

A Study on Traditional Beliefs of Missing People with Special Reference to Folk-beliefs of Birth and Death

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Abstract:

North East India is replete with ethnic groups. The Misings are one of them. This tribe is the second largest population of Assam. Primarily, they inhabit in the riverine areas of the upper Assam districts namely Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Majuli, Biswanath, Golaghat etc.. Besides living in most of the districts of Upper Assam, they have been living in parts of Arunachal Pradesh who have made unprecedented contributions to the formation of the larger Assamese nation for a longer time. Traditional practices and culture are integral part of their social life and livelihood and as such these revolve around all the festivals and rituals of the tribal community. The Mising people have the belief of simple lifestyle and traditional agricultural practices. The food potential of the Mising living in rural life is their ethnic specialty.

The paper will attempt to bring various aspects of the Mising society and their beliefs into the study through the discussion paper.

Keywords: tradition, folk-beliefs, birth and death, deathlore, Mising culture.

1.0 INTRODUCTION:

Assam is a multilingual state made up of a multi-ethnic community and community population. The Mising, an indigenous tribal community in the state of Assam is recognised as a Scheduled Tribe under the provisions of the Constitution of India. With a total population of 6,79,824, inhabiting in the districts of Northern and Eastern Assam viz. Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Sonitpur, Biswanath, Golaghat, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia and also in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Since ancient times, the migration of different communities has been taking place in this evergreen terrain. As a result, the land of Assam's socio-culture and civilization has got a distinct identity. The present population has been created in the combination of the five human species namely Nardik (Arya), Mangolayad (Kirat), Mediterranean (Dravidian), Proto-Australoid and Negrito. According to Grierson, 'Abor, Miri, and Dafala are Assamese names used to refer to the people living in the hill ranges between Assam Valley and Tibet.' The Misings were initially known as 'Miri' in the public community. But later they became known as Mising. It is not known exactly when and how the name 'Miri' took place. The first application of the word 'Miri' in Assamese literature can be found in the writings of the Srimanta Sankardeva written in the 'Srimadbhagawat.'" The Misings were formerly known as Miri. Religious books, Ahom history, ethnic texts, and government documents mention Mising as Miris. But it is remembered that the word Miri does not only refer to the Mising or that the word Miri is not synonymous with the word Mising or not all the 'Miris' are Mising. The term 'Miri' does not distinguish between mountainous and plains people and the word Miri explained the hilly people living mainly in the territory along this geographical boundary from the eastern part of the Himalayas to the plains of Assam in the south, especially to the border of the vast Brahmaputra Valley in the east and from the

Dihang Valley to the end of Darrang district to the west. E.T. Dalton mentioned that "For a long period under the Assam Government the Miris managed to keep themselves the entire trade between Assam and the Abors ; as being thus the only medium of communication between the two peoples, they obtained the name Miri, which means mediator or gobetween.

2.0 SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

The heritage of folk beliefs and their traditional social life of ethnic Mising people. This ethnic group has a systematic discussion of their living system, and folk beliefs on how a mother gives birth to a child, deathlore as well as their contributions to the socio-economic sphere of Assam.

3.0 METHOD OF THE STUDY:

The researcher adopts descriptive as well as analytical method and data are collected in this paper is primary and secondary sources. Alongside the descriptive method for theme analysis, and field based (data collection) method has been followed revealing key theme findings.

4.0 SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE:

The future of a nation depends on the economic development of every caste and community. Mising people who believe in simple living, traditional farming practices, etc. seem to be lagging far behind in socio-economic aspects. The financial condition of the Mising, mainly settled on the bank of the river- adjoining areas, flat areas, etc., depends on the natural farming, animal husbandry, and general trade. They mainly grow rice, mustard seeds, potatoes, etc. The agriculture of the Mising affected by floods and erosion depends on nature. The economy of the Mising can be divided into three parts which are dependent on actions. They are agriculture (permanent or temporary practices), animal husbandry, and hunting." The Mising people mainly cultivate paddy in agriculture. They cultivate the two varieties of rice 'ahu'(autumn) and 'shali'(summer). When the shali paddy ends in winter, they cultivate honey grains, mustard, and potatoes. Generally, it is cultivated in wastelands, furrows, etc. The Mising help each other a lot in farming. Besides agriculture, animal husbandry is another important aspect of the economic viability of the Misings. They take care of the animals that are used for food, worship, and agriculture. Pigs, chickens, ducks, goats, cows, horses, etc. are some of these domestic animals. Fishing in rivers, canals, and lakes is an impeccable interest of the Mising. Mising people living on the banks of rivers and tributaries can be seen fishing collectively.

