

STUDY OF THE MISHING AND DEORI COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

LADE JAYANT DEORAM

RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPT. OF HISTORY
CMJ UNIVERSITY, SHILLONG, MEGHALAYA

ABSTRACT

Mishings presently living in plains of Assam were not a one single tribe, but evolved into one when many tribes from various Tani tribes in Arunachal Pradesh migrated to the plains of Assam in search of fertile land as well as in search of civilizational progress. Over a period of time, they became known as Miris as they acted as middle men between tribes of hills of Arunachal Pradesh and people of the plains of Assam like Ahoms, Kacharis etc. Miri means middle men in old Assamese language. This explains presence of many Mishing clans with different Mishing dialects as well as different levels of development.

WB Brown says: "In the upper ward of Sadiya, Deoris lived here originally and before first century they came there to inhabit the area. The people are generally called Deoris simply; the language is more properly known as Sutiya. The Sutiya language indeed, may fairly claim to be the original language of upper Assam." Gait says, "the traditional rulers of Assam do not profess to be at all exhaustive. Religious books and other old writings contain lists of many other kings, but it is impossible to say if they are genuine, and if so', who the kings were and where they reigned; and to refer to them at length would be a waste of time and space.

INTRODUCTION

The Mishing are an ethnic group inhabiting the districts of Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat of Assam state in India. There are about 16,000 Mishing people in three districts East Siang district, Lower Dibang Valley, and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. They are the second largest tribal group in North-East India, second only to Bodos in Assam. They were earlier called Miris in historical days. However, the Constitution of India still refers them as Miris.

The Tanis or the Amis are one of the early, if not the earliest, groups of human races migrating to north-eastern region of India sometimes in the past. The Tanis or the Amis are variously known to other people as the Misings, Mishimis, Pa:dams, Minyongs, Galongs, daflas, Hill Miris, Apa-tanis etc. The language, culture and traditions of these tribes are one and the same. According to ethnologists, the Akas and daflas are one in race with each other, and with the tribes of Abors and Miris inhabiting the hills coming no doubt originally from the same habitats, they are still alike in all material respects as to warrant us in calling them

the earlier and later migrations of the same tribe, the abors as the last comers, retaining more of their pristine savagery and hardihood, while the Miris have been to some extent influenced by free association with the plains and the settled habits of civilization. The intercourse between Abors and Miris is still nevertheless constant and intimate. Ethnologist group them into one unit under common appellation of North Assam brace although the collectively identify themselves as Tani or Ami, meaning "man". Scholars of various academic disciplines have unanimously held that they belong to the great Mongoloid race of mankind whose ancient civilization flourished in the upper course of the Yangtse-Kiang and the Hoang-Ho-river-valleys of north-west China. They have close connections with various human races from time immemorial and contributed to the evolution of common culture. They have however no written historical traditions of their own except some disconnected oral traditions which furnish authentic facts of their early history. The history of their early period is, therefore, obscure for us to know owing to dearth of reliable historical materials. This is also mainly owing to the deficiencies of reliable historical source, but largely to the lack of painstaking academic pursuits. It appears that the true historical period of the tanis or the Amis begins only from the time they are referred to in the historical chronicles called BURANJIS and the Vaisnavite literature of medieval Assam.

CULTURE AND FESTIVALS

Their chief festival is Ali-Ayé-Leegang, in the month of February, which marks the beginning of the sowing season. They also observe Assamese Bihu during mid-April. But recently popularity of Bihu among Mishings has decreased. Mishings follow complete rituals right from the birth of an individual to death. Pohrag and Dobur are other two major festivals observed by Mishings. They have well documented and developed marriage system though Mishings youths majorly elope. This is due to more economical reason than social custom. There are many interesting rituals among Mishings. One such ritual which has almost become extinct is, before marriage, prospective groom has to work as servant in girls house for minimum six months. This practice has almost become extinct after education has spread in Mishing society.

RELIGION AND RITUALS

Mishings are animist by nature. But like their any other Tani tribes, they believe the Sun (Donyi) as their mother and, the Moon (Polo) as their father. Recently, this belief has been organised as Donyi Polo Yelam, literally meaning Donyi Polo religion. Many Mishings has converted to Donyi Polo Yelam recently. But now most Mishings follow Hinduism along with their age old religious rituals, and there are a few Christians who follow the Catholic or Baptist faith. It has also been verified that some have converted to Islam.

THE MISHING COMMUNITY

The Mishings (Miri) are one of the major tribes of Assam in the Brahmaputra Valley. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman Language speaking group of the great Mongoloid stock of human races. The Mishings originally are hilly tribes living in the mountain ranges lying in between the East Siang, Upper Siang, Lower Dibang Valley and parts of West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Their folk literature suggests that they migrated down to the plain of Assam in search of the Brahmaputra river between the 12th and 13th century A.D. They now spread over wide range of the plain and are found in parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. In Assam the tribe mostly inhabits in Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur district and other north-east states of India.

The Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam are popularly known as 'Miri'. The word 'Mishings' is a recent term meaning "pure man or real man". According to historian Dr. N.N.Lego "The Britishers called them as 'Miri'(Priest) in the pre-independence days". The said word Mishing is self-made by the Mishings to replace the word Miri(Priest) which is derogatory word for them. The census report of 1977 estimated their population as some 2,59,661 souls.

The Mishings (Miri) have got their own traditional beliefs and custom, practices, language. Though the Mishings are comparatively small ethnic socio-cultural, group of Assam, in terms of the social, cultural, political and economic life of Assam is no less important than those of other groups. The Mishings has rich folk literature which reflects their sentiments and feelings social norms and values, historical events associated with their migration from hills to the plains as well as social, religious, political event experienced in their life.

