



A CASE STUDY ON DWELLING SYSTEM AND FOOD HABITS OF THE MISHING TRIBE OF ASSAM.

Dr. Sadananda Payeng
Associate Professor
Department of History
ADP College, Nagaon, Assam.

Abstract: The main objective of the current study is to find out village system and food habits of the Mishing tribe of Assam. This study is based on both primary and secondary data. For primary data, the study has taken major Mishing dominated district such as Lakhimpur, Demaji, Majuli, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar and Jorhat district of Assam. Mishing traditionally live in piled house which they call *talengokum* or *changghar* (house with raised platform). It is a long rectangular type single house containing one or more living rooms. Being the river people, Mishings life revolves around agriculture and fishing. Mishing appears that they did dress better covered than their counterparts in the hills from the very beginning. Mishing tribe, though being an indigenous community, lives a simple yet strong knit community life.

Keywords: Tribe, Mishing, Dwelling System, Food Habits, Assam.

Introduction

An ethnic and indigenous community, inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley, Mishing tribe is known to be one of the largest tribal groups and early settlers found in Assam. The Mishing tribe is one of the indigenous tribes of Assam. Racially they are identified as Mongoloid and ethnically one of the group of tribes called *Adis* of the Arunachal Pradesh, who believe that they originated from the same ancestor called *Abutani* – the father of man or human race (Nyori 1993 P.2). According to Lego (2005:1) “the *Adis*, *Apatanis*, *Hill-Miris*, *Lobas*, *Mishing*, *Nishis*, *Puroiks* and *Tagins* of Arunachal Pradesh (India), *Asom* (India) and *Tibet* (China) belong to great *Tani* group of Tibeto-Chinese family of Mongoloid stock. Linguistically, they speak the languages of upper *Asom* group of TibetoMynmarese”. Lego further contends that genealogically the *Adis*, *Apatanis*, *Hill Miris*, *Mishing*, *Puroiks* and *Tangins* universally ascepts Abo-Tanias their common ancestor. The *Adi-Mishing* group *Nilo-Mibo* cover *Bomi*, *Bogun*, *Botung*, *Bogen*, *Bori*, *Bokar*, *Bonpo*, *Nilo-Loba* group of Arunachal Pradesh, *Asom* and *Tibet* (China). Thus the Mishing were originally hill tribes living in the *Siyang* district of Arunachal Pradesh where *Adis* are mostly concentrated. They have very close, physical, linguistic and cultural affinities with those of the tribes who call themselves as the *Adis*. As such, the Mishing also claim to be one of the *Adi* tribes.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the current study is to find out village system and food habits of the Mishing tribe of Assam.

Methodology of the Study

This study is based on both primary and secondary data. The study has based on secondary sources like books, article published in different journals, edited books, published and unpublished thesis etc. For primary data, the study has taken major Mishing dominated district such as Lakhimpur, Demaji, Majuli, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar and Jorhat district of Assam.

Origin of the Mishing Tribe

From both oral and written literatures it is clear that Mishing of the plains migrated from the present state of Arunachal Pradesh. Before migration the Mishing of the plains belonged to different clans or groups of the Adi tribes. At that time there was no any particular group called *Mishing*. The community known as Mishing, is the conglomeration of the different clans of Adi group which left their abodes in the hills and settled in the valley. There was no occasion for different clans to get together and move down the plain at a time. Different clans gradually migrated in different points of time and through different routs under different circumstances settled in different localities in the valley. A section of the Mishing was once called *chutiyamiri*, because they settled first in *chutiya land*. But nowhere in any historical literature of Assam it is mentioned why and when did the miris come into contact with the Chutiyas and settled in their kingdom. It were the *pagro* group of the Mishing who were at that time called *chutiyamiri* (Rajkumar:2000). There are another group of Mishing, which is known as *samoguriya*. They do not know the Mishing language. According to a folk study this group of Mishing under some unfortunate circumstances happened to kill their own men and women in a dark night while they were living in the hills. Having come to know about the incident in the next morning they had become totally upset and out of remorse the group immediately left the place and flouted down on a raft in river Dibang and landed on the bank of the river Brahmaputra in Assam. The Ahom monarch appointed them to kill a big python which swallowed many men and animals of some villages of locality. The skilled Mishing archers killed the python by a poisonous arrow for which the king settled them in a plave where there were plenty of a kind of tree called *sham*. So, they came to be known as *SamoguriyaMishing* that is, Mishing settled in the area of sham tree. Since they did not come with any women, they married some local non-Mishing woman for which they lost their own language but retained their social customs, religious beliefs and practices. SrimantaSankardeva (1449-1569) also mentioned in his *KirtanaGhosa*. (*KiratKachari, KhasiGaroMiri, JowanaKangka Goal, AsomMuluka, DhubajeTuruka, KubasMlechaChandal, AsomaMulukaRojokaTuruka*(Bhagawati:2/53). So, from these facts it can be ascertained that different clans of Mishing were already settled in Assam before fifteenth century. They came batch by batch mainly to find better land in the plains for cultivation.

