

# A Study on Folk Culture of the Mising Community in North-East India

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## **Abstract:**

Assam is a multilingual state of India including different castes and tribes. The Misings are the second large tribe of Assam. Their folk-life is full of vivid art and culture. Culture provides the introduction of a caste or a tribe. The ethnic image of a tribe or caste is reflected through their cultural features. Acculturation, assimilation, Sanskritization and modernization have played a major role in the changing of the culture and lifestyle of the Mising community. They have deviated from their original source and have acquired a modern form today. Yet, the different side of their folk-culture is changing in the stream of time. As a result of the spread of science and development, like other tribes, the Mising folk-belief and folk-life are also changing. Due to these effects, social and mantel changes of common life are taking place in all directions. It is very important to collect and compile the past the Mising community way of life before it becomes completely dissected. Therefore it is very important to study, preserve, and spread the culture and folk-life of the Mising tribe. This study will discuss an introduction to the folk culture of the Mising tribe of Northeast India and the impacts of globalization, acculturation, assimilation and modernization in their folk culture.

**Keywords:** Assam, Folk Culture, Life-style, Mising, Tribe.

## **I. Introduction:**

India is a country of various tribal communities. There are more than 400 tribal communities in India. The constitution of India has provided more importance to these communities and listed them as tribal under the constitution. Assam is a significant state of North-East India. There are various tribes inhabited in Assam, namely, Ahom, Bodo, Kachari, Mising, Dimasa, Khasia, Rabha, etc. They are bounded with their rituals and customs. Among them, the Mising tribe is highly populated in various regions in Assam. Besides it, Assam is the motherland of a huge number of inhabitants with both tribal and non-tribal. Since ancient times, they have different ethnic linguistic relations and various socio-cultural customs. There is always biological and socio-cultural cooperation between the population of both tribal and non-tribal communities of Assam. The Misings are an aboriginal inhabitant of Assam and the second large tribal group in the state and originally they belong to the Indo-Mongoloid tribe. As

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per the 2011 census of India, the population of Mising in Assam is 680,424 of which 345,786 are male and 334,638 are female, with a sex ratio of 967 per thousand [1]. Since the long past, they were hill dwellers, who lived along with the Adis, a tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. According to historical records, their ancestors moved to the plains of Assam around the 13th Century A.D. They are very rich in folk-culture. The tribe is settled mostly in the districts of Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Darrang, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sonitpur and Goalpara in Assam. They also live in Lohit, Siang and the Subansiri area of Arunachal Pradesh. As a riverine tribe, Mising indicates a blend of mi 'man' and asi 'water'. Some others argued it to be a blend of mi 'man' and yasing 'white' i.e good (figuratively) [2]. The Misings were popularly known as Miris in the plains of Assam. The non-tribal Assamese people have given them the name.

## **II. Objectives of the study:**

The objective of the study as follows:

- (a) To study the traditional lifestyle of the Mising community in Assam.
- (b) To study their traditional culture.
- (c) To study the impacts of Modernization and Globalization on their traditional culture and lifestyle.
- (d) To study the changes in their traditional culture and lifestyle.

## **III. Materials and methods:**

The study is based on observation and descriptive methodology. The data includes secondary sources such as the Mising culture and lifestyle-related books, journals, articles, soft copies included web pages, PDF files downloaded from websites.

## **IV. Results and Discussions:**

The term Mising means 'the people of the same blood and ethnic origin'. 'Abotani'(the father of mankind) is the first ancestor of all Mising trace. The maximum tribe has its clan system. Like the other tribe of Assam, the Mising tribe also followed their clan system. Mainly they are divided into Nine parts: Oyan, Mo:ying, Délu, Pagro, Sa:yang, Samuguriya, Tamaria, Bongkowl, Bihia. Tamaria, Samuguriya, Bongkowl and Bihia have forgotten their original language and they are using the Assamese language in their day to day life. The Misings are culturally very rich. Below, we have discussed various points of view of the lifestyle and culture of the Mising tribe in detail.

