

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS SYSTEM OF THE MISSING TRIBE OF ASSAM

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INTRODUCTION:

The Missing or Miri are one of the ethnic Mongolian tribes of Assam having their own cultural traits and their own religion. Originally they were hill dwellers and living along with the Adis in Arunachal Pradesh. They are now spread over wide range of the plains and are found in the district of North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Sivsagarh, Golaghat, Sonitpur and Tinsukia. The Mishings have been gradually assimilating themselves with the other indigenous people of the plains of Assam and their culture. They have now become a part and parcel of the greater Assamese society and have been contributing a lot to the growth and enrichment of the Assamese culture especially in the field of religion.

OBJECTIVE:

To provide an in depth analytic of the religious beliefs' and practices of Missing tribe of Assam. To interpret the processes of assimilation of Missing tribe with main stream of Assamese culture.

METHODOLOGY:

Methodology is an important part of any research work. This study is based on secondary sources. The secondary data are collected from various sources such as books, journals, and research works.

KEY WORDS :

Missing Tribe, Religion, Beliefs System , Assimilation, Assamese Culture.

MISSING TRIBE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS:

The traditional religious beliefs and practices amongst the Mishings are animistic in nature. In the Brahmaputra valley the Mishing have undergone a process of acculturation: the culture and civilization of their Assamese speaking Hindu neighbors have influenced their nature and culture extensively over the past centuries.

The traditional religious belief of the Mishings are based on three major belief systems:

1. About the creator of the universe.
2. Existence of spirits and deities around habitats.
3. About the human sole

Like the Hindu religious belief the Mishings too believe in the evolution theory of the creation of the Universe. They believe that the Universe was created by a supreme heavenly power defined as (sedi - Ba:bu (SEDI the Father) and 'Melo Nane ' (MELO the Mother) and consider themselves as the progenies of the sun (Do: nyi And i.e. sun mother) and Moon (Po : Lo Abu i.e. the moon father) who is regarded as the symbol of the creator and protector of saviour who is always with us. The Mishings regard these deities as the highest divine figure and as such consider them to be omnipotent, omnipresent and always benevolent to mankind.

Therefore the blessing of these deities are invoked on every occasion of social and religious function. The Mishings believe in different supernatural beings haunting the earth, usually unseen According. to the Mishing belief the spirit whom they call 'Uie' infest the forest, river, water, ponds and other physical surrounding of human habitats. The 'Uies' are held responsible for all kinds of maladies of human beings such as death, disease, destruction, misfortunes etc.

Therefore people worship them and offer proper sacrifices to keep these spirit satisfied and gain their favour. Some of the spirit are known by their usual abode such as ' Yomrang Uie' spirit that live in the forest, 'Taleng Uie' spirits that live above the earth i.e. eternal atmosphere, ' Asi Uie' spirits that live in water and so on. It is believed that each type of spirit cause a particular type of problem. The problems caused by the spirits are detected by the 'Mibu' the traditional priest and seer of the Mishings. A concept of clan deity is also prevalent among the Mishings.

It is known as 'Gumvn So: yin.' This deity is believed to be residing in each house of the families belonging to the same clan and protecting the family from all kinds of dangers and difficulties that may be caused by evil spirits which roam around the homes and huts all the times. Therefore the performance of a ritual for the satisfaction of the ' Gumvan So: yin' forms an integral part of this tribal religion each year.

One of the universal features of the indigenous faith of the Mishings is the concept of human sole (yalo) and its immortality. They believed that soul is the life, and death is the departure of the sole from the body. The moment the sole leaves the body death occurs to it. The Mishings believe that human sole does not go away too far from the dead man's home until and unless he is prayed to leave the family for good by performing the last ritual called 'Dodgang' in which food and drink are offered to the departing sole as well as to the gathering of relatives, neighbors and friends who come to pay homage and prayer to the departing sole. 'Urom Apin' a ritual for the departed sole is performed within a month or so after the death of a person. This ritual is performed in the belief that the departed sole does not lose all the mundane desires so soon.

The desires therefore should be fulfilled before the sole departs from the earth to eternity. Besides these important major functions, a few more rituals are performed by individual Mishings families according to their own need and tradition.