5.0 LIVING SYSTEM:

The Mising are socially beloved tribes. Their social customs, policies, and rules of living in a joint family system are very strict. All the family work is carried out with the advice of the senior and the chief of the house. The heads of the Mising family are always busy with their own work from morning till sunset. From rearing domestic livestock- pigs, chickens, ducks, etc., to transporting their essential clothes in the loom, to the upbringing of their children-all the Mising housewives also do it very carefully. The Mising people traditionally follow the religion of Donyi Po:loism (worship of the Sun and the Moon). In the Brahmaputra valley, the Misings have undergone a process of acculturation. The traditional priest of their faith is called a 'Mibu' who also acts as a healer. Mibus are supposed to be born with special powers of communion with supernatural beings. While Mibus are on their way out amongst the Misings owing to the introduction of modern education and healthcare amongst them, propitiation of supernatural beings continues to mark their religious life.

Nabin Chandra Sarma has divided the folk beliefs prevalent among the various ethnic groups of Assam as follows : Religious folk beliefs, Animal folk beliefs, Bird folk beliefs, plants and flowers. Folklore is divided into miraculous or heavenly objects, human body and behaviour, months and dates, travel, food and miscellaneous or mixed folk beliefs. This discussion attempts to discuss various aspects of the birth and death of the Mising society.

5.1 Folk beliefs related to birth:

Many customs and traditions are there followed by pregnant women of other ethnic groups in the Mising society. For example:

The parents must follow certain rules during the period from the time the child is conceived until birth. For example, thinking bad things and, killing animals are forbidden. There is also a ban on killing poultry in the daily diet. The mother-in-law also counts eggs, thinking that it is bad for the unborn child. The father does not tie the seeds for fear that the mother will suffer during childbirth. The mother does not tie-goats in grazing field etc. for fear of the pulse twisting. Pregnant women are forbidden to pass over any cow or other altar. This can cause pain in the mother's veins during delivery. A woman cannot give birth even if she is in labour pain if she commits sin. The mother will be able to give birth to a child only when she confesses her sin, if any. During pregnancy, if a woman crosses a rope tied to a cow; it is believed that this causes the 'pulse' of the unborn child to twist in her womb.

If a pregnant woman or her husband kills a snake, the unborn child may have a snake-shaped mouth or a snake-like tongue. It is believed that if a pregnant woman or her husband chases the animals away or breaks the wings, tails, etc. the unborn child can become deformed.

Women who give birth to a stillborn child are forbidden to eat meat and fish for a month from the day of delivery. Such mothers should take a bath five consecutive times without taking breath in the water of the river or pond with their husbands on the first day of delivery, and must leave their wet wears on the banks of the river or pond and come home without looking back. This preventive magic is performed to prevent the rebirth of dead children. If a mother has to eat fish without performing this magic, she can eat the fish only after digging a hole or pouring water into a large bowl keeping a fish there in the bowl or the pond must jump and catch the fish. This magical ritual is performed to prevent the spirit of the dead child from coming back with the fish. There are certain beliefs that determine whether the unborn child will be a boy or a girl. The shepherd boy says the name of the pregnant woman and brings a 'birina' leaf and two boys hold it at both ends and hold it evenly. If the leaf is straight without fiber, the pregnant woman will give birth to a boy and if the leaf is fibrous, the pregnant woman will give birth to a girl.

After the birth of a child, a child who is pregnant again without menstruation is not allowed to go outside when the clouds rise; Lightning might strike such people. A woman shall not steal ginger or garlic from another man's garden; this causes the woman to give birth to a baby with stiff limbs that cannot move. This is their prenatal ritual.

