

4. Rural Cultural Practices in Assam: A Study

Arnab Chowdhury

Research Scholar,
Amity Institute of Education,
Amity University, Lucknow campus, Uttar Pradesh.

Prof. (Dr.) Jayanta Kumar Mete

Department of Education,
University of Kalyani,
Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal.

Abstract:

The colorful life of the people, their traditional customs, festivals and dances are some of the components of the rich cultural diversity of India as well as its north-eastern region including Assam. Culture is not a static identity and keeps changing. The changing environmental development makes internal adaptation necessary for culture. Thus, a lot of changes have also been observed in the Missing culture too. The impact of urbanization and modernization has brought a major economic and socio-cultural transformation among the Missing tribe of Assam. Their society is changing not only in the aspects of socio-economic and political areas but also in traditional beliefs and cultural practices. With the above background, an attempt has been made to understand the traditional and cultural practices among the Mising Tribe of Assam in particular and rural-urban context in general.

Keywords:

Missing Tribe, culture, cultural diversity, cultural Practices

4.1 Statement of The Problem:

The Misings, belonging to Tibeto-Burman ethnic group and formerly known as the Miris, which constitute the second largest scheduled tribe (Plains) group in Assam, have been playing a significant role in the culture and economy of the greater Assamese society in general and tribal society in particular. They with 5.9 lakh population (17.8 percent of the state's total tribal people) as per 2001 Census are mainly concentrated in the riverine areas of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. It is worth mentioning that Dhemaji district alone constitutes 31.7% of the total Misings in the state, followed by Lakhimpur (28.2%) and Jorhat (15.7%) districts. Moreover, agriculture being their main occupation, as high as 85.6 % of main workers is engaged as cultivators in the state, which is the highest among all the tribes of Assam. The majority of the Mising people are still living in the flood affected and isolated areas with old age traditions, and modern civilization has practically left them almost untouched in

many aspects. This-colourful ethnic group living amidst the fellow non-tribal Assamese people for many centuries has been able to maintain its traditional socio-cultural traits unimpaired in spite of the changes that have taken place in the socio-politico-religious life of Assam (Bordoloietal,1987).

Having the tradition of living along the banks of rivers, the habitats of Misings have been constantly exposed to floods and erosion, for which they have to often shift from one place to another (Doley, 2008).Although majority of them are still living in rural areas, it is noticed that for better socio-economic conditions, employment opportunities, accessibility, etc rural to urbanmigrationei the temporarily or permanently is gaining ground among the Misings in recent times, which have resulted in adoption of new urban culture sometimes at the cost of age-old cultural traditions. In respect of Mising societies, although the Misings aremaintaining the traditional customs, some changes have been noticed in their life and culture which are affectingthe core of their culture. The spread of modern education, science and technology, etc. has also brought about drastic changes in the religious beliefs and socio-economic life of the Misings. The Misings are undergoing theprocess of modernisation, acculturation and urbanization, and the impact of these factors on them is resulting in erosion of their traditional life and folk culture.

In consideration of the above, the present study entitled “Changing Cultural Practices Among the Ruraland Urban Mising Tribe of Assam, India” is taken up to understand the changing pattern of cultural and traditional practices among the Mising tribe in the selected rural and urban areas of Mising villages/locality of Assam.

4.2 Significance of The Study:

India as well its north-eastern part including Assam is the meeting ground of many diverse cultures and population of ethnic and distinctive tribes that co-exist peacefully, each unique inits traditions, culture, dressandexotic ways of life. However, due to their interactions among various social groups, the strength of traditional norms and ways of life of those tribes has been weakened. The Misings, one of the major tribes ofAssam, are also found to have changed to some extent in terms of their social, cultural, economic and traditional practices, although they are maintaining the traditional or customary cultural pattern since time immemorial.

