CHAPTER-11

LOCATION AND PEOPLE

Land

Assam is one of the states of Indian sub-continent and is located on the North-Eastern side of the country. It extends from 24°N to 28°N latitude and 49.8° E to 96°E longitude. Assam is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the North, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram on the South, Manipur, Nagaland in the East and West Bengal, Meghalaya and Bangladesh on the West. Topographically it can be divided into three district zones, namely, Brahmaputra valley in the North; the Karbi-anglong and North Cachar Hills in the middle and the Barak valley in the South. The long and narrow Brahmaputra valley stretches from east to west. The plain zone is starting from Tinsukia, Dhemaji districts in the east and the Goalpara in the west covering the vast area of 56194 square kilometers. The Barak valley lies on the Southern side and is fertile by the river Barak and its tributaries. It covers the area of 6922 square kilometers.
In between the two valleys, there lies the Karbi plateau and the North Cachar hills. The average height of plateau is 300 to 400 meters. The highest paella of the plateau is known as Singhasan, which is about 1360 meters. This two hill districts covering on area of 15322 square kilometers. The soil of the two valleys is alluvial and the hills are red and acidic. The total area of the state is 78,438 square kilometers.

In the year 1837, Johan M Cosh gave the extent of the Mishing habited in the plains thus; The Miris occupy that strip of alluvial land along the northern bank of the Brahmaputra from large island Majuli to the river Dihong the northern branch of the Brahmaputra and bounded on the north by hilly country of the Abors

Mineral Resource and Climate

Petroleum, natural gas, coal and lime stone are the important mineral resources of the state of Assam valuable deposits of coal and minerals have produced a climate of its own in the state resulting frequent occurrence of earthquake the region.

1. Johan, M. Cosh: Topography of Assam; 1837, p-3
Assam has a tropical climate. The monsoon starts generally from mid-May up to September. The winter season begins from the mid October up to the month of March. The summer days are quite hot while the winter days are suffering cool. Humidity is high in the summer season than the winter. Annual rainfall is 40 to 60 (100-50 cms). Most of the rainfall pours down during the rainy season, which begins, from June to September.

Strong winds blow from the South West during February and March.

Flora and Fauna

Assam is known for her rich forest wealth with varieties of flora and fauna. Sub tropical evergreen forests are found in this region. According to the survey report of the year, 1995 of the forestland were 21.52 lakh hectares out of which forest were 17.58 lakh hectares. Thus the area under reserve forest constitute, about 22.40% of the total geographical area of Assam. In the early decades of the twentieth century, there was much denudation of

forests. In these forest zones grows enormous number of vegetation species. timber, bamboo, cane, grass, gum, lac and medicinal heels are such species.

The soil of the state is suitable for growing cotton, silk, coffee, sugarcane and tea. Like the flora, the deeply wooded terrains of Assam are no less rich in fauna. One of the most attractive features of the state forest sector is its colorful wild animal. Comprising various states here is various types of animals. In this connection mention may be made of species like the hoalock gibbon, the stump-tailed macaque, the golden langur monkeys, the pig, the clouded leopard, the golden cat, the white-winged wood duck etc. Among the greatest varieties of wild life, one horned rhinoceros, Tiger, Wild elephant, sambur, bear, barking deer, leopard, wild buffalo, musk deer, wild goat etc. are common. During the winter season, many migratory birds from the Northern Asia irsit this Northeastern region.

Geographical Distribution

At present, the mishing people are scattered through out all the districts of upper Assam. The vineries areas of
Brahmaputtra stretching from Sadia in the west lying approximately between 93°e and 28° latitude may be regarded as the areas of habitation of the Mishings. The Mishings are originally a hilly tribe who inhabited the Abor, Miri and Mishimi Hills in Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as NEFA (North East Frontier Agency), cover an area of Approximately 33,000 square miles of wild mountains. This area is the home of at least 25 tribes, who have an extraordinary divergence of culture, language, dress and customs. These tribes have source similarity in agricultural techniques, housing, and practice of human care, lack of indigenous script, tendency to remain isolated and seek security in clan tribal compositions.

The Mishings of Assam have much similarity in respect of language, customs, dress and physical status with the Adi or Abor tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. According to Machenzie "The Abor and Miris belong to the same habitat and they are still alike in all material aspects."

3. Chaliha, P.: *The Out Look On NEFA*; 1958, p-1,2
Origin of the word *Miri* and *Mishing*

The Mishings are called *Miri* by the plains people of Assam. The origin of the word *Miri* is shrouded in mystery. There are a lot of opinion among the scholars about the origin of the word *Miri*.