The legends of the Mishings suggest that before their advent in the plains, the Mishings were animists. But after the establishment of the Ahom dynasty in 13th century and the emergence of Vaishnavism in the 15th century the Mishings like many other tribal groups of the region came under the influence of this new religion Vaishnavism. However, it may be noted that even today, the traditional pattern of worship is not fully abandoned by them. The process of religious contact made the Mishings a part of the regional culture and of the great tradition of Hinduism. In this context it can be mentioned that the Vaishnava Gossains (clergy and preachers) and Satras (monasteries) are greatly responsible for their conversion to Hinduism. Recitation of devotional songs written by Sankardeva, use of 'chaki', offering of betel nut and leaf etc. have become a part and parcel of Mishing rituals.

They had also become the so called disciples of different 'satras' of upper Assam. The adaption of Hinduism led to the emergence of a new group of priest and clergy known as the Bhakats and Satulas. Formerly the Minute or the Miri, the primitive Mishing priest was the main person to look after all Lukas and festivals. But at present the Bhakats and the Satulas are playing the role of the preachers, priests and clergy. The introduction of Hindu priest has adversely affected the position of traditional priests known as Mibu or Miri.

With the advent of Namghar in Mishing village, the 'Murong' (dormitory) has gradually lost its importance. The contact with Hinduism has helped in the growth of new religious organizations also. The followers of 'Bhagavatia' sect have formed 'Sankar Sangha' which have been playing an important role in the propagation of Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism in Assam centres around 'Namghar' (the place of worship in every village) and Satras (monasteries). The Mishings too now have Namghars in their villages and the Mishing villages belong to the different 'Satras'.

Through this process also the Mishings have become a part of the regional culture. It is noteworthy to mention that the place of primitive religion, the Mishings have adopted a religion known as 'Kewalia', Kalsanghati or Nisamalia. These sects are the popular folk level practices of Hinduism. Through these sects also the Mishings have aligned themselves with the non tribal regional peasant culture. These folk level religious beliefs and practices have helped them in adjusting their tribal practices with the local Hindu beliefs and practices.

Apart from these practices the Mishings annually perform 'Bor Sewa' collectively by the villagers in the village 'Namghar'. 'Bor sewa' is performed by 'Bhakats' with 'Satula', 'Sadhuburah' only in closed door hall at night for the well being of the entire village community. After the introduction of 'Bor Sewa' system every Mishing village has established a Namghar which was never a part of their traditional system of worshipping.

During this long period of (since about 12th century) of their settlement in the plains many more religious beliefs and practices have come into being among the Mishings. At present they worship 'Satjaniya, ' No- janiya', ' Ekois (21) Janiya, ' Jalkai', 'Ghar Dangaria', 'Aie puja' etc. which are absolutely non traditional for the Mishing. The terms designating these rituals are not Mishing but were borrowed from non Mishing Assamese communities. It is however interesting to observe that these are not a part of Neo - Vanishnavism. Some author on the subject suggest that these non traditional or alien religious functions were the outcome of the Mishing exposure to Tantricism, Saivism and other sects of Hinduism that were prevalent in the Assam in the past. The Mishings under various circumstances gradually adopted these practices. Thus, since their migration to the plains of Assam, the mishings have passed a course of assimilation and acceptance of the custom and beliefs and practices of the greater Assamese society.

Another important assimilation that can be noticed is in the growth of sects among the Mishings. During the course of time different sects have emerged in Assamese villages in general and the tribal communities in particular. These sects may be divided into Nisamalia or Kewal dharma (worshiper of Goddess or Shakti) and 'Bhagavatia (followers of the principles of Shrimad Bhagavat) as propounded by the Sankardev. The Nismalia sect (a mixture of tribal rituals and Hinduism) is known as 'Ratikhowa Dharma', 'Gupot Dharma' and ' Amaya Bhakati'. As a result of their contact with the Gosains of the Satras of Assam one can see the growth of this sect among the Mishings. The Christian missionaries in the 19th century tried to spread their religion amongst the Mishings which led to the establishment of churches in Mishing dominated areas. At present a few number of Mishing have converted to Christianity.

CONCLUSION

Thus the Mishing society is in the State of transition not only in socio - economic and political area but also in the religious spectrum. This has led to the loss of unity and brotherhood amongst the Mishing. However, a major section of the elite Mishing people are now firmly determined to preserve their religion and cultural identity.

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