Changes are noticed in theirlife and socio-cultural practices bothin rural and urban areas which are affecting the core of their culture. However, the changes are rapid in urban areas as compared to the rural areas inthestate. Thus, to understand the changes among the Misings in urban and rural areas of Assam, two areas namely Jonai Revenue Circle and Guwahati City have been selected so as to understand the various changes in cultural practices among them. Although there have been many tribal studies in India based on tribal economy, land alienation, socio-economic development, tribal culture, etc, the studies related to the Mising Tribe of Assam arestill highly limited. This study would also help explore the prevailing changes incultural practices of theMisings in Assam. Furthermore, the study's findings will offer valuable insights to development planners and policymakers, contributing to the overall progress of tribal communities in general and the Misings in particular.

Hence, the present research work bears immense academic significance and practical utility, particularly in understanding the Millennium in urban and rural contexts from a proper perspective.

4.3 Objectives:

The major objectives of the present study are:

1. The aim is to examine the evolution of cultural practices among the Mising in both rural and urban regions of Assam.
2. The goal is to examine how the cultural practices of the Misings are evolving in both rural and urban settings.
3. The aim is to comprehend the prevalent cultural practices among the rural and urban Misings in Assam.

4.4 Database and Methodology:

The study is based on both secondary and primary data. The secondary data related to various attributes of population among the Mising tribe in particular and all scheduled tribes in general have been obtained from Census of India, 2001. Besides, existing literature available in various journals, books, and Ph.D. and M.Phil. dissertations related to the topic has been consulted with a view to developing a broad theoretical framework of the present research in the right perspective.

Necessary primary data have been collected at household level through a sample survey with the help of a well-designed survey schedule from Somkong Pagro and No. 4 Ramdhan villages and Jonai Bazar under Jonairevenue circle of Dhemaji district and various localities of Guwahati city, viz. Hengerabari, Kahilipara-Sonaighuli, and Barbari-Panjabari. Samples of 30 households from each selected area under the Jonai revenue circle and 60 households from different localities under Guwahati city have been considered for the collection of primary data to understand the rural-urban and location-specific variations in socio-economic conditions among the Misings. The sample households in each area and urban locality have been selected purposefully with locational and economic considerations towards having adequate representation of the way of life and various other characteristics of the Misings.

The data obtained from both secondary and primary sources have been processed and analysed using some simple but meaningful statistical techniques for objective and logical interpretation. The quantitative techniques adopted for the analysis are simple ratios or percentages, and certain statistical measures.

The data so processed and analyzed have been represented in the forms of maps and diagrams with suitable cartographic techniques for proper illustration of the patterns. Conclusions on the study area are drawn on the basis of the results derived from the data analysis and personal experience gathered through the observations during field study.

4.5 Geographical Background of the Study Area:

Assam, located in the tropical latitudes (24.3° N and 28° N) and eastern longitudes (89.5° E and 96.10° E), is the most populous state in North-East India. Hills and mountains surround it on three sides. The rivers Brahmaputra and Barak, in the north and south, respectively, carve out deep valleys, which represent the major part of the state. A strip of highland, consisting of hills and plateaus, lies between the two valleys (Taher, 2007). The state covers an area of $78,438 \text{ km}^2$. Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh surround it on the north, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Tripura on the south, Nagaland and Manipur on the east, and West Bengal and Bangladesh on the west. A narrow corridor, 40 km wide, connects it to the mainland of India in West Bengal on the west.

Jonai Revenue Circle, one of the case study areas, is located in the Dhemaji district of Assam in the extreme east. It is about 550 km away from the capital city of Guwahati. Its boundaries include Arunachal Pradesh in the north, the Lali and Brahmaputra rivers in the south, the Sipi river and Sadiya sub-division of Tinsukia district in the south-east, and the Simen river in the west. Its total geographical area is $1,111.81 \text{ sq km}$. The headquarters of the revenue circle, Jonai, are located at 95.16° E and 27.77° N. The Jonai revenue circle itself constitutes the Jonai sub-division. The Jonai sub-division's sole community development block, MurkongSelek, is a tribal development block comprising 15 Gaon Panchayats. With the exception of the Jonai Census town, the entire subdivision falls under the rural classification, with agriculture holding a dominant position. Many tribal and non-tribal communities inhabit the Jonai sub-division, but the proportion of Misings among the tribes is highly significant. Murkong Selek railway station and NH-52 connect the area with the rest of the state.

