerning souls of
individual creatures, capable of continued existence after the death or destruction of the body; second, concerning other spirits, upward to the rank of powerful deities. Animism in its full development includes the belief in souls and in a future state, in controlling deities and subordinate spirits, these doctrines practically resulting some kind of active worship." From the analysis of this definition, it is clear that “Animism” is a belief in souls or spirits in man, objects, things and other aspects of nature. Thus, with no exception, Animism occupies place of dominance in the Mishing society as noticeable in any other primitive society. The Mishing tribe of Assam and the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh have some perceptible similarities. Fundamentally both the tribes share a common line of descent and parentage. Both are Animists in faith.\textsuperscript{18} Animism is the foundation which shaped their religious acceptance. It is therefore natural that the religious beliefs and practices of both the Mishing and the Adis are the same except the differences in the name of the rites and rituals. To have a comprehensive idea about the origin of the religious practices and beliefs of the Mishings, Tai Nyori’s observation on Adi religion in his book “\textit{The History and Culture of the Adis}” (1993) may be noted. He quotes as follows,

“From the rational point of view however, it appears that the origin of the faiths, beliefs and practices of the Adis lies in their constant attempts to adjust themselves with the environments which surrounded them and in which they lived. Because, their place of origin, the routes of migration, and their present land lie in one of the most difficult regions of the world. The high hills, rocky mountains, snowy peaks, rough rivers, deep gorges, dense forests, heavy rains, storms, landslides, earth quakes, wild animals, diseases, epidemics etc. are the natural factors which always stood against the normal life of the tribe. They tried to adjust themselves with the nature and wanted to live in peace
and free from diseases, suffering and misfortune. However, the natural phenomenon remained mysterious to them. Their curiosity to know who was the creator and controller of the phenomenon of the nature led them to invent a number of explanations in the form of myths which are embodied in the ballads called Ābāṅgs by the Pādāṅ-Minyongs and nyibo-āgoms, by the Gālos. Thus, out of such curiosities and explanations the Ādi religion originated.”

Similar reasons can be ascribed to the origin of the Mishing religion as the Mishings were the kiths and kins of the Adis and lived in similar environment. As per the Mishing oral tradition, the creation of the Universe has been described in the Mibu Abangs. Thus, the Universe consists of one earth and two other ethereal planets in its constellation; namely, Régí-Régăm, Dong-Āmong and Ui-Āmong. The heaven is called ‘Régí-Régăm’ or the Kingdom of Gods, the earth is called ‘Dong Āmong’ and the purgatory or ‘Ui Āmong’ is the abode of spirits. As per the Mishing belief these three form the celestial constellation of Kéyum or the Universe. Régí-Régăm and Dong Āmong remain within the orbit of the solar fraternity whereas Ui-Āmong exists outside the host of solar panorama and shrouded with clouds of eternal darkness.

3.4.1 Se:di Me:lo

The Mishings conceive the universe as a creation of Sedi and Melo the two aboriginal celestial beings of the metaphysical faith of the Mishings. According to them, the Sedi and Melo are omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. They are conceived by the Mishings as earliest worldly beings representing male and female principles like the Purusa and Prakṛtī of Sankhya philosophy respectively. When Se:di created the Universe, there was no man, no matter, neither day nor night, neither soil nor water, neither fire nor air but father Se:di, the supreme lord has created them all.
These two celestial beings are the creators of the both Sun and Moon. The Mishings consider themselves as the offspring of the mother Sun (Do:nyi) and the father Moon (Po:lo). This belief has been further recognised as Do: nyi-po:lo Yelam; literally meaning Do:nyi-Po:lo religion (Sun-Moon religion). They believe that the Do:nyi-Po:lo (Sun-Moon) convey certain ideas having direct bearing on spiritual and physical life of the people. As far as physical aspect is concerned, term “Do:nyi-Po:lo” transmits the vision of the Sun and the Moon which give warmth, energy and benevolent light to humanity. The belief in Do:nyi-Po:lo has no written scriptures, but has traditionally been passed down orally from each generation to the next. The belief in Do:nyi-Po:lo by the Mishings is based on the notion that it acts as the guardian and protector of the people in this universe. In the words of V. Elwin, Do:nyi-Po:lo “is the eye of the world; he is as important to man as eye is to the body. It watches everything…Above all he is the lord of truth and an oath taken on his name is most binding of all.”

