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The Misings of Assam

(A Socio-cultural history from 1200 AD)

Manik Chandra Payun

The Misings constitutionally Known as Miris belongs to the family of the aboriginal Indo-Mongoloied tribes of the North-Eastern region of India. Originally they were hill dwellers and lived along with the Adis in Arunachal Pradesh. They subsequently came down to the Valley around 12th & 13th century A.D. by following the river courses. They now plain tribe of Assam and retains their mythological, Linguistic and institutional affinity with Adis and Nisis of Arunachal. After their migration to the plains, considerable changes have taken place in their ecology, pattern of adaptation, cultivation, and language, rituals, dress and house construction. Today, the Misings tribe is one of the major tribes of Assam. According to the Sunaram Panyang Kotoki(1935), Dr. Numol ch. Pegu(1956), Tarun ch. Pamegam(1972), Nahendra Padun(1972) the Mising migration from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh into the plains of Assam about the 8th centuries ago and continued to do so till the first part of the nineteenth century. In the plain the Mising how have got the name of Miris is a controversial issue. But it can be assumed that this name was given to them the non-tribal people of Assam (N. Pegu 1956:4, T Pamegam1972:4), Among the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, the priest is known as Miri of Mirin (Miboo). It is probable that non-

tribal plain peoples of Assam called the tribe as Miri after they came into contact with the priests. Pegu (1956:5) is of the opinion that the Mirin(ghost), with its different forms, is generally led by the Miri-Aboo or Miboo or Myiboo (the functional titles of priests among the Adis). The Myiboo, besides being the priest, acts as chronicler of the above tribes. As time eventually rolled on, they were bound to come in contact with the plain people of the Brahmaputra Valley who began to refer to their abode as the Miri Hills- the homeland of the Miris. This probably occurred more than six hundred years back as evident from the fact that Mahapurusha Sankardev(1449-1569 A.D) and Madhavdev(1489-1566 A.D) the two great vaishnavite teachers and reformers had referred to the Miris in their devotional writings. Later on, the Misings were popularly known as Miris in Assam. The meaning of the words Mising is interesting. The members of the tribe regard themselves Mi (men) yashing (Bright or good)=Mising which means "we are bright of good people" compared to the Mising and generally used for the people of plains.

Since the invasion of the Ahom on the Chutia (1376-1539 AD) the Mising had relations with the plains people of Assam. When they came down from the Northern hills and came in close contact with the Chutia who had a kingdom around Sadia (Capital). When the Chutia kingdom was invaded and conquered by the Ahoms (1376-1539 AD) it is said a few nobles of their families took shelter in the Mising villages and displayed fringed identity, as Mising to escape the disgrace of being molested by the Ahoms. After was matrimonial relationship between the Chutia and the Mising took place. It is evident from the fact that few Misings families still offer annual homage (Jal-panda) to some Chutia Mine (Chutia mother) in the several Mising villages. After the cessation of the Chutia rule, the area around Sadia came to under the administrative group of Sadia-Khowa-Gohain, a reprehensive of the

Ahom king, which is created by Shuhungmung (1497-1539 AD). After a sporadic conflict, Sadia- Khowa- gohain persuaded the Misings to come to an agreement during the reign of Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696 AD). According to that viral treaty, the Mising promised to help the Ahoms in resisting the others tribes who frequently attacked the Ahom Border. To that effect twelve chiefs or Gams(Baro-Gam) were appointed from some big Mising villages and ten chiefs or Gams(Dah-Gam) from other villages. The Gams thus appointed, used to draw few hundred princes of silver per annual from the Royal treasury of the Ahom (N. Pegu 1956). Thus the Mising have dentinal place in the Ahom history. Some of them held important military post as Miri Handinque (officer).

The Mising took active part in the Independent movement of India. During the Independent movement many Mising prominent person took active part. Sehida Kamala Miri, Who lost his life in this movement, dears' testimony of Mising participation in the freedom movement. After the Independence of India the Mising have been recognized as a part of the Assamese community. Excepting their tribal customs and traditions, the Mising are now-a-days part of the Assamese culture through language of production and polity.

