

LIFE OF THE MISHING COMMUNITY IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH AND ASSAM: A STUDY IN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIO - CULTURAL LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The Mishing tribe of Arunachal Pradesh has been observing their own religious practice since time immemorial. Their religion is essentially stuffed with the elements of animistic, polytheistic and benefits since their existence. The changes have taken place to their religious belief with the passage of time. Their contact with the neighbouring Hindus and Christians has converted them either to Hinduism to Christianity. The continuous cultural contact with the people of these sects for several decades have brought transformation to their life. However, majority of the community still holds to their root to traditional belief system amid the forces of changes.

The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, especially the *Adis*, *Padams*, *Minyongs*, *Galong* and Mishings of Siang, Nyshis and Apatoni of Papum Pare and Subansiri districts introduce themselves as the people of *Tani* group. The people of *Tani* group believed that “*Abutanias* their mythical ancestor”¹. These people of the *Tani* group have distinctive socio-religious customs and traditions. These customs are popular among them and practiced by the community since time immemorial. The *Adi-Mishings* (same ethno-religious origin) of Arunachal believed that behind the physical existence of the objects surrounding man some abstract or unseen forces controlled their life exerting influence on all the physical and mental functioning of man². They termed these abstract forces as deities or spirits, both good and evil, physically invisible. They are possessed with supernatural power and strength. The *Tani* group of people worship regular prayer to these spirits by various means that correspond to their religious traditions.

However, in the present socio-religious context, it has been observed that the forces of cultural assimilation and acculturation have made their impact tremendously on the religious belief systems of the world communities. So, they have deep impact on the Mishing religious belief system in Arunachal Pradesh. It appears that the Mishings are more inclined to adopt the other religious cults like that of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Vaishnavism. Their cultural assimilation with the people of such other religious sects living in their area³ have influenced their life. Further the impact of transculturation is also perceptible in the religious belief system of the Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh with the revival. The *Donyi-Polosim* (traditional animism in revived form). They are now interested to worship *Donyi* (the mother Goddesses) and *Polo* (father God) and the same cult tends to be more popular among them as *Doni-Poloism*, which has presently institutionalised

The Mishings live in the geographical area of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The Mishings in Assam are recognised as dominant cultural force in Assam. In Arunachal Pradesh they are regarded as minor community. They have been leading backward life due to their lackadaisical participation with the mainstream tribal way of life in the state for long time. They have rich cultural elements including traditional religion. Unfortunately, it has got a litter exposure as no major attempt has been made to highlight such valuable component of their culture. We have a number of literatures on Mishing religious life in the context of

Assam. There is a religious and cultural similarity between the Mishings of Arunachal and Mishings of Assam, yet no available literary sources on religious life of the Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh is traceable in a composite manner. So, a study on Mishing religion as a whole in the context of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh will remain incomplete if an intensive study on the religious life on the Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh is not carried out systematically.

The study has been planned out with the following objectives.

- To know about the nature of Mishing religion.
- To understand about the traditional religious belief of the Mishings.
- To know about the process of religious assimilation and admixture with other religious beliefs.
- To find out the causes and consequences of the religious conversion of Mishings
- To analysis the nature of trans-religious movement, having impact on their belief system.

Number of books on Mishing culture and religion in context of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have been read and reread to plan out the present study. In J.J. Kuli's (2001) *The Mishings: Their History and Culture* and N.ego's (2005) *History of Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh* evidences are found on the history of origin, migration and settlement pattern of the Mishings in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. V. Kargung;s (1989) *Mishing SanskritiAlekhya*, N. Pegu's (1999) *Mishing Sakalaritibritya* and B. Dloey's (2000) *The Mishings, the Sons of Nature* give a brief description on the socio-culture elements including the religious belief system of the community. J. Pegu's (2012) *Mishing Samajar Puja Padhati* along with, Pegu's *Mishing Dharma Biswas Aru Parampara (2007)* has record on the various kinds of religious rituals and the festivals of the Mishings of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The information gathered from all such reliable literatures have helped in channelizing this study with a specific purpose. However, this study is not a comparative study of Mishing religion, in the context of Assam and Arunachal. It will only be limited to give description and analysis of the Mishing religious life in Arunachal Pradesh only.

