

## Religious Belief and Practice of Mising community of Assam: A Study

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**Abstract:** Religion is a universal phenomenon of human society. It is prevalent in each and every society in one or other form throughout ages. However, it is not same everywhere and every society. Religion is an integral part of any social system. Be it tribal or modern. In every society irrespective of its level of cultural development there exists one or other type religious system, which permits every aspect of social life. As such our knowledge about a tribal society and culture remains incomplete without understanding its religious system. The study is concerned with the religion of the Mising tribe of Assam (India). Until they came under the influence of the neo-vaishnavite movement that emerged in the last decade of the fifteenth century the Misings were totally supernaturalists in their religious beliefs and practices. Present study is an attempt to throw light on all its aspects for understanding the whole gamut of social system and its problem of the Mising tribal community.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The *Misings* are one of the scheduled (Plains) tribe of Assam. Formerly they were called *Miris* in the plains. Originally they belonged to the Hill tribes known as *Adis* of Arunachal Pradesh. The *Misings* are formed by different class of the *Adi* groups, which migrated to the plains of Assam, in different points of time from 13<sup>th</sup> /14<sup>th</sup> century. They settled in the midst of different castes and tribes of the Brahmaputra valley. Thus the *Misings* formed ethnic group of greater Assamese society.

In the plains the *Misings* adopted new mode of production, and way of life. Under the impact of neo-Vaishnavite movement that emerged in Assam in the 15<sup>th</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> century the *Misings* gradually incorporated some of the beliefs and practice of the neo-Vaishnavism in to their own religious system which might be called spiritism if not animism. The *Misings* do not believe in the existence of soul in every living object, but believe in the existence of some malevolent and benevolent spirits which they call *uei* living in the deep forests, water, high hills and mountains. The spirits are propitiated to avoid danger and difficulties of life and properties, under the influence of Hinduism in the plains the *Misings* developed the idea of Hindu gods and goddesses. They have also adopted the sects of *Kalasanghati* of neo-vaishnavism and thereby become disciples (*Shishya*) of the *Kalasanghati* Satras (monesties). As result the mode of worship of the *Mising* community has completely changed but not their original beliefs about spirits. As such they maintain the sacrificial worship which is contrary to the neo-vaishnavism. Thus now the *Misings* have peculiar religious system called *Keoliya* which is a mixture of tribal animism and Hindu neo-vaishnavism.

Of late two religious movements have developed among the *Misings* one, the *Bhagavatiya* and the other *Donyi-Po:loism*. The *Bhagavatiya* is another sect of the neo-vaishnavism which worships only Lord Krishna without any live sacrifice. It does not believe and worship any deity other than Almighty God and no sacrifice is offered in the worship.

The other movement is called *Donyi-Po:loism* which means worship of Sun (*Donyi*) and Moon (*Polo*). The *Misings* regards themselves as progenies of the Sun and Moon. Formerly they did not worship *Donyi-Po:lo* though regarded as the progenitors of *Misings* but utter their names first in auspicious occasions. Now, the concept has been developing in form a religious system. According to the principles of *Donyi-Po:loism* none should be worshipped except the *Donyi-Po:lo* and wine or food should not be offered at all in the worship.

Thus three religious systems have been going among the *Mising* now without any competition and clash. So, it would be interesting to study the present religious system of the *Mising* of Assam.

Culturally the *Misings* are in the state of acculturation. They have adopted many other cultural traits of greater Assamese society. The *Misings* have been living in the valley for more than a half millennium or so. Their habitats are surrounded by non-*Mising* Assamese communities having close social contact in day to day

life. Under the influence of the greater cultural groups, the *Misings* have adopted many of cultural traits of the later groups, which is Assamese. But at the *Misings* have been able to maintain their culture. They have improved their language to written shape. They celebrate their traditional festivals regular; observe customs in matter of marriage, performing various rituals etc. But at the same time they have also adopted many of the cultural traits of the Assamese communities. Thus the *Misings* have been living in dual cultural systems- their own and those of the other communities of the state. Thus it would be also interesting to see character of the *Mising* cultural system in the changing situation.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on inter-disciplinary approach taking into account historical, sociological and anthropological facts. It is based on both secondary and primary data. The secondary data were collected from documentary sources like books, journal, research reports, folk literature and miscellaneous papers and records.

The Primary data were collected from field observation conducted in five villages of Jonai Sub division, Dhemaji district bordering the East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. The villages were selected purposively keeping in view the historical background, size of population, types of religious practices, exposure to other religious system, proximity to non- *Mising* villages and pattern of interactions with the non-*Mising* religious people and their cultural activities.

To carry out field observation, an observation schedule was prepared and accordingly facts and presses were observed in the villages. Observation focused mainly on rites and rituals performed by the families of the villages selected.

Informations were collected from the senior members of the community regarding their views and opinions on the present religious system as well as on conversion of some fellow *Misings* to other religion.

