

Age old Traditional Beliefs of the Mising and its Challenges

Darika Pegu¹, Dr. Bibha Devi²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Mahapurush srimanta sankardeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon

²Supervisor, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Mahapurush srimanta sankardeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon

Abstract

Mising is one of the ethnic groups inhabiting in Assam. They belong to the Tani group of language. Tani refers to a cluster of Tibeto-Burman language situated at the eastern end of Himalayas, in an area spread on four sides by Tibet, Bhutan, Assam and Burma. The Mising community is recognized as a schedule tribe by the constitution of India in 1950 as 'Miri'. The Mising were earlier called 'Miri' but they themselves preferred to be called as 'Mising'. It has its population of 8 lakhs approximately according to 2011 census. The Mising in Assam is observed to be one of the most influential tribes assimilating to different culture, typically the Assamese and others thereby facing lots of erosion in different cultural fields. It is observed in religious belief system which is a mixture of traditional belief and Hindu. They have been undergoing challenges including cultural erosion, marginalization and environmental threats since putting their foot in the land of Assam from the 12th century onwards. This paper would try to look into the challenges faced by this particular tribal group called Missing from the religious perspective in the 21st century.

Keywords: Mising, traditional beliefs, religion, cultural erosion, marginalization, environmental threats, challenges.

Introduction:

Mising is one of the ethnic groups inhabiting in Assam. They belong to the Tani group of language. Tani refers to a cluster of Tibeto-Burman language situated at the eastern end of Himalayas, in an area spread on four sides by Tibet, Bhutan, Assam and Burma. The Mising community is recognized as a schedule tribe by the constitution of India in 1950 as 'Miri'. The Mising were earlier called 'Miri'. There are different views and opinions regarding the origin of the word 'Miri'. According to Dr. Numal Chandra Pegu, the word first appeared in the '*Dainik Asomiya*' an Assamese daily, where he stated that the word 'Miri' derived from the word 'Mirgo' (Hunter). It is believed that *Miri* were expert hunters. Colonial writers, including Sir Eward Gait, the author of *A History of Assam*, (first published in 1905) believed that the word *MIRI* meant a 'go-between' and that the Misings were called *MIRI* because they had been acting as go-between for the administration as well as the people of the valley and the Adis since the days of the Ahoms. The word 'Miri' has got a mentioned in the work of Mamang Dai, '*Legend of Pensam*' in which she referred as 'Miri'. According to her reference, 'Miri' is referred to as 'Priest' who performs all sort of religious rituals among the Adi community.

The Misings after migrating to the plains of Assam had ventured into coordination with the Indo-Aryans and Sino-Tibetan racial groups in the medieval period. Since then, the Misings life style begun to change. In the case of religious beliefs, the Misings were influenced by these two racial groups. The Indo-Aryans were the propagators of Bhakti movement who were purely vegetarian whereas the Sino-Tibetans were non- vegetarian. The Misings adopted the culture of both these two racial groups and continued the religious practices till today. This process has led to the Mising becoming highly bicultural and bilingual. However, they have not completely given up their original culture which still exhibits some of their original cultural traits as a mixture in their beliefs and behaviours.

It is mentioned in the overview of this seminar outline, the navigation marked by rapid globalization, environmental challenges and social transformation and the relevance of indigenous perspectives which has become increasingly evident. It is fortunate or unfortunate, the Misings, one of the second largest tribal group in Assam, has been undergoing challenges including cultural erosion, marginalization and environmental threats since putting their foots in the land of Assam from the 12th century onwards. This paper would look into the two aspects- Challenges and the opportunities in the 21st century.

Rationale and significance:

The following points would be the significance of the research:

1. To study on the age old traditional beliefs and practices of the Mising.
2. To study on the challenges in the modern period.

Research questions:

The main question of the research would try to address “To what extent the Mising are able to preserve and protect its age old traditional beliefs”

Research methodology:

The study would used intrepretative method.