Guwahati, another case study area, is the capital city of Assam; it is the largest and fastest-growing commercial, industrial, and educational center in the entire northeastern region of India. Geographically, it is located in the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra between $26^{\circ} 05'$ to $26^{\circ} 15'$ N Latitude and $91^{\circ} 35'$ to $91^{\circ} 55'$ E Longitudes, covering an area of 216 km^2 . It is also the "gateway" to northeastern India, where many national highways, railways, and airways meet. Due to the significant influx of people from various parts of the country and within the state, the city has experienced rapid population growth. Despite the majority being Assamese, the city's population is cosmopolitan, with Bengali and Hindi-speaking non-tribal people as well as Boro, Rabha, and Kashmiri-speaking tribal people residing there. Hengerabari, Kahilipara-Sonaighuli, and Barbari-Panjabari areas house the majority of the city's Misings.

4.6 Discussions:

4.6.1 Changing Pattern of Language Spoken and Religion Among the Missing's:

"Language is not only a tool of communication, but it also has ethnic, socio-cultural and political implications. Various ethnic groups in the North-East have their own dialects. These are often seen by those who use them as languages in their own right. In the north-eastern part of India, the diverse ethnic groups use several languages.

But the dominant language of the larger community has a pre-eminent place. Assam also has remarkable linguistic diversity. Bilingualism and sometimes trilingualism is common in both rural and urban areas even among the unlettered. This is because when a family, a kin group, or a community moves from one region to another, its members acquire the language of their new place of domicile without giving up their native dialect. The settlement of outsiders has also contributed to the spread of bilingualism or trilingualism in the region, as noted by Verma. Among the Mising population, it is found that most of the population from the younger generation has forgotten their own dialect, which is a serious threat for the survival of the socio-cultural practices of the Mising.

The Mising religious system has become an amalgamation of both neo-Vaisnavism and animism. They have become Hinduized because they worship Hindu deities, observe Hindu religious celebrations, etc. But at the same time, they also profess animism. Therefore, we can also refer to them as tribal Hindus, a term that represents an ethnic group with unique cultural characteristics and a distinct religious system (Pegu, 2012). A great erosion of faith has taken place in the Mising society. Some members of the Mising community are also converting to Christianity. The adoption of Christianity, however, has led to the abolition of traditional faiths and practices, festivals, and even the traditional drinking of rice beer (Apong). As a result of these changes, the traditional religion of the Mising is losing its original characteristics. The Mising population practices Hinduism at the highest percentage of 98.83 percent, compared to Christianity at 0.62 percent and other religions at 0.56 percent.

Hinduism influences most Mising, according to a household survey in both rural and urban areas. The percentage of misusing Hinduism is highest in Jonai Bazar (100 percent), followed by No. 4 Ramdhan (96.6 percent), Somkong Pagro (93.3 percent), and Guwahati City (93.3 percent). While Christianity influences some of the misdeeds, its proportion remains relatively low. Among the field study areas, Guwahati City (6.7 percent) and Somkong Pagro (6.7 percent) have recorded a considerable proportion of Christians in the population.

The majority of people in rural areas speak Ming only at home. Although people in urban areas speak the Mising language at home, other languages have also had a significant impact. Hence, the Mising residing in urban areas practice bilingualism or multilingualism with respect to languages like Assamese, Hindi, Bengali, and English.

4.6.2 Changing Pattern of Food Habit and Wine Consumption Among the Mising:

Food is the symbol of the identity of a culture. The framework of the food system is intricate, undergoing constant transformation due to the influence of modernization. The study of the food system plays a crucial role in shaping a community's identity and personality. Thus, the study of the food system fills the gap in understanding the tradition, history, and changing cultural practices of the community. While the mainstream Mising people are gradually adapting to the food system of non-tribal communities, this also demonstrates the integration of rural and urban Mising culture in the construction of their identity (Kumari and Dutta, 2012).

