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# Slavery among the Miju Mishmi: An Ethno-Historical Account

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**Abstract**
This article examines the institution of slavery among the Miju Mishmi of Arunachal Pradesh. Slavery among the tribe was a form of bondage that developed in response to labour needs, debt, punishment, and social hierarchy. Using an ethno-historical approach, the study explores the origin, sources of enslavement, social conditions, belief systems, and political and economic aspects of slavery. It also examines the forms of violence and discrimination faced by the enslaved individuals. The article further discusses the abolition of slavery and its long term effects on the descendants of enslaved.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Miju, Kaman, Mishmi, Ethno-Historical, Arunachal Pradesh

## Introduction

Throughout history, slavery has been a standing tradition in societies around the world. In the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh, slavery developed in various forms influenced by social, economic, and cultural conditions. Such a system can be understood by integrating oral tradition and secondary sources. Hence, this article adopts an ethno-historical approach to examine slavery among the Miju Mishmi of Arunachal Pradesh. Miju Mishmi, also known as Kaman, are a sub-tribe of the larger Mishmi tribe. They are found primarily in the Anjaw district and sparsely in the Lohit district of the state.

In order to understand the institution of slavery, the study uses the idea of Orlando Patterson, who defined slavery as a condition of 'social death'. He has defined three ways by which this subjugation happens, and they are: violent domination, natal alienation, and social death (Patterson, 1982). Violent domination refers to the authority exercised by a master over a slave, usually through physical and psychological coercion. Secondly, natal alienation refers to the disconnection of a slave from his families and communities of origin. The detachment forces the slave to depend on their master for any sense of connection. Lastly, the concept of social death describes how enslaved individuals become disconnected from social connections, leading to a loss of identity and often placing them in a state where they are not recognised as full members of society. These concepts provide a useful lens through which the system of slavery in Miju can be examined.

## Origin

The origin of slavery is difficult to trace. The first slave or the first slave master of the world is impossible to trace. However, the transformation of primitive communism and the beginning of private ownership had much to do with the slave owing system. Following the end of primitive communism, manual labour remained the most important source of material production. The weak came to be

dominated, controlled and dictated by the strong when society was divided into haves and have-nots. Thus, originating from the ruins of primitive communal society, the slave-owning system appears to be the first mode of production as the basic productive force, dividing the society into two different antagonistic classes of slaves and slave owners. It was not entirely the mental superiority but also the strong physical might of the owning class, which made them enslave the weaker social sections (Thakur, 2003).

Among the Miju Mishmi, slavery emerged with the need for additional manpower in the primitive mode of agriculture. The tribe's economy was primarily based on agriculture in the form of jhum cultivation. While families could produce what was needed for subsistence, the production of a surplus harvest required the use of slaves. In this context, the domination of the weak by strong and wealthy people became normalised. People who were stronger, more powerful, and richer were able to force others to work for them. This condition gave rise to a stratified society divided into slave owners and slaves. In the past, Miju society was divided into two groups or classes, the masters known as too and the slaves referred to as mungra. The too held more power, resources, and authority compared to the mungra, who had no power and limited access to resources.

**Sources of Enslavement**

Slavery among the tribe was not restricted to a certain clan or ethnic group. Rather, enslavement was largely determined by circumstances such as debt, conflict, punishment for crimes, or abandonment. It is the person's circumstances and actions that impact their social status and treatment more than solely being defined by their ethnic background. Debt often served as a cause for individuals to be enslaved. Those who were unable to repay their debts ended up in servitude. This led to an unending cycle where individuals worked for their creditors without being able to clear their debts. They worked for their creditors throughout their lives, but their debt never ended. Even if a slave passes away, his family would inherit the debt burden. Similarly, if a slave attempted to flee in order to escape both the master and the debt, they would end up making their family accountable for the debt.

The tribe was also engaged in descent-based slavery. Children born to enslaved parents were automatically deemed slaves. Moreover, illegitimate children also contributed to the endurance of slavery. Children who were abandoned by their parents were victims of exploitation, including being forced into slavery. In the past, the practice of abandoning unwanted children in the forest was common in the Miju society, and if discovered, they might be adopted, made a slave, or sold into slavery (Interview with Welalum).

**Social Condition**

In contrast to rigid segregation observed in Western slavery, the slaves in Miju society experienced comparatively less social restriction. They cohabited with their masters; shared living quarters with their masters, either in the same room or a separate room. They also wore the same dress as their masters, though their clothes were usually simpler and their ornaments fewer. Master and slave ate the same food and did the same work, except that less attractive tasks were given to the latter. Additionally, they were also able to engage in conversations with their masters. They were permitted to serve as priests, including holding the title of highest ranking priests known as kahmbrihng. They also received provisions for their livelihood, clothing, and even assistance with their debts.

