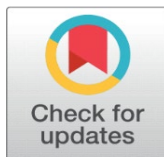
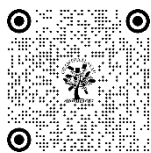


INFLUENCE OF VAISNAVISM ON THE MISING COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The Mising, officially known as Miri, is the second largest tribal group in Assam. Originally, they lived in the hills, particularly in the Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh, but around the 13th century A.D., they migrated to the plains of Assam. It has been seen that the traditional beliefs and practices of the Mising community have undergone significant changes over time. Among these changes, the influence of Vaisnavism stands out as particularly prominent. Over the time, the Kal Sanghati, a group of Vaisnavism become popular among the Misings. On the basis of nature of practices, it divided the misings into two groups- Bhagavatia and Kewalia.

Keywords: Mising, Assam, vaisnavism

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mising, officially known as Miri, is the second largest tribal group in Assam and also included in the list of scheduled tribe in India under the Constitution order of 1950. Originally, they lived in the hills, particularly in the Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh, but around the 13th century A.D., they migrated to the plains of Assam. They are mainly lived in Upper Assam area like Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Golaghat etc.

There are numbers of opinion given by the scholar about the origin of the term of Miri. According to E.T.Dalton, the word Miri was given because the people of Mising were acted as mediators between the people of Assam and the Abor tribes. Under the rule of Ahom, they played a key role in trade and communication between the people of plain and hill tribes. Since they served as mediators, the name "Miri" meaning mediator or "go-between" was given to them. Dalton writes, "For a long period under the Assam Government the Miris managed to keep themselves to the entire trade between Assam and the Abors; and as being thus the only medium of communication between the two peoples, they obtained the name Miri, which means mediator or go-between, and id the same word as 'Miria' or 'Milia' used in the same signification in Orissa. Perhaps the 'meriah' applied to the sacrifice of the Khunds is a cognate word, the 'meriah' being the messenger or mediator between man and the deity."

Sir E.A. Gait and A. Mackenzie also seem to support the view of Dalton According to Gait, the word 'Miri' means 'middle man' or 'go between' they work as middle man between hills and plain and carry out the business. Mackenzie remarked that "The Arbors and the Miris belong to the same habitat and they are still alike in all material aspects".

N. Lego observes that the word Mising stands for 'Mi' (Man) + shing (pure) =Mising (pure man) is the correct term as the Mising consider themselves as the real or pure sons of Abo- Tani, the ancestor of all Tani group (Adi, Apatani , Galo , Hill Miri, Nishi etc.) A popular legends of the Misings however , claim that the word has been derived from the name Mising given to an offspring of rain-god Do-shing, the son of Pedong -ane or mother Pedong. Jatin Mipun offers yet another interesting interpretation of the word Mising when he says that, "the members of the tribe regard themselves superior to other people. Therefore, they call themselves Mi (Men), Yashing (bright or good) = Mising. Which means we are bright or good people compared to the people of the plains".The Misings call the other people Mipag which means people who are not included in their community(Doley,24).

The Miris now call themselves Mising in preference to the earlier name which they consider derogatory. However even the meaning and origin of the word Mising, which they have accepted in preference to Miri, is debatable.

2. RELIGION

According to J.Troisi "Religion is the term generally used to describe man's relation to the supernatural powers and the various organized systems of belief and worship in which these relations have been expressed. There are no peoples, however primitive, who are without religion. Religion interacts significantly with other cultural institutions to such an extent that no special phenomenon presents a larger range of expression and implication."

The beliefs and practices of Mising are based on animism and supernaturalism. Their religious beliefs systems are based on three major belief systems viz (i) About the creator of universe, (ii) Existence of spirits and deities around habitats, (iii) About the human soul. According to their belief, there is a supernatural power which is omnipotent, and omnipresent and omniscient. They believe that all beings and things of the universe have been created by the supernatural power called Sedi -Babu.

As per the Mising oral tradition, the creation of the Universe have been described in the Miboo Ābāngs. Thus, the Universe is consisted of one earth and two other ethereal planets in its constellation; namely, Régí-Régām, Dong-Āmong and Ui-Āmong. The heaven is called 'Régí-Régām' or the Kingdom of Gods, the earth 'Dong Āmong' and the purgatory or 'Ui Āmong' is the abode of spirits. As per the Mising belief these three form the celestial constellation of Kéyum or the Universe. Régí-Régām and Dong Āmong remain within the orbit of the solar fraternity whereas Ui-Āmong exists outside the host of solar panorama and shrouded with clouds of eternal darkness(pegu,39)

Along with Se:di-Me:lo, the universe created a series of Gods and Goddesses. Se:di has a pairs of searching eyes with which he keeps vigil on humanity. The two eyes are interpreted to be the Do:nyi (the Sun) and Po:lo (the moon). However, the name of Do:nyi-Po:lo (the Son-Moon God) comes next to Se:di-Me:lo the creator.