Jatin Mipun says – *The Abors of Arunachal Pradesh called their priest *Miri* or *Mirin*. It is probably the non-tribal people of Assam who call the tribe as *Miri* after they came into contact with the priest"⁵ Some writers observe that the word *Miri* is derived from the term *Mienrient* which is a part of Abor hill. The plains people being unable to follow the correct pronunciation simplified it as *miri*⁶ According to Gait, the word *miri* means middle man or go between. They walk as middleman between hill and plain people and carry out their business⁷ Gunaviram Barua in his Assam Buranji mention that the word *miri* is derived from Mikir, Sakhamig or Mottok.⁸

⁶ Sarma thakur g.c : *The Plain Tribes Of Lakhimpur And Nagon*; p-2
⁷ Barua G. : *A History Of Assam*; 1970, p-373
In Arunachal Pradesh there is another tribe known as Hill Miri or Porbotia Miri, but they have no cultural similarity with the Mishings of the plains of Assam. Probably, observing the similar behavior in life style with the Mishings, the plain people of Assam called them Hill Miri. It can be said that the word miri has been derived from the Mishing word Miboo which stands for priest of the tribe. Throughout the Assamese literature and historical records (buranji) we find the use of the word miri. The word miri is also used in the devotional songs of Sri Sankar deva, the great Vaishava scholar of the 15th century of Assam, which runs as follows -

\[ Hori buli tareMiri, Ahome Kachari \] \(^9\)

According to Srivastava – “Before coming down to the plains of Assam, the Miris or the Mishings called themselves as Ami or Tani meaning man\(^9\)”\(^\). The tribe called themselves Mishing meanings good people. MI (man) Yasking (bright of good) i.e. “we are good man” or MI (man) Ansing (calm or peace loving people). Srivastava observes that the word miri derives from Mirion, which means “man like real

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\(^9\) Srivastava R.P. : Impact Of Community Development And Cultural Change Among The Mishings Of Assam: (project report Dibrugarh University, 1972, p-1)
God'. All these imply that the *missings* are peace-loving people who are not included in their community.

**Migration**

The Mishings have no written history. As such we have to depend on the oral traditions to know their origin and migration. The origin of the tribe has been discussed by many writers, but satisfactory answer is yet to got. No definite account can be made about the migration of the Mishing to the plains. History of their migration to the plains remains obscure. The migration of Mishings started in batches and they brought certain traits of cultural from their ancient abode in the east.

British officer Cal F.Jenkins mentions in his letter to A.J.M.Mill, dated the 4th June 1853, about the tribes of Assam which goes thus *Miris* and *Abors* are similar tribes and are more or less inter mixed in the hills extending from Lakhimpur to Dibong. The *Abor* generally occupy a jurisdiction over the latter, Whether in the hills or on the plains. From the prosecution of the *Abors* arising throughout upper and central Assam is small clans in the midst of jungle, mostly alone the banks of the river and their tributaries. The *Miris* near Lakhimpur are not mixed with the *Abors*,
and the *Abors* beyond the Dibang and up to the Dibongs for canoes and large timbers.\(^\text{10}\)

W.W. Hunter observed that the Mishings are the semi barbarous whose original home appears to the low hills north of Lakhimpur, whence they spread in large number through Upper Assam. Their language is similar to that of the Adi’s and they are supposed to an off shoot of the tribe. Indeed, the Adis look upon the Mishings as their dependents and demand a heavy tribute from them. To escape from the Adis, the Mishings came down to the plains of Assam.\(^\text{11}\)

**Legends related to Migration**

There exist some Legends among the Mishings which are transmitted through generations. We can accept them as folk history which are related to migration of the tribe from the hills to the Brahmaputra valley. Some clue regarding their migration can be determined from careful analysis of such popular stories. These are

1. YAKKO-KOBES heroic tale
2. DAMRO VILLAGE
3. THE PLIGHT OF THE MANS


\(^{11}\) Hunter, W. W. : *A Statistical Account Of Assam*; p-239
YAKKO KOBE were two brothers, with their own respective families. The two brothers led a happy and peaceful mountainous life. In the course of time, they had number of quarrels with another neighbouring tribe, the Padams due to some social causes. Those quarrels turned into a full-fledged war and it declared between the two families.

Foreknowing the most probable outcome of the war, YAKKO-KOBE'S family built a large boat beforehand and fix it in a safe place beside the Siang river. Their aim was to use the boat when the time comes.

YAKKO-KOBE had altogether three wives. Before the war commenced they collected a large amount of chillies and dried and ground them up. On the day of the war, each of them kept a certain quantity of it in barboo cashets and stood guard at the entry gate of the house. One of them sat by the fireplace after keeping a steady fire going on, ready to burn the chili powder and with all their weapons ready, at hand.

On the fixed day, the members of the Padam family approached towards them. When they reached the premises of
YAKKO-KOBE'S house, the latter's three wives relentlessly throw upon them the chilli powder. Moreover, they burnt the chilli in the fire and thereby scattered chilli powder everywhere.