The study is descriptive and analytical in nature and is based on both primary and secondary sources of data, interview and observation. These tools have been employed for the collection of data. Unstructured interview questionnaires were prepared to collect information as the present study on the Mishing religion in Arunachal Pradesh fall under broad discipline of cultural studies. The Mishing inhabited in the geographical areas of Arunachal Pradesh. The collection contains five important Mishing populated villages viz. Oyan, Mamshing, Gadum, Merrand Paglam located in the East Siang and Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Data were collected from the cross section of the population across the gender. The informants comprise the village headmen, NGO workers, educationists, priests, aged individuals, farmers, youths and the common people. Language was not a problem during interview and discussion were made with different groups in the study area.

From the interview of these people, certain facts have been extracted. The religious practices of the Mishings are shrouded with varieties of myths and superstitious beliefs maintained by the community through various ritualistic practices. The heavenly objects visible in the universe such as Sun, Moon, Stars and the planet cast direct impact on the minds of the Mishing people. They regard them as their 'Gods' and 'Goddesses' and worship all of them with deep devotion. *Doni-Polo*, *Sedi Melo* and *Karsing-Kartag* are regarded as important Gods and Goddess whom they pray regularly for their blessing for prosperous life. People generally invoke and worship them while performing their socio-religious function and

rituals. They often offer prayer to them by means of animal sacrifices with the belief that the deities are well appeased with the sucking of blood of animals. Such modes of worship the deities characterise the animistic belief of the Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh.

On the other hand, the Mishings believe in good number of Gods and Goddesses like *Sedi-Melo*, *Karsing Kartag*, *Donyi Polo* etc. They also believe in the existence of some other deities the *UricomUii*, *Goimin*, *DoburUii*. They also believe in evil spirits named *PiyangUii*, *Le:mugBate*, *Ni:pong* and so on. It is believed that human life has apprehension from deities and the evil spirits. The man has to offer prayer to all such unseen deities and spirits for peaceful living on this Earth. Therefore, they worship and offer prayer to so many deities and evil spirits by observing various rituals in their names to ensure their blessings and mercy. It manifests the polytheistic character of their religion.

The Mishing people prefer to live in the lap of the nature. They solely depend on the gifts of nature. Naturally they come in direct contact with different natural objects. They face directly the effects of natural forces, such as lightning, thunder, storms, earthquake etc. These mighty natural forces cannot be controlled or subdued by applying human power. The Mishing people believe that the natural forces are governed and regulated by supernatural beings only and they can be satiated by means of worshipping, offering prayers and performing rituals with animal sacrifice to get relief from the evil impact of all natural forces. Prayer and sacrifice are thought to be averted the evil impact of such deities. They regard *TalengUils* and *BuriBote* as powerful deities. The dissatisfaction of these spirits cause harm to the humanity by means of thunder and hailstorm. Such supernatural belief of the people relates to the nature's cruel nature.

It may be mentioned that appeasing Gods and Goddesses through observance of various rituals and ceremonies is the most essential part of their religion. Apart from mere offering prayer and worshipping of them additional means of offering sacrifice of animals and birds is also treated as inevitable to make the prayer deeper and more serious. Earlier the traditional religious rituals to appease the deities were conducted by the 'Mybou'. But nowadays due to the dearth 'Mybou' the religious rites and rituals are generally performed by the senior most community member of the village.

The 'Mybou' (priest) plays vital role in the Mishing society. The *Adi-Mishings* along with all other tribes of 'Tani' groups in Arunachal Pradesh believe on the existence of various kinds of spirits, good and evil surrounding over them. The good spirits are the household Gods and Goddesses and they are always benevolent to man. The evil spirits are malevolent by nature, which always stand against the welfare of human being and often cause harm to them. The ordinary human being is believed to be unable to imagine the power and existence of the spirits. So, the 'Mybou' is supposed to bear extra-ordinary trait to sense the nature and strength of a specific spirit. It is 'Mybou' only, who is well expert to deal with the deities and spirits by means of offering prayer and sacrifices.⁴

The Mishing people of Arunachal observe a number of traditional religious rituals of worshipping of the deities. They hold the common view that appeasing of the deities is must to get their blessing. *Dabur*, *Taleng*, *Gumin* etc. are the names of some important traditional religious rituals. The Mishing community have been celebrating these religions fanfare for a long time. Such traditional religious rituals are observed in all the Mishing inhabited villages of the state.