The data collection would be done through primary and secondary. The primary data would be collected from the elderly people and the practitioners of the age old traditional beliefs and the educated elite who are interested in the preservation and knowledge of its beliefs system. The secondary data would be collected from the text and books written on the related topics of both the community as well as other communities.

Review of literature:

The following books are reviewed to find out different religious practices of the Mising community with its challenges and continuity.

Kuli, J.J (2014 2nd ed.) “*Mising Folklore*” is an attempt to piece together folklore materials. It has given more emphasis on the folk songs and folk tales only and other related folk materials has not been mentioned in the book. There is mentioned of few religious practices but not mentioned with the respective spirits or deities. So, there is much scope to investigate and study in this field.

Doley, G.K (2022), ‘*Mising-Myths legends and Folktales*’ Rahul offset printers, a collection of Mising folktales, myths and legends. In those writings picture of *Mising* culture, migration, religion and traditions have come into light and the functions of *Mibu* and the analysis of *Abang*, that is, the oral devotional text prevalent in the *Mising* community have been highlighted but the book lack an in dept

analysis on folktales, myths and legends. The book also has given information about the Mibu and Mibusim but the challenges are not clearly mentioned. So, there is much scope of investigation and study in this field.

Padun, N (2022), "Mising Ni:tom Mising Lokogeet Mibu-Miri A:bang" is a book on the Mibu a:bangs of few Mibus and the collected version of the A:bangs by many Mising educated elite. In this book, few Mising religious practices like Dobur, Po:rag, Ali-aye ligang festivala are mentioned by the challenges of the modern period and the cause of lack of Mibu is not mentioned.

Padun, N (2021), "Abotani Upakyan" is a book on a:bang from its evolutionary to the creation of human. In this book, the creation of mibu is mentioned but the preservation and protection of the Mibu is lacking. So, there is much scope to investigate on this field.

Sarma, N (2006), "Oral songs of Tribal Communities of Assam" is a book on collection of tribal songs of the north east where few Mising folk song are incorporated. Here, the a:bangs are mentioned but the creation or the importance of the Mibu is not reflected.

Doley, B (2019), "Gompir Paríng (Root of words)" is a book a:bang, kaban, oi:ni:tom, Mibu, Mising weaving culture, festivals like Ali-Aye-Ligang, marriage system, social system, death rituals. In this book, all the folk songs of the Mising are mentioned but the importance, creation and the challenges the mibu has to face in the modern period is lacking behind.

Doley, B (2014) "Glimpses of Mising Folk Culture" is a book on weaving craft of the Misings, festivals like Ali-Aye-Ligang, Po:rag, religious faiths and practices, place of origins. The importance of the Mibu is not clearly mentioned.

Padun, N (A few Aspects of Mising Language and Culture) is a book on birth and spread of Mising language, influence of Mising language on Assamese language, culture of the Mising community which includes the Mising community, Mibu a:bang, Mising Oi: Ni:tom and its changing characteristics. Mibu a:bangs are beautifully reflected but the challenges are not reflected.

Doley, G & A (2002), "Glimpses of Mibu and Mibu A:bang" is a book on few translation of the Mibu A:bang, the origin of Mibu, its features, collection of a:bangs by few educated elite group of the Mising community. In this book, importance is given to the creation of mibu or ordination of mibu, lack of preservation of a:bang is also reflected. There is a scope of further study in the challenges the Mibu has to face in the modern period.

Discussion:

It is known from the text of (Prof) Dr. Ghana Kanta Doley, a Mising writer that Mising culture and tradition has been eroded due to the intervention and infiltration of two totally different racial groups Sino-Tibetan racial group in the medieval period in the Indian context and the 15th century in Assam during the period of Srimanta Sankardev. The cultures of these two racial groups have directly challenged the age old tradition and culture of the Misings which exist today. So, this paper, would basically focus on one of the cultural aspects, that is, 'religious' of the Misings which can be called as 'double belong' religion. I refer this word 'Double Belonging' to the only section of Mising people who practices the 'Keol Dharma' influenced by Bhakti Movement in Assam which was led by Srimanta Sankardeva. The 'Keol Dharma or religion' which is an offspring of Vaishnavism has the influence of both the Sino-Tibetan racial group and the Vaishnavism among the Mising people. The former preached about making sacrifices in the name of offerings to different deities and the later is totally vegetarian who preached about abolition of life sacrifice in the name of God. Besides, it preach to believe in one,