On the other hand, the spiritual interpretation is based on the belief of the tribe in the supreme spiritual identity which they call “Se:di-Melo” (creator) to whom the Do:nyi and Po:lo are the pair of two searching eyes. Thus, the warming ray of the physical Sun in the DAY and cooling light of the Moon at NIGHT are the symptoms of the creator. For the Mishings, the Sun and the Moon are the symbols of divinity and sources of all the creation that pervade nature. In fact, no rituals and functions start without the name of Sedi-Melo and Do:nyi-Po:lo for all the misdeeds done intentionally or unintentionally: They utter before starting every ritual in the following manners:-

“Do:nyi Ānéno tātlāngkā Po:lo ābuno,
Ngo lumurko ludāg milo,
Siloke sādākne donyino,
Siyumke sādākne polono,
Tākām Kēbāngeticāb eg Tātbeg dope sāngge āngge dāklāngkāⁿ²²

Meaning: Listen mother Sun, listen father moon, if we have committed any mistake then today mother Sun when you rise in the morning, father moon when you come out in the evening pardon us for all our mistakes.

3.5 Uie (Spirits)

The Mishings believe in the domain of ‘Spirits’ which they call ‘Uies’, having crucial importance in their socio-cultural and religious life. To the Mishings the entire physical surroundings of human habitats are infested with *Uies*. These *Uies* have had the same desires that a man of flesh and bone has craved for. In order to fulfill their desires the Spirits strike troubles on human beings so that the latter have to offer sacrifices to the former to ward off the Spirits. The word "sacrifice", means "to make sacred", that may be in the form of living or non-living objects. Practically, sacrifice is an offering of something of value to an invisible force or cosmic forces, to thank the invisible or in hope of getting them to perform in a certain way.

Unless imputable reverences are offered to those Spirits they may induce sickness, death, calamity, and misfortune and all sorts of maladies to the mortals. Thinking that troubles are caused by the Spirits, the Mishings perform various rituals by offering rice-beverages (apong) and sacrifices live-stock animals. Generally, the Spirits causing the troubles are diagnosed by the help of a ‘Mibu’– the Mishing’s priest who has special power of diagnosing causes of illness, predicting future events to come and offering remedies to them. Other method of diagnosing the Spirits causing illness for which *Mibu* is not always necessary but in case of prolonged illness or occurrence of
unnatural death or destruction of cattle or crops Mibu is called in. These types of rituals and offerings are determined according to the nature of the Uies.

The Uies are classified into several major groups depending on their celestial abode. The most prominent groups are explained as follows:

3.5.1 Urom uie (the departed souls)

‘Urom uies,’ refer to the departed souls called ‘yalo’, which literally mean shadow. In the Sun shine, a man is followed by his shade everywhere and anywhere. The Mishings conceive it as an accompaniment of soul in the form of shade. As soon as a man dies, his shade is lost from the world. It means the soul has departed from him and assumes the form of Spirit. The Mishings believe that the soul is immortal but it does not return to life in this world. Thus, it remains outside mundane human world, but not necessarily forgetting the past so soon. The Mishings believe that human soul does not go away too far from the dead man's home until and unless he is offered with due rituals. For well being of the family, they perform the last ritual called Dodgang in which food, drink, meat and fish are offered to the departing soul as well as to the gathering of relatives, neighbours and friends who come to pay homage and prayer to the departing soul. After the death of a person, the Mishings perform a ritual called Urom Apin (sacrificial rites) for departed soul within a month or so. This has been performed in the belief that the departed soul does not lose all the mundane desires so soon. The desires therefore must be fulfilled before the soul departs from the world to eternity. After the last rites, the Urom of the departed soul preceding the ninth generation is believed to transcend to another stage called Gumin So:yin. A Gumin So:yin is virtually another form of the departed soul of a family and at this stage, the GuminSo:yin acts as the
protector of the family. And this is also a concept of clan deity prevalent among the
Mishings. The *Gumin So:yin* is believed to be residing in each house of the families
belonging to the same clan. The belief is that it protects the families from all kinds of
dangers and difficulties that may be caused by the evil Spirits which roam around the
homes all the times. They offer pig, chicken, fish etc. as sacrifices from time to time
along with the ritual functions dedicated to other Spirits and family *Uroms*. “In certain
clan groups separate rituals are performed for their satisfaction of the *Gumin So:yin*, in
the interval of five years or so.” The members of the same clan group participate in
such rituals and arrange huge feast with food, meat, drink and so on.

3.5.2 *Ṭāléng uie* (the ethereal spirits)

‘Ṭāléng uies’ refer to the ethereal spirits which are believed to cause rain, storm,
drought, thunder and lightning. As people living so close to the nature and its blessings,
the Mishings consider these phenomena as vital as the question of life and death.
Therefore, the Spirits causing these must be kept happy by offering sacrifices from time
to time. Accordingly, *Ṭāléng uies* are performed by individual families as well as
collectively by the village community by sacrificing fowls and pigs, and offering drinks
and food. In initiating *Ṭāléng uie*, the ethereal spirits are invoked to be satisfied with the
offerings dedicated to them and they bless the family with peace and prosperity.
Generally, it is believed that the *Ṭāléng uies* wrath is manifested through death of a
person or animal struck by lightning.