The household survey in both rural and urban areas reveals that the Misings continue to adhere to their traditional food habits. Almost 100 percent of Misings consume non-vegetarian food in all sample survey areas (Table 3). Despite the prevalence of vegetarianism among some family members in a particular household, primarily due to religious practices or disease, it is not a common practice across the entire household. The Misings commonly consume wine, primarily in the form of their traditional rice beer, Apong. However, recent research has revealed that they are also consuming foreign wine. Traditional rice beer consumption is higher in rural areas like No. 4 Ramdhan (53.3 percent) and Somkong Pagro (46.7 percent), whereas urban areas like Guwahati City (80 percent) and Jonai Bazar (60 percent) consume more foreign wine.

4.6.3 Inter-Community, Inter-Religion and Inter-Tribe Marriage Among the Misings:

India is still by and large a traditional society with a rigid caste system. Caste plays a very important role in the selection of mates in marriages. For most Indians, the concept of marriage extends beyond their own caste. To think of marriages between different castes and different religions is a difficult and socially unacceptable proposition.

Recently, the process of modernization, democratization, and development has brought a lot of positive changes to Indian society. Similarly, among the Misings of Assam, marriage within the same community is the norm. But it is being observed that the traditional binding of the community in marriage selection is gradually loosening over time.

Approximately 10% of the marriages among the Misings involve inter-community, inter-tribe, and inter-religion relationships. The impact of modernization, socio-cultural interaction, socioeconomic development, and globalization has led to a recent change in the marriage pattern within the community. Various socio-economic and demographic factors also influence the pattern of intercommunity marriages. There is however significant spatial variation in the pattern of inter-community, inter-tribe, and inter-religion marriages. There seems to be a higher rate of such marriages among socio-economically advanced urban people. It is expected that the incidence of such marriages will increase with the increase in the degree of modernization and socio-economic development.

The household survey further reveals that the incidence of intercommunity, interrelation, intertribal marriage, and widow remarriage is higher in urban areas compared to rural ones. The proportion of inter-community (within non-tribal communities) and inter-tribe marriage is found to be high.

The percentages are 21.7 percent and 11.7 percent in Guwahati City, respectively, and as low as 10 percent in Somkong Pagro and 6.7 percent in both Jonai Bazar and No. 4 Ramdhan (Table 4). The data also reveals a low proportion of inter-religion marriage compared to inter-community and inter-tribe marriage, with Somkong Pagro and No. 4 Ramdhan accounting for 3.7 percent and Guwahati City contributing 3.3 percent. Guwahati City has the highest incidence of widow remarriage at 6.7 percent, followed by No. 4 Ramdhan at 3.7 percent, while Somkong Pagro and Jonai Bazar have no such incidence.

4.7 Conclusion:

The study yielded the following major findings and conclusions:

1. Although the Misings use their mother tongue/dialect among them and most of them know Assamese for conversation with the other communities in the state, some of the urban Misings of the younger age group have started forgetting the Mising dialect.
2. Compared to Christianity (0.62 percent) and other religions (0.56 percent), the Mising population practices Hinduism at the highest rate (98.83 percent).
3. Traditional rice beer consumption is higher in rural areas like No. 4 Ramdhan (53.3 percent) and Somkong Pagro (46.7 percent), while urban areas like Guwahati City (80 percent) and Jonai Bazar (60 percent) consume more foreign wine.
4. The household survey further reveals that urban areas have a higher incidence of intercommunity, inter-religion, and inter-tribe marriages, as well as widow remarriage, compared to their rural counterparts. Guwahati City has the highest proportion of intercommunity (with non-tribal communities) and inter-tribe marriage at 21.7 percent, while Somkong Pagro has the lowest at 10 percent, and both Jonai Bazar and No. 4 Ramdhan have the lowest at 6.7 percent.

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