that is, Supreme Power. These two practices, one is ‘animal sacrifice’ and the other ‘non-animal sacrifice’ can be observed in the religion followed by the Mising by the same people, in the same puja and in the same family. So, a mixture of age old traditional belief and influenced culture can be observed in the Mising tribe who follow the ‘Keol Dharma’.

Age Old traditional Belief system in the Missing Tribe:

As per the myths, legends, folktales and folk songs, it is clear that the belief system of the Mising tribe is animistic and supernaturalism. Their religious beliefs system is based on three major belief systems. They are (i) *About the creator of the universe*, (ii) *Existence of Spirits and deities around habitats and* (iii) *About the human soul*. The creation of the universe took place during the **Ké:yum period**. **Kéyum** is the beginning of the universe, the beginning of the past, the unthinkable, the un-manifest, the formless, the eternal, the infinite, the great emptiness. There is no answer to any question about **Kéyum**. The Miri (expert singer/Priest) while initiating the A:bang refers to the unfathomed period of the past of the remotest past as **Ké:yum ké:ro**. he says-

**“Ké:yum ka:mangé ya:yang délo,
Kéyum sumbumé ya:yum dungai,
Kéro tatmangé ya:yang délo,
Kéro tatingé rí:ring dungai”**

(Borang)

Gist:

*“There was only darkness then,
Only darkness prevailed everywhere,
There was no sound then,
Only silence prevailed everywhere”*
(Self translation)

Existence of Spirits and deities around habitats:

The Misings believe in the existence of benevolent and malevolent spirits and deities which are begotten by **Pédong A:né (rain Mother)** and accordingly different rites are performed in the name of worshipping them by making animal sacrifices. The malevolent spirits called **épom** is believed to be originated from **Robo**, the elder son of **Nibo** who originated from **Pédong A:né (Rain Mother)** and the other deities are begotten by **Pédong A:né**. The Misings believe that it is the malevolent spirits and deities who inflict sickness and unfortunate in the family and in order to satisfy and appease those malevolent deities different kind of rites are performed otherwise the other spirits and deities are not worshipped for they believe that they are always sympathetic towards them. Do:nyi and Po:lo created by **Se:di Me:lo** is considered as God and Goddess respectively and they are the Seen God and Goddess and it is considered that **Se:di Me:lo** has bestowed upon him all the responsibilities to look after the lives on the earth. Therefore, Do:nyi Po:lo is considered as the Supreme Power. Therefore, Misings worship **Do:nyi- Po:lo**. But the formal worship of **Do:nyi Po:lo** is a recent development in 1960s and has turn into a religious form among the Mising society which is known as **Donyi-Poloism**. This **Donyi-Poloism** had is rooted in the **Tani** group of people inhabiting in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

The Mising believe these spirits and deities have their own space of habitats. The habitats are (i) *Taléng Among (Heaven)* (ii) *Dong Among (Eatrh)* and (iii) *Uyu Among (Hell)*. The Mising believe that *Taléng*

Among (Heaven) is the space of the Benevolent Spirits, *Dong Among* (earth) is believed to the space of Malevolent Spirits who seek worships and offerings from human beings believed to be residing in the forest or big trees and *Uyu Among* is the space of Human Soul after death which sometime seek worships and offerings. Accordingly different rites are performed in the name of those spirits and deities among the Mising community.