3.5.3 *Dobur uie* (the evil spirits)

‘Dobur uies’ are the spirits that cause flood, landslide, accidental or unnatural
death of human beings, destruction of crops by insects and other diseases. The general
welfare and prosperity of a village community are also believed to be dependent on the blessing of the Dobur uies. Thus, sacrificial rites dedicated to Dobur uies are performed individually and collectively by the families of a village every year in its early part. The individual family may, however, perform a Dobur uie regularly at the interval of five or three years.

The rites dedicated to the Dobur uies are performed at the outskirt of the village concerned so as to keep away the malevolent spirits from the village. Just before the beginning of the function the young men of the village go on beating around every household of the village so that the evil spirits hiding in the nook and corner of the houses run away and leave the village. While performing the Dobur uie neither the village folks go out of the village nor can any outsider enter into the village. On that day all roads entering to the village are closed so that evil Spirits cannot enter the village. In the morning the youths of the village go from house to house demanding the dues Ajeng for the puja. They collect apong, fowl, pig and rice-beer in a place on the outskirt of the village. Two idols resembling snakes swallowing an egg are prepared from some corn and split bamboo are placed in the altar facing the Sun. Pig and fowls are sacrificed and the Satola (Village priest) utters prayers, -

"Oh Mother Sun, Father Moon,

Oh Divine self,

Be pleased with these offerings and

Bless us with health and happiness."²³

Apart from this ritual, the Mishing people also perform another three types of rites for Dobur uie. These are discussed below:-
3.5.3. (i) Arig Dobur

It is one of the most important rituals of the community. Their main livelihood source is agriculture. If there is a fear of damage of crops by insects, failure of rain, and occurrence of flood or other natural calamities then to prevent that or for more production of crops this ritual is arranged. This ritual is performed in a paddy field in the month of Kati of Assamese calendar when the rice is about to form. It is also known as Mo:pun Dobur. It is performed by the owner of paddy in accompany with one or two other people. Here five chickens are sacrificed to seek blessings of Ko:je yango (goddess of fertility), Do:nyi-Po:lo,(Sun-Moon), Gumin So:yin (race spirits) for prosperity of their crops and protect them from insecticides etc.

3.5.3. (ii) Piya: Dobur

‘Piya’ means bloodshed or accident. It is arranged in household. When two persons or groups or villages enter into quarrel and bloodshed amongst themselves, then considering the intensity and importance of the happenings a number of families or a number of villages collectively arrange this Dobur. It is also performed when there is a sudden disaster inflicting a family like accident, house destroyed by fire, someone killed by lighting etc. Here, the concerned family offers a red coloured chicken for sacrifice to remove the evil spirits. The five or six young boys of the village revolve round the house for five times and take the said red chicken with a pot of apong, salt and chilly and also take an amount of money as Dashkina. The ritual is performed with the help of a village priest. Main objective of this Dobur is to maintain social order, peace, prosperity, civic sense and to remove evils caused by bloodshed.
3.5.3. (iii) Do:de Dobur

If a person commits activities like murder, offence, sin, move to socially restricted places, then the family members of that person invite the villagers and arrange this Dobur. It is also known as Po:ni Dobur. Considering the intensity of the offence, it may include more than one village. Here, a small female pig and five chickens are sacrificed by one priest with other respected villagers and they pray to make the family as well as the person free from the sufferings of his misdeed.

Besides the spirits described above, there are many other types of spirits which cause disease to individuals. These Spirits are known by their usual abode such as yumrang uie- Spirits that live in forest, Asi uie- Spirits that live in water, Pejab uie- Spirits that live near the river and pond and so on. For remedies, such spirits are also appeased by offering sacrifices with small quantity of food and drink. But for most of the spirits at least a chicken is sacrificed. These are briefly enumerated in the following:-

3.5.4 Kum: sung Uie (granary spirit)

‘Kum:sung’ means granary and accordingly kum:sung uie is performed below the back side of the granary (traditional granary is placed at least two feet above the ground). The foremost objective of this ritual is to enable the granary to fill with crops in every harvesting season. We perceive that both the Tālēng uie and Kumsung uie are synonymous, presided over by a priest and its essentials are same as that of Tālēng uie.