Dwelling System

Mishing traditionally live in piled house which they call *talengokum* or *changghar* (house with raised platform). The platform is raised five feet above the ground level. It is a long rectangular type single

house containing one or more living rooms. Each room is marked by a fire place where children of each single family sit around in the evening time before going to bed. In case of joint family the head lives in the last room of the house where foods and drinks are generally prepared and taken. All members of the family come together and sit around the fire place of the head's room and take foods together and also discuss family matters. The house has only two entrances – one in the front and the other at the back of the house. At both ends spacious verandas are kept. The Mishing houses are constructed by wood, bamboo and cane materials and thatch for roofing. Wooden ladders are fitted in the front and the back of the house for climbing to the raised platform. One or two spacious platforms called *kare*, attached to the main house are maintained mainly for drying paddy grain in the day time and to sit and goosing in the evening in the summer time. On every fire place a piece of ceiling made of bamboo splits is kept hanging for the purpose of smoking fish and meat which Mishing relish most. The ceiling is called *perap* and another *chang* made of bamboo split called *rapterap* is kept suspending *onperap* to keep earthen jars which are used in keeing rice beer. It is important to note that Mishing regard fire place most sacred. It is constructed in the middle of the platform dividing it into upper area (*ri:sing*) and lower area (*koktog*). Important male persons are seated in the *ri:sing* and womenfolk and children and less important male persons are seated in the lower part including *koktog*. Rituals are performed only in the *ri:sing* marked off by the fire place. Members of the family also sleep only in the *ri:sing*. Thus *rising* has rituals significance and social status. The fire place must be kept cleaned and safe from damage. It is the important duty of the Mishing housewife to clean all the fire places of the house in the morning and sweep the whole platform from one end to another, every day.

Mishing house does not have any separate prayer house or room. The room where the Head lives is used a place of worship. There is also no practice of everyday prayer among the Mishing. Prayers are offered only on the occasions of performing rituals. However, the Head offers prayer alone when he goes to some distant places on some pieces of business or start sowing seeds or harvesting crops. Prayer is offered by touching eastern corner of the fire place and pouring down a few drops of *apong* in the name of family ancestor. Thus a Mishing house serves all purposes of the family such as preparing and eating foods, entertaining guests, performing rituals, and sleeping. It is a living house in all sense of the term.

Food Habits

Being the river people, Mishngs life revolves around agriculture and fishing. Wet paddy cultivation is practiced by the tribe predominantly. Rice being their staple diet is consumed thrice a day with lentils, fish, vegetables, chicken, pork. Mishing tribe grows their own food. What surprised us was that dairy products are not used at all. Consumption of milk, butter, cheese, etc. is not heard of in this tribe. The Mishing may be called voracious eaters of rice with meat and fish, cooked in curry mixing mainly leafy vegetables. They eat all varieties of fish but not eat meat of all animals. They eat chicken, pork and deer meat and avoid horse, dog, monkey, snake etc. They strictly prohibit beef. A beef eater may

be ex-communicated. Mishings do not prohibit duck and goat meats but they hardly relish them. These are not used in socio religious functions – not even entertaining a guest. A Mishing family or the village community honor a guest by killing a hog and offering its meats with a kind of rice beer called *po:roapong* (pure wine). They also prepare white variety of rice-beer but the blackish variety called *po:ro* is their original preparation which other communities using rice-beer cannot prepare.