'Dabur' rituals are famous among the Mishings, as *Dobur* Pujais celebrated in different points of time of the year. *Dobur* is celebrated basically to eliminate infertility of the land, draught, bad weather and bad harvest, inter-tribal clashes and occurrence of any unlawful activity. Generally, four kinds of *Dobur* rituals are observed by the Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh. Some rituals are celebrated only within the family itself, and some others are celebrated by the entire villagers in group.

The name *DoluDobur* itself derives from the *DoluUii* (Deity responsible for wet rice cultivation). During the time of weeding, the wet rice, paddy fields this *Dolur* ritual is celebrated in group by the villagers. The *DoluDobur* is called as village *Dobur* in some places and it is celebrated to appease the *Doluiii* (spirit) to get relief from his unfavourable impact on the paddy fields.⁵ The formalities are observed for these rituals. On the specific place of observation of the ceremony a makeshift altar is built. Normally one he-pig and eight cocks of different colours are sacrificed to appease the *DoubrUii*. Pigs and the cocks were killed by beating on the heads and its blood fall on the makeshift altar of *DoluDobur*.

While observing the ritual 'Mybou', the senior most ritual performer of the village chants certain phrases of prayer to the *DoburUii* asking his blessing for all round development of the villagers, especially to get the blessing for good harvest.

Certain changes have been observed while celebrating *DoluDobur*. Earlier women having menstruating period during the festive day, were not allowed to participate in the ceremony and the outsider's entry to the village was almost restricted. But nowadays such rules become flexible due to the dilution in the norms of maintaining life style.⁶

'KachenDobur' is celebrated basically to satisfy the deity of the Jungle. This ritual is observed in the Mishing area in various ways. The same ritual is named differently in different places. For celebration of this ritual, a specific place is selected in a corner of the village. A makeshift bamboo platform of three feet high, and then or eleven length and breadth is built out in corner of the forest or paddy field. In some places this 'KachenDobur' is named as 'AptaDobur' (hunter's ritual) as the Mishings were once closely associated with nature and hunting in the forest. They collected food from forest for their livelihood. While moving in the forest they faced troubles from wild animals and evil spirits. So, they celebrated this ritual only to appease the spirits of the jungle for their safety.

But nowadays this means of livelihood has changed. Hunting is no more considered as basic means of livelihood and so, they observe this ritual very rarely. The ritual is celebrated among limited families of the same village, or sometimes few families of two or three villages in a definite place. This festival is celebrated to bring peace and amity in the family. This ritual is observed when certain incident of fighting and bloodshed takes place between two persons of the same village or two different villages or among the villagers of two or three villages then, 'PiyiaDobur' is observed as remedial measures to get relief from the evil effects of such unfortunate happenings. The meaning of the word 'Piyia' means the incident of bloodshed which is supposed to be encouraged by the *PiyiaDoburUii* (the spirit of fighting or battle). In this ritual, the blood of the sacrificed animal is allowed to fall on the altar of the ritual. 'Mybou' or the ritual performer changes certain Abangs (recitation on myths) or *hymns in the name of piyiangUii* for the protection of the villagers from any untoward incidents of violence.

Presently the tradition of observing *PiyaDobur* becomes obsolete due to the modern means of setting of the disputed and violence by following legal process. Easy access of Panchayat raj and modern law courts have contributed a great deal for abolition of such old practices of resisting violence and disputes. If any individual member of a family commits misdeeds or crimes such as keeping illicit relation with woman, theft or robbery as any household of the same village or outside the village *DodeyDobur* ritual is observed as a measure of getting repentance of the crime and to avoid any repetition of such misdeeds in future. Often the members of the family or the families to which mistake is done are also invited to the *DodeyDobur* to get compromised at the cost of compensation. It is up to the will of the particular family or the families whether they will prefer to keep such invitation by physically attending the ritual. To conduct the ceremony the presence of 'Mybou' is not essential; any professional ritual performer can conduct it.