4.1 Social Life: Socially, Misings are a beloved community. They like to live in society. They also love peace. Traditionally, they have been living in the river-sides because of the availability of water, facilities of animal husbandry, more production by a little labor, etc. The social life of the Mising community is very simple. Collectivism, unity, and cooperation are the basic characteristics of their common life. The family is the primary level of social organization in the Mising community. Collective labor donation is prevalent in their society. In any social work, it is necessary to have one member from each family. There is an organization of youths in a village to perform various works of their society. Such an organization is called 'Mimbir-Ya:me:'. These institutions play a major role to fulfill social works such as marriage, festivals, the funeral in the village. Besides, they also provide justice for the youths who have held minor crimes. In the same way, the elders have also a social organization called 'Kébang'. Usually, there was a Kébang in every traditional Mising village. It works as a social-political ritual. It also plays a major role as the administration and judiciary in the village. Every Kébang of the villages is independent and sovereign. For the protection of the village, enforcing the law, hearing the cases of the culprits, and punishing the offenders are the main duties of a Kébang. The head of this institute is called Ga:m. The membership for the woman is not allowed in this institute. Therefore, it is seen that Kébang and Mimbir-Ya:me: play an important role in operating their society properly.

Mising society is male-centered. The male member is the head of the family. In their society, only sons become the successor of his family's wealth. The Misings prefer to live in a joint family. Mising women are more hardworking than their men. They remain engaged in household and agricultural activities and look after cattle breeding like pig, chicken, duck, the goat for extra income. From morning to evening they work hard. The Mising men and women work equally in their farmland. They also carry out the responsibilities of their family equally. A society or family needs an equal role of men and women to operate well and this is also seen in the Mising society.

4.2 Religious Belief: According to the religious belief, the worshipped Gods of the Mising tribe are Do:nyi (the Sun) and Po:lo (the Moon). Therefore they called the Sun as the mother and the Moon as the father. They regard the Moon (Abu po:lo) and the Sun (Ané do:nyi) as their ancestor. 'Sedi' and 'Melo' are the other Gods of their community. They believe that 'Sedi ba:bu' (the father) and 'Melo Nane' (the mother) are the descendent of the 'Do:nyi-Po:lo'. The original faith and belief of Misings are Do:nyi Po:lo, the Supreme Being who created the universe in all the elements. This belief remains in their hearts and dominates their thinking and movement [3]. On every religious and social function, they mention the names of their deities and sacrifice themselves to those deities. According to them, these gods are always kind to them because they are infinite and almighty in this universe.

Dobur puja: Dobur puja is the only religious function among this community. In this function, some souls are sacrificed to the father Moon and the mother Sun.

Mibu Dagnam: In the Mising society, the priests are called 'Mibu'. Mibu (the priest) performs Mibu Dagnam with some young boys and girls. Here, the Mibu dances with his yoksa (the sacred sword).

**4.3 Marriage System:** The marriage system is a social and legal permission to live a man and woman together as husband and wife. The Mising has its own and unique style. They used their local language term 'Midang' instead of 'Marriage'. In the Mising society, the marriage within the same clan and Non-Mising will never be allowed. The practice of widow marriage and re-marriage is prevalent in their society. According to a Mising scholar named Bidyeswar Doley, pointed out three traditional systems of Midang (marriage) as:

(a) **Da:ro Midang:** The most popular marriage system among the Mising tribe is Da:ro Midang. In this system, the parents or guardians of a bachelor play a major role to complete the procedure of the marriage. They send a proposal to the bride's family. If the proposal is accepted, the groom has to perform in the bride's home for a few days. Then, both families have finalized the date for the marriage.

(b) **Dugla La:nam Midang:** The marriage that occurs when the bride and groom escaping from their houses and hiding from parents or family members is called Dugla La:nam Midang. This marriage is not under the recognized system.

(c) **Kumsu-Jo:su Midang:** This marriage system is popular among poor Mising families. Even after getting acceptance of the marriage from both sides, people who cannot get married due to the financial problem, they adopt this marriage system.

Besides, cross-cousin marriage is also prevalent in Mising society. One can carry the daughter of the father's sister or the daughter of the mother's brother. Other than no cross-cousin marriage is prescribed [4]. Nowadays it is seen that the taboo of the Mising marriage system becomes flexible due to close contact with the Assamese people and the influences of acculturation and modernization. Now, they allowed marrying Non-Misings.

**4.4 Traditional Foods:** The geographical environment and climate of a place influences in the food habits of the residents of that place. When the Mising tribe was residents of the hills, they used various fruits, roots of green seeds, fishes, meats collected from haunting were as their main foods. After coming to the plain area, their food habits became changed; along with fruits, meats, and fish, rice also added as the main food. Boiled foods, dried meat, and fish are popular among the Mising tribe. There are different kinds of traditional dishes and drinks like Apong, Purang, Namsing, etc. available in the community.