The rites or rituals performed in respect to the spirits and deities among the Mising are like-

Taléng Among Uyu ‘rite’ :

Rites performed are *Taléng Ui:*, *Rokpung Ui:*, *Atér Ui:*, *Dangoriya* or *Rutum Ui:*. Gods, Goddesses are *Se:di-Me:lo* (Supreme Creator, considered as ‘Brahma’), *Do:nyi (Sun)*, *Po:lo* (Moon), *Karsing kartak* (stars) and *Benevolent Spirits*. *Koje yango* (Goddess of wealth and fertility), *Kiné Na:né* (Goddess of land beneath earth), *Yidum Boté* (God of wind)

Dong Among Uyu :

The rite is performed for the spirits or deities are like- *Pejab Ui:*, *Yumrang Ui:*. Spirits and deities are *Bíri Blag* (spirit of water), *Dí:mu* (deity situated on the top of a mountain), *Nomgu Boté* (regulator of diseases, poverty and suffering), *Lé:mug Boté* (a terrifying deity who came to the earth in the form of storm, thunder, bolt cyclone etc), *Banji-banmang* (a blood thirsty and life-destroying deity, *Ni:ji Ni:pong* (a deity in forest), *Médéng Moné* (a conspiratorial moving deity, killing, looting tactics are found in her) and many other malevolent spirits and deities.

Uyu Among Uyu :

This is the worship of souls of the ancestors. The Mising people believe in the existence of life after death. The Mising community have the belief that there is another world when the soul goes away from the body of a person. They believe that it the body which die but not the soul. That is the reason behind why the Mising people perform a puja called *Pindo* which is only mend for the soul that have gone away from the body. Therefore, after the death of a person, the Misings perform three level of death rites for the salvation of the soul *first- Tiloni*, *Second – Usi* and *third- Dodgang*. It is believed that after these death rituals the soul find solace with their ancestors. But it is believed that sometimes these souls turned into malevolent when the traditional system of respecting and honouring is not done to them and inflict various kinds of sickness, diseases, suffering, disappointments, misfortune, deterioration etc in the family. So, in order to appease those souls different kinds of rites are performed. The rites are like- (i) *Ui To:nam* or *Ui To:sag* (ii) *Ui Ipag* or *Ui Ipung*. *Ui To:nam* or *Ui To:sag* is a kind of gift to *Ui I:pung* or *Ui i:nam*. In Mising tribe, the *ui:s* like the forefathers are often depicted as benevolent celestial beings who act as intermediaries between earth, Heaven and God. It is observed in the pujas of the Mising that the priest invokes the names of the forefathers and asked them to communicate Gods for the well being of the family. The pujs of the Misings have two steps. *First-* The Initial step is when the priest invokes the names of the forefathers to beg for blessing from Gods. The chanting of the priest goes like this-

“O Sine mébo nolu,

Runé Piné kolok katirbilangka/kumbilangka

Sé é:rasé okolégang kumdusong

Édom ai:yopé Runé Piné kolok kobilangka

konamdé aromilo

Nom Tango yékrako biyékunéko”

Chanted by "Mongalsing Morang, a Mising Kewol Priest, village Chekai Mukh "

Gist:

"O death forefathers

Beg before the creator for this family

For what purpose this family is praying

Beg for Accomplishment of the purpose from the creator

If accomplished

You would be offered with a matured male pig"

Urom Ui :

It is performed for the souls of the ancestors of three generations. It is believed that the death souls revisit the earth seeking foods and drinks from time to time for which the Mising perform ancestral worship which is called ***Urom apin***.

Dobur Ui :

It encompasses all- Gods and Goddesses, benevolent spirits and deities, malevolent spirits and deities, and souls of the ancestors. In this rite many natural elements are mandatory. It requires about twenty wild leaves to prepare the meal for the spirits and deities, it requires sixteen *Pi:ro* plants, sixteen Kagori plants, a female black pig, nine chicken of different colours, a mibu or priest ordained by the spirit called épom.

Ali-Aye-Ligang rite:

Ali-Aye-Ligang is one of the main festivals of the Mising. It is a pre-harvesting festival. It is celebrated on the first Wednesday of the month of February every year. This day is believed to be the day when Abutani and Karmi, the first human started sowing paddy in the field for human kind. To perform this rite, it needs four *pi:ro* plants, cotton, plough instruments, taling leaves, karo leaves, white cloured fish, po:r apong, steam rice rafted in the wild leaves, white mibu shirt, white towel.