3.5.5 Yumrāŋ Uie (forest spirit)

‘Yumrāŋ’ means forests. The Mishing community performs this kind of ritual, where offerings are made to appease the spirits of forest. Earlier the Mishings are
primely settled in riverside and their inhabitant areas were covered with forestry along with various dangerous animals, insecticides, and plants. Thus, their lives were full of threats and insecurity. Thus, to get rid of all such evil elements, they offer prayer to spirits of forest (Yumrāṅg Uie). Under a tree, a priest with the family members of the affected persons conducts the worship. While entering into the forest, if a person is attacked or threatened by wild animals or spirits, then a ritual known as Āg:nām is carried out days before the performance of Yumrāṅg uie, where an ‘iron rod’ is dedicated in the name of the spirit of forest. The objective behind performing this ritual is to make the affected person free from threats to enter into forests.

3.5.6 Āsi Uie (water spirit)

As a riparian people, Mishings have to largely deal with cultivation, fishings etc. and to satisfy their necessities they have mostly cope with water and water related troubles. In Mishing language, ‘Āsi’ means water. Thus, they believe that evil spirits might cause damage or trouble to any body via water. Accordingly, they attempt to satify those water spirits and arranged Āsi uie.

3.5.7 Péjāb Uie (duck spirit)

The word ‘Péjāb’ means duck. It is observed by a family, when one member has problems or pain in legs, hands or paralysis in his/her legs, then one white coloured duck or multi-coloured duck is being offered to a priest in the name of the duck spirit. If the person is cured within 10/12 days, the priest sacrifices that duck near the bank of the river and offers blessings to the person. The sick person and one or two of his family members can only attend this ritual. In the river bank, near water, twenty four betel nuts
and twenty four dakshinas are arranged and packed in banana leaves and this are offered to the priest with an amount of money. The priest chants Harinam and twenty four earthen lamps are lit by him in the name of duck spirit. He then makes a boat of banana tree and arranges the said twenty four dakshinas and twenty four earthen lamps in the boat. By chanting Harinam the priest offers fresh blood to the spirit sacrificing the duck. Later the sick person takes a bath in the river water and he floats those betel nuts and dakshinas along with rice powder and head of the duck in water. The rest portion of the duck is cooked and eaten by the priest and the persons attending the ritual in the bank of the river.

The above mentioned traditional rituals are directly or indirectly involve their religious beliefs and practices. We have seen most of the Mishing people still practise those rituals while performing their day to day activities of life, if pain, suffering, troubles, and unseen incident, etc. occur among family members. Now question arises,—what is the reason behind their beliefs, the people express that if they don’t practise those rituals, the family as well as community cannot live peacefully and cannot progress in the coming days. They might get disturbances from those evil spirits in the way of life. Thus, it is necessary to offer rituals in the name of those spirits whom they think that may bring troubles. But it cannot logically as well as scientifically establish the factors behind their faith. Rather it is notable that their inherent fear psychosis can not make them free to avoid their age old traditional Animistic form of beliefs.

### 3.6 Influences of other Religions

Traditionally the Mishings are the followers of Animism, but when they shifted from the hills to the plain areas of Assam, they got connected with other neighbouring
religions. Accordingly different sections of Hinduism, more prominently Neo-Vaishnavism and Christianity render immense influence over the Mishing society. Those influences are discussed below:-

3.6.1 Neo-Vaishnavism

During the 15th century a noticeable change came into being in the socio-religious scenario of Assam. The space for mutually contradicting Hindu sectarian believers of Assam was almost literally submerged by the Neo-Vaishnavism under the auspices of Sankaradeva during that century. Among them the Shaktism, Saivism and Tantricism are the most prominent Hindu sections having mutual contradictions regarding each other’s beliefs and practices. The Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva has great impact upon the mainstream Hindus. Even the tribal people who were kept apart themselves from Hinduism and guarded their indigenous tribal faiths were influenced by the Neo-Vaishnavism. But it doesn’t imply that Neo-Vaishnavism brought in its tide all the tribal communities under a systematic course of conduct so far as religion is concerned. But that much is sure that certain ritualistic brush-up definitely came about in tribal religious practices. It is a matter of conjecture that whether those tribes accepted merely those elements of Neo-Vaishnavism which appeared to be invoking them or those Vaishnava Bhakats (votary of deity) of Satras solitarily imparted the fiddling part of Vaisnavite practices alone and never cared to reveal core traits of Vaishnavism in its entirety to the tribes. But the fact is that tribal conversion to Neo-Vaishnavism fold was never rooted and remained superficial.

The Mishings like most tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley came under the influences of Vaishnavism during 15th century. Certain attributes of Neo-Vaishnavism like recitation of hymns penned by Sankaradeva himself, lighting the lamp of mud
(chaki) as supreme witness during prayer, offering betel-nut and leaf as supreme offering to the deity, etc., henceforth became an inseparable custom of Mishing rituals. Negligible number of them was elevated to an inferior disciple (Bhakat) of certain ‘Satras’ of upper Assam with their egalitarian outlook. Some of these disciples on attaining certain level of perfection in recitation of the verses of the sacred verses of Kirtana were allowed to initiate their fellow tribe’s men. As such, Neo-Vaishnavism was able to give birth of an unparallel combination of Aryan philosophy and animism of mongoloids tribes.