Like any other tribes Mishings never used tea as a part of daily beverage. Similarly, they hardly used milk as food until recent past although they used to keep milk cattle for milk business. Mishings also hardly used *dal* (lentil) and other varieties of grams except black pulse and cooking oil preparing various types of food items except meat. Mishings used mustard oil only in cooking meat not in other varieties of food items. Now-a-days, however, these food items have become common to them. Many Mishing families take tea regularly instead of *apong* (rice beer) to visitor. *Apong* has become rich man's drink and rare item for socio-religious functions. It is prepared mainly for religious function in which it is a must item. Without *apong* a religious function is considered incomplete and it serves no purpose. They believe that the spirits propitiated are not satisfied without *apong*. Similarly, no social function without *apong* is significant and meaningful. Some quantity of *apong* must be served to the invitees to a social function. Thus, *apong* continues to be a cultural item for the Mishings.

Dress

Writing on Mishing dress Pegu (2005) rightly states in his publication entitled – “*The Mishings of the Brahmaputra Valley*” that it is difficult to say with precision how the Mishings men and women dressed centuries back in the hills. However, it appears that they did dress better covered than their counterparts in the hills from the very beginning. They are now found dressed in anything from shirt, pant, by man, salwar-kurta and sharees by women. Yet their traditional dress are very much in use till to-day particularly the women dress. Men folk use the same dress as non-Mishings wear. But the womenfolk wear modern as well as their traditional cloths made by themselves particularly the married ones. After marriage traditional dress called *ege* (cloth to cover the lower part of the body from the waist) and *gero* (cloth to cover the upper part from hips to the neck) are compulsory for a Mishing woman. Wearing *ege-gero* symbolizes the marital status of a Mishing woman. The unmarried girls wear only the *ege* to cover the lower part of and blouse the upper parts of the body. The girls also use a piece of cloth sufficient to cover the chest called *Ku:pok*.

All the Mishing traditional dress for men and women are home made or home spun. In the past more or less every Mishing families used to grow cotton for making cloths for its members – both male and female. Male clothes to cover the lower part of the body from waist to below knee is called *ugon* and the shirt called *gaaluk*. Mishings use different colours such as black, yellow, deep, red and bottle-green. Female clothes are made very colourful making them quite attractive. In fact, *Mishingege*, *ribi*, *gaseng* and *mibugaluk* (priest-shirt) have good market demand for their colourful designs as well as quality. Mishing Gadu is not a dress but a heavy cotton rug made for family use. But it is also wanted by many non-Mishings buyers to keep it a piece of decoration for its attractive design and quality. Thus Mishings have their own dress pattern.



Conclusion

Mishing tribe, though being an indigenous community, lives a simple yet strong knit community life. Mishings are a patrilineal and patriarchal society, which means only the male children are entitled to inherit the property. However, female children are also given property if the parents wish so. Daughters have the right over mother's clothes and jewelry. Among the Mishing people, girls are treated equally. It is heartening to know that girls even after marriage are encouraged to pursue their education and choose a career of her choice. Though the Mishing tribe is an indigenous group, over the years they have assimilated with the mainstream society and have not just accepted the development programmers and prospects but they contributed to the growth and improvement of the Assamese society. However, interestingly they are maintaining their culture which distinguishes them as a separate ethnic group still maintaining their own socio, cultural tradition, traditional beliefs and also customs.

References

- Baruah, S. et al (2007). *ChutiyaJatirBuranji, ChutiyaJatirBuranjiPranayanSamiti*
- Lego, L.N. (2005) *History of the Mishing of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam*,
Published by Ponung Lego, Jumbo-Gumin Publications, Itanagar AP.
- Lego, L.N. *ibid*.
- Gait, E.A., (Reprint – 1984). *A History of Assam*.
- Kagyung, B. (ed) (1989). *MishingSanskritirAlekhya*, Guwahati – 3
- Pegu, N.C. (1981) *TheMishing of the Brahmaputra Valley*, Dhemaji.
- Nyori, T. (1993). *ibid*.
- Nyori, T. (1993). *ibid*.
- Nyoti, T. (1993). *History and Culture of the Adis*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi 110027.
- Pegu, N.C., (2008), *MishingHokolorItibritta :EtiChomuAbhas*, in Padma Pator (ed) :
JanajatiSamajSanskriti, Guwahati.
- Pegu, N.C. (Revised-2005). *The Mishing of the Brahmaputra Valley*, Dibrugarh.
- Pegu, N.C., (2005) *Ibid*.
- Pegu, N.C., (2005) *Ibid*.
- Rajkumar S., (2000). *ItihaseSoanraChosataBachor*, Banalata, Dibrugarh.
- Roy, S. (1966). *Aspects of PadamMinyong Culture*, North-East Frontier Agency.
- Taid, T.R. (2007). *Glimpses*, Published by MAK, Dhemaji.