3. CONVERSION TO NEW-VAISNAVISM

The traditional beliefs and practices of the Misings started to change after they settled in the plains of Assam. One major influence was the rise of Vaisnavism in the 16th century. The first reference to the conversion of a Miri (Mising) named as Paramananda to Vaishnavism is to be found in the Vaishnavite literature of Assam as early as the 16th century. It is stated that Sankaradeva (1449- 1569), the founder of the neo- Vaishnavism in Assam, had converted one Miri (Mising) to his faith and renamed him as Paramananda, meaning- the supreme pleasure. There is however no other reference to any other case of conversion to Vaishnavism other than the case of Paramananda. This event was significant because it marked a shift in the tribe's religious practices, moving away from their traditional hill and ethnic customs towards the culture of the plains.

However, after Sankaradeva's death, his teaching of equality among castes in bhakti faced opposition from conservative groups. Tribal societies largely remained outside this new religious belief until at least the 20th century, except in cases where a radical sect called kala-samhati interacted with them. Ideological differences emerged among the sub-sectarian orders within neo-Vaishnavism after Sankaradeva's time. These differences shaped the religious and social environment of Mising community. Gopal Ata, the founder of Kala-Samhati, made some changes to his order by including tribal and backward societies and trying to make them more Sanskritized. One of these changes was renaming converts during initiation, seen as a way to alter the lifestyle of tribal people. According to S.N Sharma, this practice became common within the sect. So, the renaming of a Mising tribe member to the Sanskrit name Paramananda should be seen in this light.

Over the time, the Kal Sanghati, a group of Vaisnavism become popular among the Misings. On the basis of nature of practices, it divided the misings into two groups- Bhagavatia and Kewalia.

4. KEOLIYA

It is said that some Mising converted to keoliya dharma which is based on tantrik part of kala samhiti, a another sect of neo-vaisnavism as early as the second part of 19th century. The keoliya worships varieties of spirits and deities in various manners of offering live sacrifices with rice and beer. Most of the rituals are performed by bhakatiya system which was introduced after having adopted the kalasamhati sect of neo-vaisnavism, as early as the 19th century. The keoliya is found to be mixed with animism and Hinduism. Majority of the mising people belonging to keoliya sect. Following are the rituals the keoliya performed –Dodgang, Tiloni, Urom, Gyati (clan worships), Sani puja (worship to Saturn), Napurukhiya (worship of nine generation) etc.

5. EK SHARANIYA BHAGAWAT DHARMA

The Ekasaraniya-Bhagawati Dharma, based on the Vaishnavism doctrines of Sankardeva, represents a reformed religion within the Mising community. Presently the Ekasaraniya Bhagawati Dharma has become popular the Jangraimukh, Dhakuakhana, the Ghunasuti area of the Lakhimpur District, and some villages of Dhemaji District.

The Bhagawatiyas attribute their conversion to the sect as a means to overcome many superstitions and unsocial practices. During the bihu, they use to hold nam-kirtan rather than organizing tribal feast and merry-making. While they are allowed to retain their ethnic cultural activities, such as traditional dances and songs, they refrain from certain practices like the preparation and consumption of homemade vodka called phatika or apong. It's noteworthy that they have no affiliation with any of the satras and do not seek initiation from them, indicating a distinct path within the broader Vaishnavite tradition.

6. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE KEOLIYA AND BHAGAWATIYA

1) The keoliya worships varieties of spirits and deities in various manners of offering live sacrifices with rice and beer. Most of the rituals are performed by bhakatiya system which was introduced after having adopted the kalasamhati sect of neo-vaisnavism, as early as the 19th century. The keoliya is found to be mixed with animism and hinduism.

The bhagawatiya may be called Hindu(neo-vaisnavism) without the elements of animism. They worship only Almighty god, the lord Krishna and none else. They did not offer live sacrifice and rice beer at any ritual. The bhagawatiya regarded the Bhagawat-Geeta as sacred book.

2) The keoliya namghar is occasionally used and mainly for holding the annual religious function called barsewa. It remain closed most of the time.

The bhagawatiya namghar is used daily. The elderly ladies of the faith come to namghar every morning and hold group prayer by chanting namkirtan. In the evening the elderly male devotees hold prayer from time to time in the namghar.