Those disciples who could show considerable perfection in recitation of verses and ritualistic procedures had become the chief priests (Satulas). The Satulas preside over every type of ritual except Dobur uie. Although, the Bhakatiya system of Neo-Vaishnavism emerged in the Mishing society, it was unable to supersede their ancestral practices. The traditional practices like sacrificing chicken, pig and a:pong were equally performed along with the imitated Neo-Vaishnavite practices like Nam-Kirtana, lighting the Chaki, placing Sarai in particular place, offering blessing to the ‘Sevakis’ i.e. worshippers with the name of Ram, Hari, Krishna, and Sankara-Madhava. This new system had pushed back the traditional seers called Mibu of the Mishing society to a lesser important place than that the Mibu occupied previously. But, the Bhakatia system was unable to fully influence over the old traditional tribal beliefs. Now, the Mishings continued to perform the same old rituals, offered the same sacrificial things, but in a different form. The Spirits still preoccupied prominent place as before and the same were propitiated by offering a plenty of rice beverage, pork, fish and food. Such practices are considered as ‘taboo’ in Neo-Vaishnavism. Hence, a mutilated and twisted form of Neo-Vaishnavism came into the Mishing society.
3.6.2 Addition of new rituals after being influenced by Vaishnavism

The Mishing society develops a number of new religious practices after being influenced by neo-vaishnavism. Some important rituals are enumerated below:

3.6.2.1 Nāmgār Dāngoriā:

It is the significant ritual practice performed in Nāmgār at night. Usually, every Mishing village has a Nāmgār, where all people collectively sit and lights up earthen lamps at Bohag and Magh bihu. In Nāmgār, the villagers offer pinda to all deceased souls of the village. This sewa is arranged every year to remember the deceased souls. In Nāmgār, villagers held two day long programme and invite Sadhu, priests, and bhakats. In this ritual, villagers offer five chickens, having separate significance of their own and bhakats chant Harinam continuously for eight hours, from evening to morning. Those five chickens are offered---one red cock for Nāmgār Dangaria (spirit of Nāmgār), one white cock for jalkai Dāngoriā (water spirit), one white hen for Aai Dāngoriā, one red hen and one cock for ‘pinda’ to Dāngoriā (deceased souls). They are cooked with vegetables and taken by the Bhakats and invitees.24

3.6.2.2 Risto:

It is performed when someone is constantly sick, absent minded, not good in studies or when he is believed that he is unlucky. In such cases astrologer recommends this ritual and tells the family to perform it with pig, fish or tortoise. To perform this ritual the concerned family arranges one priest with three boys to carry out the ritual for the victim. They also offer nominal dakshina to the priest and to each member of the ritual. It is held in the house of the affected person. Po:ro apong is used in this ritual.
3.6.2.3 Sātjoniā:

It is observed when a family faces problems like accident, quarrel, murder, etc. For the purpose seven Bhakats are needed and seven Nām Kirtans are uttered from the Kirtan Ghosa of Sri Sri Sankaradeva or from Nām Ghosa of Sri Sri Madhavadeva. Each Nām is followed by pelignām (blessings) in which the host bows down to seek blessings from the Bhakats. Here, seven dashkinas are also offered to the respective Bhakats. It is a taboo ritual and especially restrictions to join in the ritual is made for those families where, there is birth, death and Urom apin not yet performed, menstruation etc. This ritual is a commonly performed once in a year. Taboo is another sacred belief which is a rather negative custom of any belief. Some regard taboo as “holy dread”, an objectified fear of the demoniac power thought to be concealed in the tabooed objects.  

3.6.2.4 Na-joniā:

The system of practice and reason behind observing this ritual is similar to that of Sāt-joniā except the nine numbers of Bhakats (votary of deity) are involved here, and accordingly nine stanzas of Nām Kirtan are chanted. If one family is unable to arrange the Shardha of their forefathers, then they arrange Na-joniā for the peace and prosperity of the family. Here, the family offers betel nut and dakshina to each of the nine Bhakats. The Bhakats lights up one earthen lamp and take a feast with one female pig and use black apong (po:ro apong). They take a curry of Mati mah (pulse) and kaldil also. It has norms that the rest of the food items of the feast are not kept at home. It has thrown outside the house.
3.6.2.5 Ekoish-joniā:

This ritual is performed to seek welfare or yield in any ground of activities of one family. Performance of this ritual requires twenty-one Bhakats. Accordingly, twenty one Nām kirtan are chanted and they offer blessings to the organising family. One big male pig is required for the purpose. All villagers are invited in the ritual and they join in the feast. Thus, it is an expensive ritual. The Mishing affluent families arrange this ritual at a gap of every two or three years.