**Apong:** It is a type of rice beer made by Mising women. It is a popular drink among Mising people. They offer it to their guests as an honor. There are two types of Apong like Po:ro Apong (black color beer) and Nagin Apong (white-colored beer).

**Namsing:** The powder of dried fish is called Namsing. At first, fishes are dried on the kitchen's fireplace. Then the dried fishes are ground at their wooden grinder (ki:par). After that, the fish powder is kept in a bamboo container with a full tight cover. They mix the fish powder for making a different type of vegetable dishes.

**Purang:** It is a boiled rice dumpling popular among the Mising people. To prepare this item, first, a good variety of rice is soaked in water. After that, it is packed with Tara Paat (*Alpinia Nigra*- a kind of wild leaves belonging to the ginger family) into small pieces. Then, it is cooked by steaming or boiling.



Figure 1: (a) Apong (rice beer), (b) Traditional Foods including rice beer, Purang Apin, smoked meat, boiled vegetables, etc., (c) Purang Apin (rice dumpling).

There are certain food taboos among the Mising. If any member of the family dies then taking of meat is prohibited to all the members of the family until the obsequious performances of the deceased are over [5]. Nowadays, the food habits of the Mising community have changed by the influences of Hinduism and regional culture. In earlier, they used to eat beef, but inspired by the influence of Hinduism, they gave up eating beef. They always took only an oil-free diet and didn't eat eggs, milk. But nowadays, they included it on their food list.

Today, the Mising people use betel nut (tamol-pan) to their guests instead of Apong. The betel nut is a popular part of the regional culture of Assam. Therefore it is seen that traditionally a lot of food habits are abandoned by the Mising after they embracing Hinduism.

**4.5 Dresses:** Different types of cloths and garments of Mising tribes are made in their handlooms with simple implements and equipments. The varieties are seen in colour combination, designs and motifs woven

artistically in the clothes displaying aesthetic beauty [6]. The Mising tribal people wear two types of clothes. One is for regular uses and another is for festivals, marriage rituals, and worships. It is noticed that the dresses for their regular uses are very simple and the dress for men is very similar to other non-tribe people. Ugon (a simple white dhoti), Gongro, Gonbor (a long loincloth), Érkog (a type of muffler), Dumér (a colorful towel), Galuk (a shirt), etc. are the dresses for men. But the Mising women wear traditional dresses in their regular life. The dresses for women are divided into two types of garments. One is covering the part from the waist to the knee. Mosang Ege, Geging Ege, Tapum Ege are such lower garments. Another is covering the upper part of the body. Ri:bi Gaséng, Gero, Kégrég or Ségrég, Gaséng, Bimbung (a type of shawl) are such types of upper garments. Mirijim, Tapum Gasor, Mibu Galuk are famous Mising traditional dresses. The Mising women prepare their dresses the combine delicate tastes of color and designs. The sources of their design are taken from the colorful nature and some geometrical figures.



Figure 2: (a) Galuk (sleeveless jacket for man), (b) Érkog (a muffler, tied around the neck to keep warm), (c) Mosang Ege (a lower garment for woman)

Nowadays, Mising educated women are dressed like Assamese women as it is the impact of acculturation and modernization. In the present time, the dresses which are available in the market are the most common dresses of males and females. Except for special occasions like festivals, marriage rituals, worships the Mising people do not use traditional dresses. They preserve their traditional dresses like a valuable property and worn with care whenever needed.

4.6 Traditional House: The Mising people live in Stilt House or Chang-Ghar ('Talém Ukum' in their local language). Even when they were in the hills area, they had Chang-Ghar so that they could get relief from wild animals. Now, they live in the riverside and have Chang-Ghar to get relief from the flood. Therefore, they believed that Chang-Ghar is more secure from some natural challenges than other houses. Generally, the Mising house is built facing the river. That is why their house is North-South direction. Chang-Ghar is made out of bamboo, wood,

and thatch. The floor of the house is about 3 to 5 ft. high from the ground and it is formed with thick bamboo splits. One has to climb a ladder to reach the floor. The roof of the house is covered by thatches. Usually, the houses are about 30 to 100 ft. length and 10 to 15 ft. in breadth. The most important feature within a Mising house is Meram, the fireplace. It is situated in the central part of the house. The fireplace is constructed by fixing wooden trays in gaps covering them with earth. Over the hearth hangs a three-tiered (sometimes more) bamboo shelf, which is used to dry fuel, meat, fish and other items [7]. It is noticed that the Chang-Ghar has only two doors, Tupak Yabgo (front door) and Yapkur Yabgo (back door). There are no windows and separate rooms in the house.