Besides *Dobur* the Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh observe certain ritual to appease the deities of nature, *TalengUii* is regarded as the deity of nature. The Mishings believe that thunder and hail storm is the deeds of particular deities of heaven. When such heavenly deities are dissatisfied with the members of the families then they might secretly design for causing harm to the them. Sometimes people die in thunder or hailstorm or sometimes thunder falls on somebody else's house or paddy field, killing man or damaging the crops. So, the deities of the heaven can be satisfied by means of offering sacrifices. This ritual can be observed in groups or by individual family. *Taleng* ritual is named as *Talenguli* and it is not observed inside the house of the family. It is celebrated in the open field or on the spot where the thunder falls. In this ritual a tradition is followed to make an advance for holding the ceremony by packeting some important material such as, medicinal cake for rice beer, rice, coins, crafted piece of spade, axe and other deadly weapons on wood or bamboo with a piece of red cloth and putting the same on the esteem most of the granary till day of observance. The *TalengUii* is observed before two or three days ahead of a fully dark night, till the emergence of new moon in the sky. The respective family of the families observing the *TalengUii* can keep some taboos as specified by the rule of the ritual. For observing the ritual, the host family or the families have to offer a black coloured hen, a red coloured cock, and a white coloured hen as sacrificial needs. For observance of the ceremony an altar of dry clay is erected on the definite place, chosen for observing the ritual. The surface of the altar is painted with a picture of seven coloured rainbow. The altar is then decorated with multi-coloured wild flowers and leaves and above such decorated altar all the ritual items are placed for chanting and prayer.

There has been no change observed in this ritual. Only a change has been perceived in the items of this scarifies. There have been no strict rules set in case of specific number of sacrificial items to be offered to the specific deity. This can be made liberally as per the affordability of the family or the group. The first person or father of a particular clan is called as *Gominor*, first ancestral father, of the clan. He is regarded as household deity of each family of the particular clan. A tradition is there in the Mishing society in Arunachal Pradesh to offer special prayer to him through celebration of a ritual in his name and such ritual is known as *GominSoring*. The blessing of the *Gomin* is sought for peaceful and prosperous living of the members of the family. This ritual is widely observed in Arunachal Pradesh. Few changes in the celebration of this rituals are happening today i.e., in the form of collecting of the traditional items for the purpose. No bar is made in the matter of offering the ritual materials nowadays. A family can offer them as per their own economic status and capability.⁷ Many traditional religious rituals are observed by the community in different times of the year. Observance of all such rituals highlights the pattern of traditional religious

belief of the community. The religious belief pattern of any community is not static; it is dynamic and subject to change in the context of present time. Religion is a component of culture and all the religions have its own traditions. Peoples' choice for any religious ideology could not be restricted to a particular religion or religious belief. Continuity of cultural assimilation among different communities exert inter-influential impact as a result of which cultural transformation of any community in the line of its neighbouring communities become inevitable. On the other hand, rigidity in the religious customs of a particular community often may be a factor of such religious transformation and people sometime prefer to shift from rigid to flexible sects. All such factors may be true in case of religions transformation of the Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh.

It has been observed that in Arunachal Pradesh, that Mishings are attracted towards the Vaisnovism as their counterpart in Assam. However, the Mishings of Arunachal have recently come under the clip of Vaisnovite cult. Vaisnovite as they maintain the standards, both Vaisnovism and traditional religion follow simultaneously. So far as Oyan village is considered, 20 to 25 families, 19 to 15 families in Gadum and 7 to 8 families in Merr village have adopted Vaisnovism. They do not use the religious discipline of Vaisnovism in case of celebration of *Dobur*, *Taleng* and *Pacrage* festivals but on the other hand, nowadays some families liked to celebrate *Dodgang*, *Uram*, *GominSoring* etc. Following the customs of both the traditional Mishing religion and Vaisnovism. During such festivals or the ceremonies all the sacrificial duties are performed following the traditional Mishing religious customs and it's related to the recitation or chanting part. It is only performed pursuing the Vaisnovite rule i.e., through recitation of 'Nam-Kirtan' (reciting the passages of *Kirtan* by Sri Sankardev).⁸ Vaisnovite rituals could be arranged within the minimum cost of physical labour and monetary expenditure as well. So, adoption to Vaisnovism seems to function as blessing in disguise for the Mishing community in Arunachal Pradesh. This helps in curtailing the cost incurred by the traditional rituals.