Although Mishings (Miri) maintain their traditions including their language, some changes has come to the fore which are seen with respect to their religious beliefs and practices as different forms of Hinduism and other religions have penetrated into their culture. After all the Mishings rich social and cultural heritage contributed a lot towards the growth and development of the greatest Assamese society and culture, yet they are known very little to the people of other parts of the country. The Mishings (Miri) have been struggling to serve themselves and are trying their best to follow and adjust with the state of Assam.

Cultivation and fishing are their major occupations and they supplement their income by working as agricultural labourers. Their women are expert weavers... The Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh were hunters, gatherers, fishermen and trappers. Now the majority of them practice shifting cultivation. Recently some have taken to growing pineapple and betel nut. Some are also engaged in service, trade and business settled cultivation, spinning and weaving.

THE DEORI COMMUNITY

However, history says that the homeland of the Deoris is in the North Eastern states of India or in the east of undivided Assam. According to the book *Mataks and their kingdom*, the Deoris had their abode on the bank of the Kundil River which flows through the Sadiya (Chapakhowa) area and for this reason their Kingdom was known as Chutam in the North Eastern region of the Brahmaputra Valley.

In the book "Siva Purana", the late Ahom king Rudra Singha narrates that the Deoris were living at Chaug-Chu-Kul, Chakati-Chaliya, Laibari, Lataubari, Kundil, Joidaam, Arem- Kerem and Mamaru-Pichala (Now in Arunachal Pradesh). According to the book "Boroni Jaiminaw Swamasarnai" the Dimichiya Gonarajita whose capital was Kundil Nagar was ruled by the Deori tribe. They had an honorable and prestigious king called Patgauan or Tanugiria. The first king of Dimichiya Ganarajya was late Bisusing Borkoyo in 1500BC and the last king was Bismoksing Borkoyo who was most famous and well known for his brilliance. These days the capital Kundil Nagar of Dimichiya Ganarajya is known as Bismok Nagar due to the strong Endeavour and enterprise of the late king Bismok Sing.

It is said that in 1602AD the three main sub-caste of Deoris namely Jimochayan or Dibang-Diyongial, Midoyan or Tengapania and Luitugan or Borgoya took different temples like Midiya (Bolia Baba), Luituwasi (Tamreswari), Midi Gira-Girasi (Burha-Burhi) and Daramji (Parsuram Kundha). They had been serving the 4th sub cast called Patgayan or Tanugirian. These areas are now in the Lower Dibang Valley, western Lohit and Northern Changlang and North East Tinsukia Dist. of Assam.

The Deoris proudly introduce themselves as 'Jimo-Chhayan', meaning 'the children of the sun and the moon'. In fact, the Deoris were respected among the tribal communities as priests or worshippers.

Development of Deoris economically and socially, lies in the growth of the economy in the Agriculture and allied sectors. This has to be supplemented by small-scale industrialization concentrating in items of comparative advantage. The development has to take into consideration- the markets of the hinterland areas of Arunachal Pradesh comprising of the districts of East Siang, West Siang, Subansiri and Pakumpare. With the coming up of the Bogibeel Bridge, the market will also extend to Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Tinsukia District. The opening of the bridge over Siang River at Pasighat will open up markets of Sadia, Lohit, Changlang Dist of Arunachal Pradesh. The re-assuring factor of Dhemaji District is that it is a self-sufficient district in paddy and other products, limiting the imports to consumer products. The other note-worthy factor in the economy is that Muga rearing has developed as an important economic activity and there is tremendous scope for value-added products in this sector. With the commissioning of the Lower Subansiri Power Project, the district will become surplus in power by 2010.

However, there are certain weaknesses in terms of communication; road and rail are severely handicapped during the summer months freezing the economy for nearly 5 months every year. Availability of trained manpower and desire of the people to improve their quality of life is wanting. Entrepreneurship required in all fields of activities is lagging behind.

CONCLUSION

The Misings and the Deoris are two tribal communities of Assam in India. The Misings are the second largest tribe of Assam and reside mostly in Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat of Assam in India. A few live in and around Pasighat of East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh too. The Deoris are the second least populated tribe in Assam and are found mostly in Sivsagar, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia district and Lohit & Changlang Districts of Arunachal Pradesh. I was studying the belief system of both the communities as a part of my research thesis for my Masters. Though my focus was on documenting the religious process of both the communities and focusing on acculturation processes and revivalism in both the communities, it did not stop me from exploring the roles and positions played by the women in both the communities.

There is lot of restrictions among the women of both the communities the researcher studied. When we analyze the role of women in both Mising and Deori communities it can clearly be said that the women play a role of great importance both economically and socially. In fact in economic structure she plays a very strong role. The woman rears pigs, goats, poultry etc. which forms a great share of family income. The women participate equally in the agricultural activities also. She is involved in transplanting and also cutting the harvest in the field. She also goes and works out to earn extra income and support the family. In fact the women today have started weaving and all the products that she weaves are marketed, which forms a considerable amount of money. Thus, it can be undeniably claimed that she plays a role of great economic importance in the family. But when it comes to the roles she plays in the belief system, it views a different picture. The central belief system of both the communities revolves around the perception about the supernatural beings and their action and influence on human society and human beings. Both the communities perceive that the favours of the supernatural beings and the spirits are must for survival as both the tribes reside in very hostile environment with massive floods ravaging them every year.

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