After the birth of the child, colored threads are tied to the hands and feet. The tied thread on the hands called 'lakjin' and the feet is 'lejin'. They are tied to make the new born baby away from evil eyes.

In the Mising community, mothers should not walk on the roads used by others. They are not allowed to cook on the stove where others cook. Therefore, a separate wall is cut for her, a temporary door was removed and a stove is set up. The mother should take a knife or scissors with her when she takes a bath, and keep a handful of musterseeds and a knife in the baby's head rest. This will prevent the mites from causing any harm to the mother or baby.

Again, to relieve maternal abdominal and body pain, hot ashes is tied in 'tarapat' that is gently rubbed on the abdomen and massaged. This is done for five days from the day of birth. The period from the birth of the child to five days is called 'Abayam' or 'Gena Loga'. On the fifth day the mother is purified with her child. On the day of cleansing, the young children of the village are called and fed with offerings. The village elders bring sacred water and give it to the parents of the children to purify them. It is forbidden for the parents of the child to eat with others until they are cleansed. The custom of shaving the hair of

the newborn on the seventh day was traditional but is now uncommon. Only after one month in some areas there is a tradition of cleaning the house by making 'Shantipani'. The mother and the family can be completely cleansed only when the new moon appears.

The village elders or parents also lead in naming the newborn. In the past, names were given in relation to the time of birth, but now, under the influence of electronic media, names are given with Western influence. There are also names given to newborns according to their body colour, temperament, etc. There is no custom in the Mising society except for naming children.

In the Mising civilization that developed on the banks of the Brahmaputra today, the Misings were influenced by Vaishnavism and converted to Hinduism like other ethnic groups in the plains. These Misings perform traditional rituals and rituals related to birth and death.

5.2 Folk beliefs related to death:

In Mising society, when a person dies, certain rituals are performed at the house of the deceased. However, not all the rituals that are followed at the death of the elderly are followed at the death of young children. When an elderly person dies, the family plays the traditionally preserved 'lénong' (bar-kah).

When they hear the sound of 'lenong', they know that someone has died and arrive at the house of the deceased with a package of 'apong' in their hands. Everyone washes the deceased and puts on new clothes. They rub perfumed oil on their bodies, comb their hair and put it in a new 'émpu' (Naga-Dhari). After death, the toes are tied together with a string. Everyone together worships the dead. When an elderly person dies, the whole village becomes untouchable. Therefore, no one in the village shall work in their paddy field and weaving on that day.

As soon as the deceased is taken down from the shed, the family members also go down to the ground and remove the stove. The body is wrapped in cloth and Naga blanket and carried on a canoe for burial. There is no practice of cremation, only the practice of burning. However, the land is first bought from Ai Basumati. The hole is usually seven feet long and three feet wide and about five feet deep. At the bottom of the hole and on both sides, bamboo poles measuring five feet are placed and the dead body is placed on top. The wealthy also bury them in 'rungkog' made of planks or boats. Before the body is placed in the hole, the body is turned to the left five times. Before the funeral, a thread carefully cut and, incense and cherekiare also returned and the threads are occasionally stirred to mark the end of the life cycle of the deceased. In the pit, the person performing the funeral first puts a piece of soil with his left hand. After him, everyone gathered at the cemetery throws soil into the pit. The man who is to perform the funeral puts the last clay in the hole and says, 'We have not killed by beating you. Turn your back on us, and go to your own place. The hole is made into a semicircle and the clothes used by the deceased are placed in it. They build a beautiful small house of thatch and bamboo in the morgue and fence it around the house and spread clothes on the walls. Meanwhile, it is forbidden to look back when returning from the cemetery. Looking back, it is believed that the soul of the deceased comes with it. The people wash their feet outside, walk three times over the fire in the courtyard with wet clothes and put on dry clothes. The Misings believe in reincarnation. According to that belief, they turn around and climb up to the roof to check the new stove. The deceased is believed to have rebirth according to the footprints on the stove in the next life.