Po:rag:

Po:rag is another very important festival of the Mising. It is a post harvesting festival. In this festival a rite is performed. To perform this rite a priest called Mibu is mandatory and without his presence the festival is meaningless or worthless. In this rite, it requires nine female black pigs, nine *pi:ro* plants, nine Kagori plants, taling and kamro leaves in abundance as every step of the rite requires those leaves. It is believed that the spirits and the deities accept the offering only on those leaves.

These are the age old traditional belief system among the Misings but when they came in contact with the plains of Assam and Sino-Tibetan racial groups, they were influenced and have to face many challenges in preserving and protecting these age old traditional beliefs and practices in the modern period.

Challenges:

First- The traditional belief system of the Misings had to face challenge when they came into contact with the Sino-Tibetan racial groups in the last part of the medieval period in the Indian context during the Mughal Period.

Second: The traditional belief system of the Misings had to face challenges when they set their foot on the land of Assam where their age old religious tradition had been fractured. The Misings were influenced by many other religious beliefs system and accordingly they were converted. The majority of the Misings were influenced by Neo-vaishnavite Movement in Assam in the last part of the 15th century under the leadership of versatile scholar Srimanta Sankardeva and were converted to **Ek Sharan Dharma, Bhagawatia Dharma, Nigunaiya Dharma**. It is said that Srimanta Sankardeva appointed one Miri (Mising) youth as one of his disciple and sanskritised his name as Paramananda. According to N.C Pegu (1981:153) some Mising people were converted to **Keoliya Dharma** which is based on the tantric part of Kala Samhati which is another sect of neo-vaishnavism as early as the second part of the 19th century. This **Keoliya dharma** is found to be mixed with animism and Hinduism or age old traditional religious beliefs of the Misings and Hinduism without animism elements. It is found that many of the Mising people have completely left their age old traditional belief of supernaturalism and animism and some still try to stick to their age old traditional belief amidst the conversion. This is especially observed in the **Keoliya Dharma**. It is a mixed practice of animism, supernaturalism and Hinduism. In this **Keoliya Dharma**, it is found that mantras chanted in the pujas are diluted form. The names of Gods and Goddesses of Hindus are invoked like Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh along with the names of supernatural elements like sun, moon, se:di, Me:lo and the names of the ancestors by the same bhakats ordained by senior bhakat who has obtained five naams. It can be assumed that this section of Mising people who follow the **Keoliya Dharma** are still in one way trying to preserve their age old traditional belief along with the converted belief system in order to keep balance in favour of the changes. It is all the more very interesting to note that the same family who performed the **Keoliya Dharma** making all sorts of animal sacrifices performed the **Kirtan** which is completely devoid of fish, meat and drinks. They do it a vegetarian manner.

Third – Another challenge to the age old traditional belief is the conversion to Christianity. The Mising people who are converted to Christian are seen to be avoiding the age old tradition and are found to be adopting the western culture. They believe Jesus to be their supreme God and He is everything to them. They have forgotten the age old traditional belief in spirits and souls of the ancestors who were worshipped since inception. It is very interesting to note that their traditional name in Mising language have been replaced by the names of the western, the beautiful traditional dresses of the marriage ceremony have been replaced western dress, rites and rituals are not to say even the most important festivals through which the Misings are identified like Ali-Aye-Lígang, Amrag, Porag are abandoned. So, these are few great challenges the Mising people are facing in the 21st century. It is like this tribal group would disappear in the near future.

Fifthly: The big major challenge is due to the deforestation, cutting down of big trees, erosion and the intervention of modern technologies etc. It is because the Mising people has a strong connection with the nature and they believe that they are the children of nature. They consider the sun and the moon as their supreme god and goddess and the rain and the wind as their progenitors and the spirits and deities living in the forest and trees as their protectors. All these gods, goddesses, spirits and deities were being able to communicate with the help of a priest called Mibu who is believed to be ordained by a spirit called épom. This épom is believed to inhabit in the forest and trees. As the forest and jungles are deforested, cut down, the space for this spirit are destroyed and believed to move very far away from the Mising people. It is due to this reason, Mising people are lacking real Mibus and due to lack of real Mibu, the folk song called a:bang which is considered as ‘the only source of all knowledge and wisdom

of the Mising community' is losing its importance in the Mising community in the modern period. This would lead to the extinction of Mibu as well as a:bang in future.