Figure 3: Talém Ukum or Stilt House (Chang-Ghar)

Acculturation and modernization are also visible regarding the housing pattern of Mising. The changing pattern of their house is one of the most significant impacts of their close contact with the non-tribal Assamese. Nowadays, most of the Mising people like to have modern houses instead of their unhygienic traditional houses. The Mising people who are not financially strong they have traditional houses.

4.7 Festivals, Dances and Songs: Like other tribes of Assam, the society of the Mising is also an agrarian society. Therefore, their main festivals are related to agrarian. The most considerable agrarian festivals among the Misings are-

(a) Ali-a:yé-lígang: It is the most significant festival among the Mising community of Assam. Ali means edible root, a:yé means seed and lígang means sowing festival [8]. It is a spring festival, which is associated with agriculture, especially, when the 'Ahu' paddy cultivation begins. The festival celebration is started on the first Wednesday day of the 'Falgun' month of the Assamese calendar. The main objective of the festival is to pray to 'Mother-Earth' for food production and paddy. At the festival, all young and old join in festal making.

(b) Po:rag: The other most significant agrarian festival among the Mising is Po:rag. The festival is celebrated in the harvesting time of paddy. The objective of the festival is all getting together with feasts and prayers.

In the Ali-a:yé-lígang festival, all boys, girls, men, and women are dressed colorful cloths, performed a dance named Gumrag So:nam. Paksong momam is also a common dance to all festive celebrations. It is a group dance both by boys and girls performed at the yard of their house (Ukum). Raktub So:man is another typical ridiculous dance perform by the adult people of the community inside their houses.



Figure 4: Gumrag, the popular dance by the Mishings during Ali-a:yé-lígang.

In the Mising society, there are different types of songs, from their aims and subject matter the Mising folk songs are different. In Mising language, the songs are called Ni:tom. There are many types of Ni:tom. They are-

- (a) A:bang: The A:bang songs are generally used by the Mibu (the Mising priest) of their society.
- (b) Kabang: These songs are a type of ballad. The Mising people express their sorrows of past and present by these songs.
- (c) Bi:rik: These songs are singing in their seasonal festivals like Po:rag and Ali-a:yé-lígang.
- (d) Midang: The song to be sung at the wedding is called Midang Nitom.
- (e) Oi-Nitom: The love songs are called Oi-Nitom. These type of songs is the most popular songs among the Mising people.
- (f) Ko:ninam: The song to be sung for children is called Ko:ninam.

Nowadays, due to the close and continuous contact with the Assamese people, they enjoy not only their festivals, dances but also Assamese Bihu, Bihu dances, and songs.

4.8 Language: Mising language belongs to the Tani branch of Sino-tibetan family [9]. The Misings have adopted the Roman script for their language. It has some similarities with the languages of Adis, Nishi, and Garo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The similarity is seen because the Misings were once a tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. But



nowadays, the impact of Hinduism which is the main source of acculturation among the Mising is found in their language also. Today, they have used the Assamese and Hindi language also. The process of acculturation in the field of language among the 'Samugurias', 'Bongkowl' and 'Bihia' are so deep that they have forgotten their Mising language.

## **V. Conclusion:**

The Mising community is one of the plain tribes of the Brahmaputra valley and recognized as Scheduled Tribe (S/C) under the constitution of India. They are trying best to keep their culture unbreakable. But due to close contact with non-tribal people and the demand of time, their cultures have started changing. Therefore it is our responsibility to protect their traditional cultures and should help to get a place in the great traditional culture of the world.

Finally, the research done by us is not the only and completed research. "A Study on Folk Culture of the Mising Community in North-East India" is a vast subject in research. There is every possibility of study in this subject in the future also.

## **Acknowledgement:**

We do hereby declared that the research work present in this paper entitled "A Study on Folk Culture of the Mising Community in North-East India" has been completed by us. We have not received any kind of financial support from anyone for this study.

No study can covers all aspects of a research problem. Finally, the research done by us is not the only and completed research. "A Study on Folk Culture of the Mising Community in North-East India" is a vast subject in research. There is every possibility of study in this subject in future also.

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