The Padam people were totally taken by such an attack. Unable to bear the agony, they rolled about in the courtyards due to the burning of the chilli powder. Waiting for such an opportunity, YAKKOBE killed all their enemies at once. After that, for their own safety they guided their families to the Siang river where their boat was ready for them. On the boat they reached across the plains after travelling along the river.

2. DAMRO VILLAGE

There was a Miri village called Damro in which a beautiful and expert weaver TURI lived. Turis father, at her marriageable age declared that he wanted an expert in athletic of Mirong village name Moyoung came to visit the Damro village and defeated all the youths of the village in athletic events.

The father of Turi was pleased with this young man and fixed the marriage with him. This was an insult for the young men of the Damro village and they made a wicked plan to kill Moyoung. They arranged a feast on the very day when the young couple visit their
village. They threw Moyoung in to a river binding his hands and feet. Turi also jumped into the river with the husband.

The village of Mirgong became angry with Moyoung hearing the incident. They tried to take action against the member of the Damro village. One day the village of Miyoung arranged a great feast and invited all the members of the Damro village. The youths of the Damro village suspected conspiracy and they did not attend the feast except a few. The participant of the feast were murdered by the people on the spot. One man escaped and he informed his villages. The villagers of Miyoung were comparatively smaller in number than that of the Damro village. So, they fled away the plains and finally they settled in plain Assam.

3. The Plight of the Mans

The invasion of the Mans created wide spread terror in almost all plains of Assam. The cruel and inhuman Mans after plundering and killing mercilessly, at last reached the bank of the Bor Luihit. Even after facing the big waves of the river, they did not think of returning back instead, they wished to create further terror on other bank. They thought of crossing the river by boat.

The Mishings residing by the bank of the Dibru river knew about the inhumanity of the Maans. They worried when they came
to know the intention of the Mans of crossing the river. On day, the Mans asked them to help them cross the river by boat. When they came to know of the situation, the Mishing people asked the fisher folk not to help the Mans cross the river. On the other hand, the fishermen were compelled to help the Mans out of fight. On coming to know of their plight, the Mishing gave a idea to the fishermen in order to teach the Mans a lesson, the river was full of small riverine islands. Their plain was to help the Mans across to one of such an island only, and not to let them know the great depth of the river beyond it. The fishermen after letting the Mans cross to an island immediately left them there and hurried away in their boats.

The Mans came to know of the danger, but it was too late. They stranded in the island surrounded by deep waters of the broad river. The cruel, blood thirsty Mans who never dream of being victims of helplessness were now in reality, in a poor plight. Because of scarcity of food many Mans died and other slowly waited to die.

The Mishings who were keeping a watch on the activities of the Mans waited for the right moment and immediately attacked the Mans late at night. They were armed to the teeth
and were in large numbers. The starved few and weaken Mans were no mach. The Mishings could easily wipe out all traces of enemies.

In this way, the invasion of the Mans in the north bank of the Bor Luhit was brought to an end to the island, by the Mishing.

**People of the study**

Assam has a very ancient civilization. Situated in "one of the great migration routes of mankind" the region of North East India, it become a state of museum of various races and ethnic group. People of different races and cultures have enriched of the local culture throughout the centuries. Assam is a meeting point of colourful tribes consisting of both hills and plains tribe having different ethnic and linguistic background. Among the plain tribes of the region, the Mishings occupied a significant position, being the second largest group with a population of the Mishings in Assam is 4,67,790 consisting of 2,39,388 males as recorded in 2001 census. In remote past eastern part of the sub-Himalayan range of mountains region especially the Siang valley of the present Arunachal Pradesh was the homeland of the Mishings.

The Mishing were formerly

referred to as Miri in religious scriptures, ethnographies, Ahom chronicles and government records till very recent times. They have been living mainly along the banks of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries for which they are called river in people. They now spread over wide range of the plains of Assam and found in the districts of North Sonitpur and Tinisukia. These districts are situated on the eastern part of Assam bounded by Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland.

They are very sturdy people. Their general colour and complexion vary from bright golden to dark brown; but species having very fair complexion particularly in the younger age group are not rare. Their general constitution and facial features show a distinct approximation to Mongoloid group of people with prominent cheekbone, scanty beard and moustache, and short but not so short nose with low bridge. The folds in the epicanthus, in a few cases are prominent, but in great majority, it is not so significant. In this respect, they somehow resemble the Manipuris. However, their tradition and linguistic affinities with the Adi people of Arunachal, besides facial features, are so remarkable that there cannot be two opinions of the fact that they sprang from a common stock.
The Mishing belong to the Tibeto-Barman language-speaking group of the great Mongaloids. They present very attractive varieties of material culture, such as spinning, weaving, basketry, cane and wood works that have been known to the trive for quite a long time. The Mishing people of the region have an excellent taste in colour and remarkable skill in diverging patterns. Their handiworks show high standard of technical perfection. They are self sufficient for centuries with their home products. It is seen that the Mishing folk are gradually assimilating themselves with other indigenous people of the plain Assam and their culture.