Marriage was permitted only under certain conditions. Female slaves could marry if the bride price was paid by their master, while the masters of male slaves were required to provide the bride price on their behalf. However, they were restricted to choosing partners from their group. Marrying a freeborn was prohibited, and if a freeborn individual married a slave, they would be labelled as such. The tribe followed the tradition of marking individuals with a slave designation. This restriction reinforced social boundaries and prevented upward mobility.

**Restrictions and Discrimination**

The appearance of social integration hid the inequalities inherent in the institution of slavery. The slaves were not allowed to own property and were exclusively bound to work for their masters, giving all their earnings back to them. This restriction aimed to prevent them from building up wealth that might enable them to free themselves (Interview with Welalum). However, Mainprice mentioned that a slave kept pigs and chickens of their own and cultivated their own fields. He also mentioned about one of the Pul (a clan) slave owning a mithun (Thakur, 2003). H. Kri, however, mentioned that this attitude accrues only to those slaves who are good and faithful (Kri, 2008). The slaves deemed as lazy, cunning and insincere were beaten and seriously punished to the satisfaction of the masters. Such a disciplinary method adopted by slave owners illustrates the concept of violent domination of slavery by Patterson.

**Punishment and Violence**

The punishment practised by the tribe was brutal and dehumanising. One of the ways of punishing the slaves was to plug their thigh muscles or the calf muscle with a hot iron rod, and they were chained. Their ears were plugged with iron rods or even impeded. Many times, they were hanged upside down for days and beaten mercilessly with thorns and some irritating leaves (Kri, 2008). Oral histories recount particularly tragic incidents that reveal the extent of violence inflicted upon slaves.

In Phangloglat village, located in the Manchal circle of Anjaw district, a tragic and distressing incident unfolded that serves as a poignant reminder of the harsh treatment faced by those who were once enslaved. A female slave was brought to Phangloglat as a gift accompanying a bride. When she became pregnant and was unable to perform her daily duties due to her advancing pregnancy, she was considered worthless by her owner. This led to a horrifying and cruel act, as her master forcefully dragged her and cast her into the Lohit River. It is recounted that even the water deity rejected her unclean (referring to a slave) body, causing it to wash ashore. The body was, however, pushed back into the river with a piece of wood. It is now believed that the ghost of that female slave continues to haunt the village (Interview with Welalum), serving as a haunting reminder of the suffering and injustice she endured.

Another tragic incident took place with a slave named Hangelum. The narrator narrated about him being naughty and rebellious in nature. He would never listen to his Pul master. One day, they journeyed to Tibet for trade. Along the way, Hangelum strayed from his master, choosing a different path. It is said he even went to Tibet and found his way back. However, fate took a tragic turn. In Tinai village, Hangelum encountered his master. A heated argument erupted, and in a fit of defiance, Hangelum took out his blade. His master, enraged, took his blade out and severely injured both of Hangelum's knees. They carried the wounded Hangelum to Warti village, leaving him in the care of a family with promises to return. The master did send two of his sons back for Hangelum, however, with a chilling instruction: if he resists, kill him. The sons arrived at night but departed the next morning secretly, seeing Hangelum's

critical condition. They must have believed that he wouldn't survive much longer. Also, just a few hours after their departure, Hangelum breathed his last (Interview with Sokhar). These narratives illustrate how resistance was met with extreme violence, reinforcing the condition of powerlessness that defined slavery.

**Belief system**

Cultural beliefs played a crucial role in legitimising slavery among the Miju Mishmi. There was a common belief among the freeborn that slaves were inherently inferior or less intelligent. It was believed that the slaves had no knowledge of seeking freedom. The freeborn Miju's used to claim that the slaves lacked the knowledge or capability to demand freedom. The phrase "mungra mat ka-phat", meaning "the gall bladder of mungra is ruptured" was a derogatory expression used by the freeborn Miju's to describe slaves as unintelligent. There is no scientific evidence to suggest that the gall bladder is linked to human intelligence. But it was believed that since their gall bladder is ruptured, they lack intelligence; they only needed to be taught (Interview with Welalum).