3.6.2.6 Nām Sewā:

The Mishing community performs this ritual once in a year in the month of Bohag (April) of Assamese calendar. Objective behind this ritual is to pray for eliminating all the known and unknown misdeeds conducted by one family during the year may be in the form of killing animals, uprooting trees etc. The three or four Bhakats are required to carry on the ritual. To symbolize the sin conducted in twelve months of a year, twelve stanzas of Nām Kirtan are sung to make the family free from its consequences. The ritual requires fish, dal, black pulse, local vegetables and the family invites a few villagers to join in the feast and offer blessings to them.

3.6.2.7 Dāngoriā:

The Mishings believe in offering puja to Dāngoriā. They believe that a family can only prosper by getting blessings from Dāngoriā. It is a taboo and prohibits entry of all sections of the society. The Mishings arrange Ukum (house) Dāngoriā and Yumrāng (jungle) Dāngoriā, these two kinds of Dāngoria puja at least once in a year. When there is a sick person in family like back pain, pain in legs, hand and any other parts of the
body, then the family approaches to the astrologer and at his direction conducts the Dāngoriā Puja. According to the ability, a family arranges two or three Bhakats though the number of Bhakats is not fixed. Here, one Dāngoriā Nam is sung to make the ill person free from hindrances. It strictly requires one male red coloured and female white coloured chicken. Usually, only the sick person and their family members attend the ritual.

3.6.2.8 Lakshmi Puja:

It is arranged in front of the grannery, so that harvesting becomes more fruitful. The puja is arranged before harvesting in the paddy field. Here new cane leaves, three jars of white apong are offered to three Bhakats. With Lakshmi puja, some families arrange Pachan, if the produced fruits or vegetables appear in joint form i.e. banana. Then one pig and one jar of black apong are offered to Dāngoriā. It is a restricted ritual and performed in the particular household.

3.6.2.9 Jalkai Dāngoriā:

It is observed in the river water if somebody feels cold, vomiting, etc. Here, the Bhakata creates an elevated land near the river water, and over that land, he offers sacrifice of one cock and fresh blood from the cock’s head has been offered to the water spirit.

The above mentioned rituals are practised as a result of their conversion to new religions along with animism. Thus, the present Mishing society develops a belief system where they worship Sri Sri Sankaradeva and Sri Sri Madhavadeva as their Gurus. Worship is the practice of showing deep respect. Their prayer songs invoke the following names as their Almighty God--Lord- Ram, Lord- Krishna, Lord -Vishnu and Basudevā.
3.6.3 Christian Religion

Christianity as a religion emerged in the middle of the 1\textsuperscript{st} Century and believed in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. *Old Testament* referred Jesus as the Messiah. Christian religious studies propagated that Jesus suffered, died, was buried, and was resurrected from the dead in order to grant eternal life to those who believe in him and trust him for the remission of their sins (salvation).

The Trinity is an essential doctrine of mainstream Christianity. It refers to the teaching that the one God comprises three distinct, eternally co-existing persons; the Father, the Son (incarnate in Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Trinity represents both the immanence and transcendence of God; God is believed to be infinite and God's presence may be perceived through the actions of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Christianity came to India as early as the first century A.D. St. Judas Thomas, a disciple of Jesus, arrived in Kerala, in south India in 52 A.D. The missionary work of St. Thomas paved the way for Christianity to lay its foundation in India. The second upsurge in growth of Christianity in India was through the European missionary activities which started in the early sixteenth century.

The Portuguese, under the leadership of Vasco da Gama, arrived in south India in 1498, and were the first among the European powers to arrive in India. The Portuguese, inspired by the Pope’s order, established Catholic Churches and started to baptize people around them. The English missionaries started acting in India at a much later period, only in the early nineteenth century when the British rulers allowed different churches to establish missionaries in their territory in India.\textsuperscript{26}
The Christian missionaries made several attempts to establish its impact upon the hill tribes of the North East India along with that of the Mishings since the British rule began in this part. Different factors play vibrant role to lead the people of North East as well as Assam to convert into Christianity by leaving their own ancestral religions. The Missionaries left no stone unturned to convert them into Christianity. It was therefore mainly the common people who embraced Christianity.

