Abstract on

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE MISINGS OF ASSAM:
A CASE STUDY OF MAJULI

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2013
The Misings are one of the tribes of Assam and are the second largest group with a population of 587,310 soul.¹ They are one of the offshoots of Mongoloid stock while linguistically they are Tibeto-Burmans² most of them inhabited in Upper Assam. In the long back they used to live in the hilly areas in between the Siang and Subansiri districts of present day Arunachal Pradesh³ and came down to the plains of Assam around 14th -15th century.⁴ Since then they began to settle on the riverside areas of the Brahmaputra and the Subansiri rivers of Assam. They are now concentrated in the Upper Assam districts of Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Golaghat, Tinsukia and Sonitpur. Their inhabitants are found on the bank of the river Brahmaputra, Simen, Burisuti, Tomgâni, Jiādhal, Subansiri, Ghunāsuti, Boginadi, Rangānadi, Dikrong, Picholā, Buroi, Jiābharali, Dibru, lower parts of Dihing, Disāng, Dikhou, Dhansi and Bharali on the south bank. Moreover a large number of Misings settled themselves on the Majuli Island which is surrounded by the river Brahmaputra to the South and the Subansiri and Kherkotia in the North. Of the total number of 243 villages in Majuli the Mising dominated village is numbered at 108 approximately.⁵ Some of the Mising villages of Majuli are-Borpomuā, Tāmār, Putuki, Besāmørā, Ratanpur, Cherpāi, Kekuri, Đāktok, Moyongiā chāpori, Missāmørā, Sumoimāri, Muluāl Miri, Korotipār etc.

The study on the ‘Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Misings: A Case study of Majuli’ was carried out with the following objectives:

(i) To analyze the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Misings.
(ii) The research also aims at studying the gradual transition of the Mising religious beliefs and practices.
(iii) To study the level of impact of this transition on the traditional beliefs and practices.
(iv) To find out whether the Mising community is aware or not, that in embracing new religious beliefs they are threatening their own traditional religious beliefs and practices.

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1. Census of 2001
3. Ibid, p. 133
4. Ganesh Pegu, Mising Janasanskritir Ahe Ahe, Dhemaji, 2004, P.72
5. As per 2005 census recorded by Misings Autonomous Council, Gogamukh, North Lakhimpur District, 2006, p.27-29
(v) To find out whether the community is facing any problem, burden or discomfort in observing traditional religious practices. And also to find out factors responsible for their gradual process of transition or conversion.

Historical methodology has been followed in the research work. Necessary data and information are collected by consulting both Primary and Secondary sources. The primary sources include Archival data, Government proceedings, Census Report collected from Archives office, Dispur, Director of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Panbazar and Census office, Bhangagarh. Field study based on interviews and questionnaire have played an important role in enquiring about the traditional beliefs and practices, level of transition from traditional beliefs towards other religion and changes that occurred after their conversion towards Christianity. Articles in newspapers and research papers on the related topics of the community have been used as secondary sources. Information has also been derived from the website.

Number of books has been written on the Mising community. Among some of the major works mention may be made of The Misings: Their History and Culture by Jawahar Jyoti Kuli, The Misings, the Sons of the Nature by Budheswar Doley, The Mishings of the Brahmaputra Valley by Nomal Chandra Pegu, Mising Sāṃskritir Ālekhya by Brigumoni Kagyung, History of the Mishings of Eastern India by Peter Pegu, History of the Misings of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam by N. Lego. In these books attempts have been made by the writers to provide comprehensive history about the community and its transition in different aspects including religion. There are also some articles written like Mising Religious Belief: Continuity and Change by Lakh Nath Pegu. However, we do not find any comprehensive study on the religious beliefs and practices of the Misings though many of them have written about the transition in one way or the other. We also do not find any single book that has been written with special reference to the religious beliefs and practices of the Misings of Majuli Island. The area bears significance since it is mainly inhabited by Mising population while on the other hand it is famous for Vaisnavism and its satras and more recently by the emergence of Christianity. Therefore it will be interesting to look in to how the traditional beliefs and practices of the Misings have been influenced by Vaisnavism, Christianity and many other forms of Hinduism.
The *Mising* had their own traditional beliefs and practices and it was mainly based on the worship of nature. They did not have any particular Gods or Goddesses and rather believed in different spirits.⁶ Accordingly they performed number of rituals regularly from time to time to appease these spirits. Mention may be made of some spirits like *Tālēng Uie* (sky spirit), *Kum:sung Uie* (granary spirit), *Yumrāng Uie* (forest spirit), *Āsi Uie* (water spirit) and *Pējāb Uie* (duck spirit). Besides, there are other rituals which they perform for the well being of the people as well as for the prosperity of their crops. However, there are certain spirits in whose name no any rituals are performed but instead simply invoked before a ritual is performed by the community. These are primarily *Do:nyi-Po:lo* (Sun-Moon) and *Se:di-Me:lo* (Creator of Universe). Rituals to the spirits are performed by the *Miboo*. The *Miboo* is the sole priest of the community. He is also known as the ‘medicine man’⁷ as traditionally people relied upon him for any disease or illness. The *Mising* follow their own beliefs and practices at the time of pregnancy, child birth, death rituals or having a new house.