Like the Vedic customs, there are three steps of purification of the dead in the Mising society. The funeral of the first deceased is performed on three days or five days. 'Dadgang' and 'Uram-amin' are then performed. For the first three days, the family members of the deceased are forbidden to eat 'jola', 'bhaja-pora', 'tengga', etc. After three days, the village elders are invited and the initial

purification is performed. It is called the 'Bululentsunam'. This is followed by two rituals, 'Uram Apin' and 'Dadgang' respectively. There is no fixed time for these two events. The ceremony is held depending on the time and financial situation of the family of the deceased.

Before the 'dadgang', relatives, friends, etc. of the deceased may give 'Uram Apin'. In this ceremony, the persons associated with the deceased, the young men of the village and other associates are invited and fed rice.

If a family is to hold an 'Uram', thread is tied itself in the pig's stomach, members of the family will have stomach ache or dots of blood like spots can be seen on the walls of the house.

'Dadgang' is the last rites of the deceased. All the villagers and relatives are invited to this ceremony. In 'Dadgang', an altar is built on the west side of the house and the offerings are given with their left hand. Along with the deceased, the offerings are given to the forefathers so that the soul of the deceased can live in peace with the souls of his ancestors in the afterlife. Only after the 'Dadgang' is performed they can perform the shraddha, wedding etc.

In addition, there is still a tradition of folk beliefs in the Mising society. Some of the folk beliefs prevalent in their society are as follows:

In Mising households, red yarn is not allowed to be kept in the 'miram' (fire place). It is unlucky. When a member of the household travels to a place or goes to cut wood or trees, before or after the journey, he shall not cut the yarn, kill chickens, pigs, etc. until he returns home. They do not burn wood from trees that have been struck by lightning. If it is done, lightning strikes the house. The Misings believe that the poles used to bridge the rivers should not be burnt, which causes back pain.

No one should hang on the poles while lightning, otherwise lightning will strike the poles. When it thunders, the bran of muster seeds should be burned in the fire. Pigs slaughtered for rituals or public festivals have canal-like spots on their livers called 'Aag' means morgue. In other words, such stains are thought to cause death. It is also believed that the distance of the spot from the core of the liver can be used to determine whether the mortuary is from home or abroad or from a village or far away. A thin scar anywhere in the liver indicates that a life-threatening illness or accident has passed. If there is a slight cut, there is a fear of humiliation from society or family. There is also a risk of fire if there are signs of wrinkles.

Fire fly should not be touched; 'Apang' becomes sour if caught. When cutting the bamboo in agriculture, it should be cut in two pieces; this should not be cut into three pieces. When cut into three pieces, one piece is eaten by the 'titikiri' (a bird) and the other two pieces are revived by joining. A man should not be beaten with household item if beaten, he will be eaten by tiger.

They should not eat the seeds or seeds left for sowing, as this will cause the planted tree to dry up or be burnt if it bears fruit in the future even if it survives. Birds, especially crows, are not allowed to defecate on humans; doing so, especially black stools, is ominous. Two people cannot share a pepper ; Doing so will damage the relationship between the two in the future. If one has to give a package of peppers as a sign of love, add salt. Otherwise, affection is disrupted. People cannot see an empty vessel in the morning or while travelling; nothing is accomplished during the day.

Many of these folk beliefs and customs have been traditionally practiced in the Mising society.

6. CONCLUSION:

The Mising people are an integral part of Assamese society and culture who leads a simple life. They have been living in the plains of the Assam since ancient times and have used the Assamese language as

the medium of education for various reasons. The Mising society is strongly influenced by the confusion of Sanskritization, Westernization, and modernization but is quite rich in socio-cultural.

However, this study will pave the way for future research studies and reveal new aspects. People are seen practising both their traditional religious practices along with the Vaishnavism way of life. For instance, they consume traditional drinks and pork during festivals and in different occasions. Their religious life in the valley has thus assumed a fully syncretistic character, as it were, and it has given them homogenous characters of both animistic Donyi- Po:loism and Vaishnavism. Following such tradition of folk beliefs, rituals, rites and customs, the Misings are living with pride. This study will create new paths in the future.

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