Although a very humble beginning of the Christian missionary work in the Mishing inhabited areas was started with the prime motive of spreading Christianity among them for the first time in 1836 at Sadiya subsequently at North Lakhimpur in 1894 and at Pathalipam in 1895, their efforts proved futile. Their efforts and the resultant failure are recorded as:

“At the beginning of 1897, Paul toured again villages along the Subansiri river. Joha, the local preacher, having been discouraged due to deceit and cunning ways of the Miris (Mishings), returned to his native town. Nevertheless, Paul managed to reach many villages and found interest hearers. In November again, Paul went out and camped in the midst of several Miri villages. Several young men were convinced and were willing to give up Hinduism, but the separation from houses and friends that stood in the way of their acceptance of Christianity…After that Paul went back to Sibsagar and met Mrs. Gureney, Petrick, Swanson and Firth, who seeing his weakness advised him to stay in the Dibrugarh station.”

During the 19th century, Christian missionaries moved depth into Mishing traditional beliefs. From the last part of 20th century, Mishings are gradually embracing
Christianity. Indirectly this is a measure to replace the vacuum that was caused by the influences of Hindus and subsequent backwardness.

It is only in the first half of the 20th century the conversion of the Mishings towards Christianity started. As per available records it is found that a section of Mishing people comprising of thirty eight (38) numbers belonging to Lakhimpur district showed a willingness to embrace Christianity as their religion for the first time in their history during the period 1921-1930 A.D. However, the Missionaries were not totally successful in converting them and it is only in the post-independence period they could gain some popularity as they imparted training to some Mishing youths in the theological colleges. In the year 1980 A.D. a section of Missionaries started their activities in the Mishing inhabited villages of Majuli, Sadiya, Telam, Silapathar, Akajan and Tarajan by means of opening up English medium schools. Due to non-availability of census data we can not identify actual numbers of Mishing Christians in Assam. In this regard, Eisen pegu, a Baptist Christian opined that total number of Mishing Christians will be 4000. According to local police sources of Majuli, the Christian population at Majuli including the Baptist families is seventy (70), and the trend which was reportedly set rolling in 1981 by E. Pegu and L.R. Sangma, gradually percolated to adjoining Kekuri Madhupur and Latibor Chuk Mishing villages in Lakhimpur district.\(^{29}\) Rather, during field visit we found people who newly adopted Christianity in the districts of Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Jorhat and also other Mishings populace area in Assam. Most of those people are belonging to the economically very poor rural areas.

Of late, at the dawn of the 21st century (1990-2005 A.D.), Majuli has come to witness an altogether different development. This development is the conversion to Christianity in the Island. The converted people mostly belong to the Mishing
community. They are also the majority inhabitants in the Island. Most interestingly it is not the whole family that convert but an individual. There are many cases where children are converted without their parents’ knowledge and consent. Another reason for the growing influence of the people towards Christianity is the simplicity and less expensive nature of its rites and rituals. This simplicity of belief has influenced most of the Mishings as they were fed up with constant rituals, heavy expenditure and social discrimination in the name of religion. Some factors play an active role in converting the Mishing people towards Christianity. These can be characterised as follows:-

Firstly, The Mishing community is purely dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Shrinking of agricultural land as well as production, because of natural calamities like flood and erosion led people from cultivators to daily wage earners, factory workers etc. The missionaries taking the advantage of this situation helped the poor people and offered free supply of food stuffs, clothing, education and facilities relating to their health and hygiene, distribution of seeds, hand carts, cow, pig etc. Again, the Missionaries conducted a number of schemes to help especially the poor people. The role of the missionaries through education and care of the sick and sufferers, also motivated the common people and converted them towards their religion.

Secondly, Hindu religious fold failed to provide equal status to the Mishing people. Despite being Vaishnavite sect, the tribal people hardly able to attain due dignity and acceptance from the larger Assamese fold. Thus, the simple Mishing people in constant dissatisfaction make a shift from vaishnavism to Christainity as a religious alternative.
Thirdly, the Mishing people are very casual and some times they became dissatisfied with rigid religious practices of both Animism and Hinduism. Again, ritual practices in both the religions mark a heavy expenditure. Besides these aspects, some other dimensions may play crucial role in this conversion to Christianity. Such as ideological influences of Christian religion, continuous mental disagreements with traditional rituals, close contact with other religious communities, open social strata in Christinity and adoption of the system of equality to all sections etc. All those factors lead to conversion of the Mishings towards a simple religion i.e. Christainity as per their perception as well as practices.

After conversion towards Christinity, now the Mishing Christians change their whole life style in the form of adoption of a new form of behaviour, ways of thinking, and ideology. And also with the change of their traditional religion and ritual practices, they become more interested to acquire education, new ways of celebrating their traditional festivals, such as the inclusion of prayer songs of Lord Jesus in situations of trouble and joy etc. Correlation as well as assimilation with other religions gradually diminish the social co-operation of the Mishing society, because earlier in the name of attending rituals of other families, almost all the Mishing villagers come into contact with one another, but now those sections of Mishings have no faith over traditional rituals and have other religious influences upon them, do not attend or got invitation for those ritual practises. Therefore, different groups of people occur within the religious sections of Mishings.