The cultural assimilation and admixture of the Mishings people of Arunachal Pradesh with Christianity brought change in their life. Till the 70th decade, of the century no church building was built in the Mishing villages, but during the end of previous century, one church house was built in the outskirts of Oyan village. The residents of the village adopted Christianity. The church houses located in the village are built at the joint initiative of Padam and Mishings. The people of both the communities visit to offer prayer. Likewise, three church buildings have so far been built in the Namshing circle adjacent to Mishings inhabiting area. Total Mishing families adopting Christianity would be around 30 to 35 in Namshing village. The church building is built at the joint venture of the Mishings and the Padama of the area. Their adoption to Christianity has put remarkable influence on their traditional tribal mind-set. They are supposed to be more prone to cultivate the westernised culture in their day-to-day life. Nowadays the younger generation prefer to follow westernised way of the life such as visiting to the clubs for the purpose of enjoying, using of western dresses and food items, listening English songs, watching movies, performing rock dances and music till late night on various occasions affecting adversely on the normal swing of tribal life. The conversion of Mishings to the Christianity is contributing considerably in rising of literacy and up gradation of knowledge among them. Nowadays many converted parents of the community prefer to send their wards to the English school. The Mishings follow Hindu Gods and Goddesses and their belief system, as a result of their long run socio-cultural contact and interaction with the plain Mishings of Assam. Many of Mishings of the Assam believe in a number of Hindu Gods and Goddess as the alternatives to their traditional deities. The Hindu God, 'Lord Brahma' is often compared to Mishings *Sedi-Melo*, who is

regarded by the Mishings as the creator of the Universe and *TalengUii*. 'Lord Indra' is the god of the hailstorm and thunder. The Goddess 'Laxmi' is thought to akin to Mishing God *DoburUii* who can bless to human being for acquiring wealth and properties.

The people of Mishing community begin to adopt various ways and means as applied by the Hindu people. They are relieved from different kinds of social maladies and epidemics. The missing families nowadays prefer to apply Hindu means of witchery and magical chanting to get relief from different diseases like small pox, measles, epilepsy and incident of possession by ghosts etc. Mishings' aftercoming in contact with Hinduism helps them to understand about the mainstream Indian ways of life. Adoption to Hinduism helps them go forward from all fronts-socially, economically, educationally, culturally and so on and so forth. In Arunachal Pradesh, the transculturation of tradition culture and religion is an on-going phenomenon developing rapidly due to the growing sentiment for regionalism and ethnicity among various tribal groups. The tribal communities are perhaps dissatisfied with the event of existing cultural fusion in the tribal areas with the advent of many outsiders' socio-religious group to their land. The process of religious and cultural transformation among the tribal groups stated from long back with the advent of British to this place. Such cultural transformation has considerably affected their traditional way of living that which the communities are realising gradually. So, most of the 'Tani' groups now have incorporated *Donyi-Poloism* in their belief system. *Donyi-Poloism* is the offshoot of the trans-cultural transformation of religion of the 'Tani' groups in Arunachal Pradesh which encourages for the devotion to only one God-Goddess, *Donyi-Polo*. The Mishings of Arunachal Pradesh believe that they are the offspring of *Donyi-Polo* (Father Moon and Mother Sun) and that is why they never forget to worship their great ancestral parent during the time of observing all their traditional rituals. Decades past there was no any institution incepted for offering formal prayer to *Donyi-Polo* but recently like many other 'Tani' groups of people in Arunachal. The cult of *Donyi-Poloism* is being institutionalised among the Mishings. The Mishings of Arunachal are much attracted this cult from last few years. Presently, separate houses have been built in their places to practise the rites and rituals of *Donyi-Poloism*. It is quite obvious that such separate houses are now built in all the Mishing villages viz. Namshing Gadum, OyanMerr and Paglam of the state for worshipping and offering prayer to these super deities. Reportedly, the people of the Mishing villages who have come into this fold visit the *Donyi-Polo* temples as per their own schedule for offering prayer and worship. There is no specific time frame or schedule for celebration of the *Donyi-Polo* Puja like other Mishing religious festivals. If somebody desires, he or she can visit the *Donyi-Polo* houses even regularly for offering prayer to their ancestral deities.

The Mishing tribe is the native of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The tribes have transformed themselves in their social, cultural and religious life in the wake of modern touch. They have come to the mainstream of the nation concerning their progress and development. The Mishing people today is greatly influenced by the dynamics of other religion. Their adoption to other religion does not mean their complete submission or the acceptance of other cults. The base for their shifting to other religion or religious belief is perhaps motivated by the utilitarian purpose than the ethical bearings. They have attained political ascendancy and have their representation in State Legislative Assembly and Rajya Sabha, the House of Elders.

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