It has been found that the *Mising* never had any particular place of worship. As such their rituals were performed either at home, granary, and forest, under a tree or by the side of a river. Moreover, they did not have any prayer song and instead it was the *Miboo* who chants different *Ābāngs* (religious utterings) at the time of different rituals. There was also no any religious text prevalent among the *Mising* and instead depended on *Ābāng* to maintain their tradition.

However, after their migration to the plains of Assam many changes have taken place in their traditional beliefs and practices. A study has been made on the nature of changes in their religious beliefs and practices, influence of Vaisnavism, Christianity and the very recent attempt to institutionalize their traditional beliefs and practices by means of *Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelām Kēbāng*. It has been seen that the traditional beliefs and practices of the *Mising* witnessed tremendous changes in due course of time. Out of the above mentioned changes the influence of Vaisnavism is more prominent. However, the influence of Vaisnavism did not happen all of a sudden. It was

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⁶ ‘God’ here stands for a super human being worshipped as having power over nature, human fortunes etc. For example, A deity, an image or idol. On the other hand ‘spirit’ stands for a rational or intelligent being without a material body or a supernatural being such as ghost, fairy etc. vide The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, P.604 and P.1399

⁷ T. Taid, Glimpses, Dhemaji, 2007, p.98
the result of a close contact for centuries together between the two cultures. An explanation by Margaret Mead, M. J. Herskovitz and Jatin Mipun that the dominant culture influences over the weak culture justifies the nature of Vaisnavite influence over the Misings.8

As a result of the influence of Vaisnavism the change is so prominent in Majuli that the Misings are divided into different sections- (a) Kewaliā, (b) Bhāgavatiā and (c) traditionalists. Kewaliās are seen to be more liberal and can take Āpong and meat and there is no much restriction in the rituals performed by them while the Bhāgavatiās strictly prohibits use of fish, meat and wine and they preferably wear white dresses in times of rituals. The so-called traditionalists are also not free from Vaisnavite influence. **However, one interesting aspect of their present culture is that neither they have totally given up their tradition nor they have adopted complete form of Vaisnavism.**

The spread of Vaisnavism is only one part of the influence of Hinduism upon the community. **Different sects of Hinduism like Sāivism, Saktism and Tāntricism had its partial influence in their society in one way or the other.** Another important change is the conversion of the people towards Christianity. Many factors are responsible for the conversion of the Misings towards Christianity.

Some sections of the Misings being alarmed by the gradual extinction of their traditional beliefs and practices have launched their own movement to institutionalize their tradition with an aim to preserve it. This was started with the formation of Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelām Kēbāngh Assam by a conference held on 10th May, 2003. **The Kēbāngh have codified with some alteration many aspects of their traditional beliefs and practices as per the needs of time.** As per the codification the Kēbāngh have introduced a prayer house named Gāṅging, prayer book and an image of Do:nyi-Po:lo to be kept in the shrine. Traditionally Do:nyi-Po:lo was never worshipped nor any rituals were dedicated in their named rather they were invoked in every ritual.

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8. Jatin Mipun, *The Mishings (Miris) of Assam*, New Delhi, 2000, p.3
Comparison of the Misings has also been made with the neighbouring communities of Ahoms, Chutias and the Deoris. It has been found that all these communities had their own respective traditional beliefs and practices. However, in due course of time all these four communities got gradually Hinduised. As a result many of their traditional beliefs and practices are on the verge of extinction. Of these the Ahoms and Chutias have almost lost their language and many of their other practices are being preserved only by some section of the community and that also in a very thin manner. However, in comparison to them, the Misings and the Deoris have been able to preserve it in a much better manner. The uniqueness of the Misings lies in that out of the four communities only they are under the grip of Christianity in recent years.

Thus the present nature of their religious beliefs and practices can be best described in the words of Nomal Chandra Pegu, ‘the religious activities of them (Misings) appeared to be curious mixture of Vaisnavism, Saktism, Animism and grains of Tantrism, conceived and adjusted according to the dire necessity of their spiritual uncertainties.’

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