As regards their duties, religious beliefs and practices, the Misings regards the Sun (Do:ni) and Moon(Po:lo) as their ancestors. They regard the Moon as their father and the Sun as their mother. Therefore in any ritual performance, they first recite the of Ane Do:ni (Mother Sun) and Abu Po:lo (Father Moon).It is known that the Mising are peace loving people, both men and women are hard workers. Comparatively the women are more working then men in the household and agricultural activities and look after cattle breeding (Pig and fowl) for extra income from morning to evening. The Mising are divided into two various groups through they do not strictly follow them. First they di-

vided into two broad divisions, viz Barogam and Dahgam. These two are further sub- division into Pagro, Chayengia, Ayengia, Moyengia, Damukial, Samuguria and so on. Then, the clans can be categorized according to the sub-groups. As for example, Doley Pegu clans are normally included within the Pagro sub-group and Padun, Morang, Taid, included within Chayengia or Ayengia and Regon, Payun, Payeng, Narah, pagag, Chinte, Chirang are included within Moyengia sub- group. In the sociological point of view the clan organization of the Mising is interesting. The Mising trace their clan from the name of their forefather or from the deities. According to their beliefs, there is a creator of the universe. They believe that the living beings of the world were created by a supreme being and therefore they trace their opi'n(clan) from the name of creator. They were Yumkang, Kashi, Shiang, Anbo, Bamuk, Muksheng and Shedi. Prior to Shedi, which universal name is Me:lo, nothing was created in the universe. Later on after the creation of Shedi and Me:lo several incarnations or evolutions took place. There are few clans among the Mising which came into as a result of the contact with the Chutia and the Ahoms. Some of Chutias took shelter in the Mising villages when they were finally defeated by the Ahoms during the reign of the Suhumung Dihingia Raja(1497-1539AD). Later on they married Mising girls and became Misings. The name of Chutia- Miri or Miri-Chutia is the result of those inter-community marriages. Like the Chutias, during the reign of the Ahom (1228-1826 AD) and the Burmese aggression, many Ahoms took shelter in the Mising villages and settled down permanently. Hence, many families have adopted Chutia and Ahom surnames (e.g. Konwer, Handique, Gogoi, Gohain etc). The surnames are not regarded as clan names through they use them after their names.

Among the Misings, the patriarchal joint family system is popular. Within the patriarchal joint family, there are varying de-

degrees of closeness relationships. The relationships can be seen from kingship organization of the Misings with their genealogical pattern. The Misings practice clan exogamy and tribal endogamy in their matrimonial system. Marriage within the same clan Payun with Payun, Narah with Narah, and Pegu with Pegu will never be sanctioned. Similarly, marriage is restricted within the same sub-clan also. The cross-cousin marriage is common among them. The present religion of the Mising is the synthetic of animism and Hinduism. The religion among them is known as Kewalia or Kalhanghati. In spite of the mixture, they are worshipers of Uyu or spirit. The name of Do:ni-Po:lo (the Sun and the Moon) is recited in every ritual and festival.

There are various festivals performed by the Misings. The most significant among them are the Ali-ai-ligang and Po;rag and they performed them according to their traditional customs. The socio-political structure of the Misings is democratic. Like the Pasi, Minyoung and Padam of Arunachal Pradesh, the Misings have Ke'bang (village council) consisting of village elders within a village. The Ke'bang is the supreme within the village which controls the social and political life of the villagers. Any complaint or anti-social activities are brought to the notice of it. In case, any controversy arises between two or more villages, Bane Ke;bang or bigger Ke'bang is called for judgment. The Ke'bang is held in the Murong or Public hall where all discussions are taken by elderly villagers. Besides Ke'bang, the Membir-Yame (young women and man) is another village body who helps in all social activities within the village. The head or the Chairman of the Membir-yame is known as Deka-Bora who is responsible for the maintenance of the body.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Misings have a well organized social structure with tribal characters. But as they are living with the non-tribal Assamese for many centuries, changes

have naturally been taking place in the tribal social structure.

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