**Political and Economic factors**

Economically, slavery was mixed with labour practices and the role of slaves in supporting various industries. In the Miju society, as noted by J. P. Mills, "Male slaves have greatly outnumbered females"(Mills, 1952) and were employed in various capacities, including agricultural labour, domestic work, hunting, fishing, and other economic activities. Within households, slaves, irrespective of gender, assisted the women with domestic chores such as taking care of children, cooking meals, fetching water, feeding domestic animals, and collecting firewood. While both male and female were involved in performing domestic chores, male slaves were often assigned to other forms of labour as well, such as hunting and feuds. Unfortunately, female slaves were often subjected to sexual exploitation and were frequently raped by their masters. And the children born of that intimacy were treated as slaves (Interview with Welalum).

The tribe was also engaged in the trading of goods in exchange for slaves. T.T. Cooper wrote, "The Mishmees are keen traders in slaves and knives, which they buy from the Thibetans and Khamtees in Burmah, in exchange for musk and teta" (Cooper, 1873). Enslaved individuals were treated as commodities and used as a medium of exchange between trading partners. Furthermore, slavery was not only a system of labour but also a symbol of might. A man or clan with more slaves was considered powerful, rich, and respected (Kri, 2008).

Politically, the presence and endurance of slavery were influenced by power, conflicts, and the practice of capturing individuals for ransom or sale. Regarding the enslavement of war criminals, F. P. Mainprice noted that there was no enslavement of war prisoners. He documented that none of the Mishmi 'slaves' came to their masters through war, as the Mishmis took no prisoners, but all were persons who could not pay a fine and who willingly entered the service of some well-to-do man who paid it for them and who was glad of additional labour in his household (Mainprice, 1946).

However, on the contrary, J.P. Mills mentioned the Assamese who were captured occasionally from the Khamptis or Singphos. Even one of the famous incidents of the past also points to the capture of people belonging to another tribe as slave. The British missionaries, Krick and Boury, promised Kaiee-sa Meno, the Miju Mishmi chief of Taboka, a large sum of money and a gun if he would lead them to Tibet. However, Kaiee-sa was deceived by the padres as they undertook the journey guided by someone else.

Hence, the infuriated Kaiee-sa murdered both the missionaries, plundered all their belongings and carried off their Singpho attendant as a slave (Thakur, 2003). Regarding the selling of the slave, the tribe indeed engaged in that practice. R.W. Godfrey wrote, "Raids and holding people to ransom, if not selling them as slaves, are common occurrences" (Godfrey, 1940). The slaves were sold when there were too many of them in a household through inheritance, making it difficult to care for them. Mainprice also mentioned a girl about 3 years old, who had been sold for three Bos frontalis after seizure in the course of a dispute 8 years old between Lowaso Taphlav of Tsonyoglat village and Mathaino Tamblav of Tamblayglat village (Mainprice, 1946).

**Abolition and Its Aftermath**

The British enacted several laws to abolish slavery in India. The enforcement of these laws, however, remained limited in the Frontier Tracts of Assam because it lay outside direct British administration. However, they provided shelter to the slaves who escaped into their settled territory and occasionally even paid compensation to their masters. The masters exhibited considerable unrest when their slaves sought refuge in the plains, claiming freedom under the protection of the British. The elevation of these escaped slaves to positions of authority, referred to as 'Gam' or 'chief' by local political officers, was perceived by the native tribal leaders as a significant affront. Due to this, many of the prominent tribal chiefs kept their distance from the British and infrequently made appearances in Sadiya (Cooper, 1873).

The emancipation of slaves in the state was not a single event but a gradual process. It was initiated in the early 1950s; however, a major phase of identification and emancipation occurred around 1961, followed by continued liberation, compensation, and rehabilitation measures extending into the 1970s and beyond.

Many slaves were relocated to a place, known as Poma in the Lohit District. And as a part of the emancipation process, they were recognised as free individuals with legal rights. This process also involved the assignment of surnames derived from those of their former masters because many of them no longer retained knowledge of their ancestral identities. The assignment of surnames based on former masters reflected the enduring loss of ancestral identity caused by natal alienation.

Even after its abolition, the system of labelling the descendants of enslaved people as "slaves" was common. If a freeborn marries a slave descendant, they are also labelled as a "slave". Therefore, today, to subvert this system, during marriage a few extra Bos Frontalis are given to the girl's parents to free an individual from the slave tag and this practice is known as boh thanga. After this, labelling someone as a slave is punishable by fine.

**Conclusion**

Slavery among the Miju Mishmi was shaped by economic necessity, social stratification, cultural beliefs, and political power. The slavery system practiced by the tribe aligns closely with Patterson's theoretical framework. Slavery was deeply embedded in everyday life and, therefore, its consequences extended beyond formal abolition. Understanding the history of slavery is essential for documenting past injustices and also for recognising their lingering effects.

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