3) Keoliya may come and offer prayer at bhagawatiya namghar sitting along with bhagawatiyas.

However, the bhagawatiyas do not visits keoliya namghar. They also do not participate in any religious functions of keolias. The bhagawatiya namghars were found to be more or less similar to those of no-mising neo vaisnavite communities. The mising bhagawatiya namghar is also an open hall where male and female devotees recite hymns of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva every morning and evening. The namghar is regarded as most sacred hall for which they bow down at the front door before entering the hall.

4) The urban dwelling Misings belonging to bhagawatiya cult attend the namghar established by the neo-vaishnavite caste communities. The mising bhagawatiya also offer prayer at the same namghar where other neo vaishnavite offers. The mising bhagawatiya sit together and offer prayer along with no mising bhagawatiya in the same namghar.

While in other side, keoliya have no namghar in any urban centre. The urban dwelling keoliya perform their rituals in their own residences.

5) The keoliya still continue the same old sacrificial worships with aapong(rice beer). They believed that without live sacrifices the spirits and deities are not satisfied. They continue the practice because it was introduced by their forefathers and therefore, they could not give it up.

The bhagawatiya mising however, felt the keoliya practices are irrational and unethical. In addition to their abstention from practices like sacrificing animals and consuming alcohol, the Bhagawatiyas also refrain from eating pork and prohibit the production of alcohol.

7. IMPACT OF VAISHNAVISM ON THE MISING TRIBE

The satras have economic impact on the Misings. Possessed of large amount of revenue-free cultivable land, many satras have leased out their lands to the villagers for cultivation on share-cropping basis since the days of the Ahom rule in Assam. Many Mising villages being situated in the vicinity of the satras, they are also cultivating some part on the same basis.

The element of Vaishnavism is however more apparent in their socio-cultural life than in their belief systems. It is believed by some of them that the introduction of Vaishnavism into the Mising society has created some problems as well. This is an attack on the Mising ethnic religious belief on one hand, and on the other it has also been unable to give them human dignity and equality in the society by discriminating against them. Even the guru i.e. the preceptor of the kala-samhati sub-sect, whose system embraced many of the Misings content with mere collection of the religious tax (kar) rather than explaining the secrets of religion to attract them to the faith and sanskritizing their life-styles. At least this is the opinion of many of their elite members. Emergence of the hatulas, medhis, sajtolas, and sadhus in the style of the Hindus has also great impact upon the traditional priestly system of the Misings. Formerly, the Mibu or the Mising traditional priest was the main person to look after all ritual activities. But after their conversion to Vaishnavism and introduction of the ritual structures the Mising traditional system has to face strong challenges that have adversely affected the position of traditional Mising priests. Holding of the congregational prayer, use of chaki (candle) offering of betel-nut and leaf etc. have become part and parcel of Mising ritual today. In most Vaishnava Misings villages today there are namghar which has affected the importance of the Murong, the Mising system of common hall of the village.

8. CONCLUSION

Despite changes in religious faith the Misings have not been able to free themselves from beliefs in spirits and their effects. They still maintain the same traditional animistic beliefs and practices associated with the beliefs. They still not given up everything of their traditional beliefs and practices which are animistic in nature. A large majority of them still continue to perform sacrificial deity worship, use wine as indispensable item of worship, tantric type of ritual, ancestral worship etc which are antithesis of neo-vaisnavism.

They bury dead bodies and offer foods and drinks to the departed soul besides the grave and perform some other rituals in that connection. They still call themselves as the progenies of the Do:nyi:Po:lo and perform some other rituals in that connection.

Although the women take red lead (sindoor) in their forehead like Hindu women nevertheless they do not call Brahmin priest or to conduct the ritual related to marriage. Widows do not wear white cloths like Hindu women after become widow.

In case of dress in the time of rituals the bhakatas are not mandatory to wear white dress. They also visit namghar wearing their traditional beliefs and practices. Religious functions are started from the name of Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and their guru Gopaldeva. But they never forget to mention their ancestors.

The members of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, although given up all traditional practices of the Misings, but they too buried their dead bodies instead of cremation. Interestingly the Christianized women also take sindoor in their forehead. It is clear that the Misings are in the process of Hinduization i.e sanskritization. They have adopted many cultural traits of the neo vaisnavite communities, which are socially and culturally more advanced than the Misings and other tribes. Under the impacts of sanskritization the Misings and the neo-vaisnavite castes have been able to come socially closer to each other. The changing nature of the Misings' religious beliefs over time highlights the emergence of diverse belief systems within their community.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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