Discussion were also held with 3-5 informative men of each of selected villages on different aspect of their religious system, beliefs and practices, problems of Hinduism, conversion to different Hindu cults, to Christianity, new tribal religion called *Donyi Po:lo* and problems emerging out of the new development in religion etc.

The data have been classified, tabulated in frequency distribution and collected and inferences have been drawn on the basis of result of stastical analysis.

## III. RESULT

The *Mising* religious system has been characterized by their animistic beliefs and practices. They still perform various rites and rituals propitiating various spirits seeking remedies of various problems and fulfillment of some objectives. They still believe that human soul turns into a spirit immediately after death person and the spirit lives in and around human habitat seeking for food and drink from time to time. The age old believe that the *Misings* are the progenies of the sun and the moon which they called *ane Donyi and abu Po:lo* respectively and invoke them on every occasion of sacred functions and oath taking in matters of dispensing justice.

Ths *Misings* came under the influence of *Kala Samhati* sect of neo-Vaisnavism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and had become *Shyshyas* (disciples) of the *Satras* (monasteries) of the sect. As a result a new system of worship emerged vis-a- vis to decline of their traditional shamistic system. In the new system only the persons called *bhakat* (devotee) could perform the religious function of community. The *bhakats* are the senior devotees who are initiated by the *Gosais* (abbots) of the *Satras*.

Neo *vaisnavism* is the cult of devotion (Bhakti). Its tenet and teaching is absolute devotion to Almighty God alone and to non else and worship him only by chanting (*naam-Kirtan*) without any sacrificial offerings. Srimd Bhagabat is its sacred scripture and *naam or Kirtan ghar* (prayer hall) is its most sacred place. Same is the basic tenet and teachings of *Kala Samhati* with only difference from the sects is that it not only welcome the low castes and tribes as its disciples but also allows them to maintain their cultural trait including food habits which other sects abhor and treated the low caste and tribes as untouchable.

Thus the *Misings* had become Hinduised and developed concepts for various Hindu God and Goddess worship some of them and celebrate Hindu religious festivals. Accordingly the *Misings* called themselves Hindus by religion.

Of late two religious movements called *Bhagawatiya* and *Donyi Po:lo* have emerged in the *Mising* community. *Bhagawatiya* are followers of the basic tenet and teachings of neo-vaisnavism. They worship Lord Krishna as the true incarnation of Almighty God and none else. Their mode of worship is *naam kitran* (chanting hymns) without any sacrificial offerings.

*Bhagawatiya* movement began in the middle of the last century as reform movement against *Keoliya*, and it is gradually spreading throughout the *Mising* community. In the present study out of the 1373 families 14% were found to be followers of *Bhagawatiya*.

*Donyi Po:lo* is the cult of worshipping the sun (*Donyi*) and the Moon (*Po:lo*) taken together. It is based on the traditional belief of the *Adis* of Arunachal Pradesh (India), that the Sun and Moon are the creators and protectors of the universe and all things in it. They also believe that they are the progenies of the Sun and the Moon; and therefore their entities alone should be worshipped and none else. Thus the *Adis* worship Sun and the Moon as Almighty God. Their mode of worship is also only chanting without any sacrificial offerings.

Apart from *Bhagawatiya* and *Donyi Po:lo* some *Mising* are also adopting some other religion like Anukulyia, Krihnaguru, Mahapurushiya, Christianity etc. showing trend of change in the religious system of the community. However, its large majority has still adhering to *Keoliya* religion. In our study 77.95% of the families of five villages were found to be *Keoliya*. When asked for the reason for adhering to *Keoliya*, which is admixture of animism and Hinduism, the respondents stated that they maintaining it more as a matter of tradition founded by their forefathers than as religious faith. Same as the view of the followers of the *Donyi Po:lo* and the *Keoliya* and the converts to other religion. Thus *Mising* religion is now in state of flex.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The objective of the study was to understand the religious system of the tribe called *Mising* of Assam. Main focus is on transition from tribal to Hindu system and its outcome.

It has been observed that the *Misings* who were hill tribe prior to their settlement in the plains are ethnocentric in religious matters. They did not give up their beliefs and practices at all despite living in the midst of caste and tribes professing various cults. Their language and way of their life were totally different from those of the other populace of the valley for which social interactions between the *Misings* and the others was not possible. The Hindus treated the *Misings* untouchable and the others as alien hill man. This sort of attitude and behavior blocked close interactions of the *Misings* with the castes and tribes. As such the *Misings* lived completely an independent socio-economic life they maintaining their original religious system intact until emergence of neo-vaisnavism in the Brahmaputra valley.

#### V. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing it can be concluded that Hinduisation of the Indian tribes does not necessarily mean complete absorption into Hindu society and culture. While adopting some elements of Hinduism and its culture the tribals retain some of their customs and practices which are based on some animistic beliefs. This is well illustrated by the present *Mising* religious system and the contentions of Elwine 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. It also needs some move from either tribals or religious groups for Hinduisation in real sense of the term. Both the group must come forward to embrace the faith by heart and soul.

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