3.7 Critical remarks

Although, the Mishings are maintaining the traditional-cultural patterns as well as religious beliefs and practices, some changes have been noticed in their life and culture
in due course of time. Since, the Mishings had migrated from the hills to the plains of Assam, they had gone through constant influences of other religions prevalent among the people of Assam. As an outcome of these influences, different sects of Hinduism like Shaktism, Saivism, Tantricism, Neo-Vaishnavism and Christianity emerged in the Mishing society. In the beginning, Mishings did not fully accept those practices but gradually incorporated some of those beliefs and practices in their own religious functions. The present Mishing religion is an admixture of Neo-Vaishnavism, Tantricism, Christianity and tribal beliefs. Now, the Mishings perform some rituals such as Ĥātjoniā, Najonia, Akaisjonia, Jalkai, Pejab Uie, Yumrāng Uie, Ghar Dāngoriā, etc. and these are non-traditional for the Mishings in origin. It is to be noted that now, a large number of Mishings have been practising the various forms of Hinduism like Vaishnavism, Anukulism and Christianity etc. along with their own traditional faiths on Animism.

Rather than adopting and practising new faith, the Mishings are able to keep alive their original religious beliefs and practices till now. Undeniably, an eminent thinker G. Phukan opines, “most of the tribes of the plains are culturally less distinct from the Assamese caste Hindus than the hill tribe because of the relatively greater interaction between them through the centuries.” But it doesn’t mean at all that the Mishing pristine beliefs have gone through a process of so called proselytization or filtration as a result of influences of their culturally rich Hindu neighbours or Christian preachers. So far as Hinduism is concerned, Mishings conversion to Hinduism is not an accomplished fact. Even socio-cultural assimilation of the Mishings with the Assamese society is partial. The outlook of the casteist never permitted them to accept the tribes as their brothers. Reversely Christianity remained a religion of the alien people to the tribes.
Practically, the religious practices of Mishings in the contemporary period cannot be categorized with any particular religious system. Though, the Mishings are generally Hindus, they never follow any specific religious sect of Hinduism. By worshiping deities and practising Hindu religious functions, they become Hinduised. Again, they practise animism. This dual religious trend of the Mishings helps us to identify them as Tribal-Hindu, having their own cultural traits and religious systems significant for their ethnic identity.

According to D.N. Majumdar --"The aboriginal tribes coming in contact with Hinduism or Christianity, with urban people to whom they look up for their `economic existence, may not learn much about true Hinduism or Christianity but all the same they know which of their rites and rituals are repugnant to their civilized neighbours and gradually develop an aversion to their indigenous religious code and even become ashamed of their time-old practices-- the result has proved to be disastrous, a decay of religion has set in,“32 Thus, the absence of a locus stand, the Mishings are going through an ordeal of chaotic psycho-social degeneration which has become a subject of grave concern for the Mishings.

Significantly, religious reformation is necessary for the development of all ethnic societies. The Mishing society is not an exception to it. Due to assimilation as well as influences from a number of other religions, today, the Mishings generate a new trend in its religious practices and beliefs. But, the fact remains that Mishings are quite independent of Hindu society. They are certainly not the so-called low caste Hindus as Hindu orthodox social systems state. Free from all dogmatic Hindu rituals, their “Animism” itself is a distinct form of religion in its own accord.
With the changing social frame, the religious beliefs and practices of the Mishings have gone through a transition from animism to polytheism. Along with animism, they worship various types of ‘Spirits’ whether benevolent and malevolent. Accordingly, the religious festivals are eagerly awaited by the Mishings. Moreover, the ancestral ‘Spirits’ find favour and appreciation from their new generations and they consider the ancestors’ families and household deity to help them in every walk of their life. It is also observed that, the Mishings have blended their beliefs and rituals with other faiths. Hinduism has active influence over them as the Hindus have been their close neighbours, associates and ideal models for a long time. Thus, these practices characterize the polytheist nature of the Mishing society. Time has therefore, come to evolve a system which will reinforce the solidarity of the Mishing society in terms of their socio-cultural identity and reinstate their traditional values in conformity with the new social construct.

The chapter studied about the traditional beliefs and practices of the Mishings, which witnessed lots of changes in due course of time. The influences of Vaisnavism and Christianity have gradually resulted in emergence of a new set of beliefs and practices amongst the Mishings. But, it is obvious to mention that still the common Mishings have not been able to give up their traditional beliefs and practices yet. To be more accustomed with the traditional beliefs and practices, we tend to elaborately discuss the agro based festivals of the community in the next chapter.
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