Precautions:

The age old traditional practices have to be preserved and continued in the form of written tradition as it is the identity of the community. The main issue in protecting and preserving the age old traditional practices of the Mising is the Mibu. It is because Mibu and a:bang play pivotal role in preserving and protecting the religious tradition of the people. Therefore, first and foremost, training of the Mibu has been undertaken by the concern community. Although, a person may not become a real mibu but he has to be given the training to chant the a:bangs that are found in the written form. Secondly, awareness programmes on the importance of preserving the a:bang has to be conducted in every Mising dominated village telling them about the knowledge and wisdom that can be obtained for living a peaceful life. Thirdly, a special tutorial classes only on a:bang can be started by the Mising Autonomous Council of the Mising. Fourthly, it would be a best solution to preserve the a:bang if Mibu or priest are given pension scholarship among the community. Fifthly, recitation of a:bang in every rite and rituals of the Mising instead of the hindu chants of the Keol dharma which is practiced and prevalent among the Mising community.

Conclusion & Findings:

From the above discussion it is clear that the Mising community is in between the age old traditional beliefs system and vaishnavite religion. It is observed that from the study that the Mising are following two religious beliefs. One is their own age old traditional beliefs where sacrificing of animals is done to the gods and goddesses. It is also found from the study that this community believe in the existence of spirits, deities and the soul of the ancestors where different kinds of offerings of animals, chickens are made in their names. It means that they are still following their indigenous practices. The other religion is the hindu religion. It is purely vegetarian where only fruits items are offered to the gods and goddesses. Therefore, it can be said that while adopting the hindu religion and culture this tribal community called the Mising retained some of their customs and practices like burring the death bodies, sacrificing animals, believing in the existence of soul after death are retained still today. In this connection Elwine said that 'it is difficult to draw a sharp line of distinction between Hinduism and tribal religions'. Analysis of the findings also shows that mere contacts with the non-tribals through production and state formation system is not enough for Hinduisation of the tribes.

References:

1. Datta, B. Nabin Chandra Sarma, Prabin Chandra Das. (1994). *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India*. Bhabani Offset & Imaging Systems Pvt. Ltd. 7 Lachit Lane, Rajgarh Road, Guwahati-781007.
2. Borang, K. (2019). *Ekop Taktor A:bang*. Maa Digital Printing Press, Sivsagar, Assam.
3. Doley, G.K. (2019). *The History of Mising Language & Literature- Reference to Mising Agom Kebang*. Donyi Seng Publication, ward No-1, Dhemaji Tiniali, Dhemaji-787057.
4. Doley, G.K. & Doley, A. Kr. (2022). *Glimpses of Mibu and Mibu A:bang*. National Printers Doley, G.K. (2022). *Mising-Myths, Legends and Folklores*. Rahul Offset Printers, Silapathar, Dhemaji, Assam.

5. Kuli, J.J. (2014). *Mising Folklore*. Kaustaubh Prakashan, New Market, Dibrugarh, Assam.
6. Rajendran, S. (2022). *Myths and Legends from Around the World*. Rupa Publications India Pvt.Ltd 2020, 7/16/,Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi-110002.
7. Sahay, S. (2013). *Tribal Folktales of India- A study in Anthropological perspective*. Discovery Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. 4383/4B Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110002 Taid, T.R. (2013). *Indian Literature in Oral Language:Mising Folk Tales-Compiled and rendered into English*. The Hallmark, 68/1B Sikdar Bagan Street, Kolkota-700004.
8. (2007)*Glimpses*. Dhemaji Offset Printers, Mising Agom Kebang, Ratanpur, Dhemaji-787057.