

Modernity versus Tribal Identity: A Study of the Misings of Lakhimpur District of Assam

Lohit Hazarika^{1*} Bhupen Chutia²

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Lakhimpur Girls' College

² Associate Professor, Department of English, Lakhimpur Girls' College

Abstract – Known as a riverine tribe of Assam, the Misings of Assam basically dwell on the flood plains of the rivers originating in the sub Himalayan hills of Arunachal Pradesh. They have been historically associated with pisciculture, wet rice cultivation, animal husbandry and collecting forest produces for survival. In fact, as the very term 'tribe' indicates, the Misings dwell in locales away from the centres of trade, commerce and political powers. However, modern developmental projects of the state and central governments have started reaching most of the people and they are fast integrating with the other developed societies. This paper studies the Mising people living in a few villages in the district of Lakhimpur experiencing the gains of development albeit in a slow pace and they appear to be enthusiastically welcoming modernity as a means of social, economic and cultural development.

Key Words: the Misings, Scheduled Tribe, Modern Development, Tribal Identity

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INTRODUCTION

The Misings are one of the largest tribes of Assam scheduled in Article 342 of the constitution of India. It is believed that they migrated from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh to the plains following the courses of these rivers upto the mighty Brahmaputra nearly by the thirteenth century AD through the riverine routes. They are often referred to in the history of the Ahoms as a tribe closely associated with the Chutias who had ruled the North-Eastern part of Assam up to the sixteenth century before going down to the expanding Ahom kingdom. During the Ahom rule, they were instrumental in facilitating communications and trade with the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Even during the British period, it was the Misings, known as the Miris then, who acted as the 'go between' community and helped the British military and capitalist adventurers venture into the interiors of the hills of Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, the Misings are, historically speaking, a very much dynamic tribe always visible in their business and tribal-political dealings with the ruling classes. Their expertise in riverine transportation and intelligent exploitation of nature has always made them an important player in the socio-economic life of the Assamese society. In fact, there are lots of folk sayings in Assamese indicating their intelligence, independent or untamed spirit and their ability to keep everybody in good humour, if not keep guessing – friends and foe alike. That means, despite their natural shyness as a tribe, they have been known for their rather sophisticated behavior in dealing with inter tribal relations. However, as a tribe heavily

dependent on forest resources and low laying agricultural lands, they remain attached to their natural habitat, i.e., the flood prone river basins till today despite the fact that they are not averse to modern education, development and urban culture.

It has to be mentioned that since independence, the Misings have developed much in terms of political mobilization, education and modern employment. The pro-active policies of the state and central government such as preferential reservation in education and employment opportunities have made tremendous impact on the Mising society. In fact, the Misings are claimed to be only the second tribe in India to be educated enough to send the highest number of cadres to most of the civil and military services of the Government of India from among the scheduled tribes, the first being the Minas of Rajasthan. The developmental projects of the Misings have got a fillip in 1995 when the Mising Autonomous Council was established under the Mising Autonomous Council Act, 1995 passed by the Assam Legislative Assembly comprising of satellite areas and core areas for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement of the Mising and other Scheduled Tribe communities residing therein. This council, with its Head Quarters at Gogamukh, in the district of Dhemaji, is basically meant to give the tribal community political, legislative and administrative powers to decide their future along the lines national development bypassing the undue interference from more

advanced communities. This council has now been entrusted with the responsibility of planning and implementing developmental schemes suitable to the local needs of the Mising and other tribal communities. This council covers the Mising populated areas of ten districts of Assam – namely Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Biswanath, Sonitpur, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Majuli, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. It has been provided with executive powers and functions on 34 subjects. The annual developmental fund allocated to the MAC for the year 2016-17 was 147.25 Crore.

There has always been an uneasy relation between preserving tribal ethos and unique identity on the one hand and accommodating a modern developmental culture, on the other. The very characteristics that guarantee a preferred treatment as to a community as a 'scheduled tribe' are premised upon the fact that they should be practicing primitive lifestyle and customs; and dwell in geographically isolated places which means shying away from modern developed societies and cultures. The constitution of India, by recognising them as scheduled tribes guarantees the sustenance and promotion of their distinct cultures, thereby saving them from the clutches of other dominant groups and cultures. At the same time, the government policies are also oriented towards offering them the benefits of modern developmental projects including communication and integration with the outside world undergoing rapid economic and social changes. The government is committed towards extending all modern amenities to the tribal population like education, medical and veterinary facilities, civic amenities and other facilities that are available to each and every citizen of the land. In the economic front too, these tribes are being initiated into modern modes of agriculture and other economic activities. That is, there have been conscious efforts on the part of the government that these tribal communities are drawn towards the mainstream culture of the society at large along with all their distinct traits, characteristics and special status. And this is not an easy task to accomplish. The natural antipathy between cultural isolation and assimilation, geographical isolation and communication always stand on the way to such projects. Moreover, the speed of development, seen from the outside with different developmental parameters, will appear to be absurdly slow and imbalanced.

It is in this context that this study was planned – to study the reach of modern developmental culture among the Mising population living on the edges of the so called mainstream society. Modern development is expected to expedite the process of change and assimilation with other societies taking the tribal population away from many of their traditional economic modes and cultural traits. On the other hand, the localized legislative and administrative powers can give them enough scope to promote their cultural practices including language. This study was conducted in the year 2016-17

keeping these presumptions in mind. The aims of this survey were –

1. To study how far modern education, communication, job avenues and other amenities have reached the villages inhabited by the Mising population.
2. To study how far are infrastructural development being planned and implemented in those far flung areas close to the flood plains of the rivers.
3. To suggest measures for a cohesive life style without affecting the core of their culture in the face of imminent change.

With these aims in view, 25 villages from 6 development blocks of Lakhimpur, the district with the second highest number of Mising population, were selected for this study. The total population of the Mising community in Lakhimpur District is 156024 (2017) as per records of Mising Autonomous council. Total population inhabiting these 25 villages of 6 blocks is estimated to be 8265. The following are some of the observations on the basis of our study:

1. Displacement:

Living in the flood plains is not an easy business. They need constantly to fight against the changing courses of the rivers. Out of the 775 families under survey, 225 families were compelled to leave their hearth and home in search of suitable new sites which too, turned out to be equally inhospitable owing to flood and erosion. The dispersed character of the habitations and changing course of the rivers stood in the way of undertaking infrastructural facilities. It has also affected their getting used to settled agricultural practices.

2. Mobility:

The Misings have traditionally remained confined to their natural habitats with regular interaction with other societies for economic and other cultural practices. The country boats and dugouts have been their principal modes of transportation. However, after India's independence and the proactive measures adopted for their socio-economic up-liftment they have started settling permanently in better places including small towns and other areas of business activity. However, most of the villages surveyed in this study remain in the outskirts of modern infrastructural facilities. 28% of the villages have motorable roads within the villages. The nearest railway stations, however, are located not within easy reach of all the villagers as the distance varies from 10-15 kms. The villages are required to travel up to 15 kms to reach administrative offices such as the Sub Divisional Office (Civil). As regards roads, 56% of

the villages still depend upon foot tracks to keep contact with the outside world and the plight of these villagers during summer beggar description. Only one village appears to be lucky to get an all-weather motorable road.

3. Modern Amenities:

Except a few post offices (32%), medical sub-centres (4%), other civic community facilities are not available for the villagers. Medical facilities, veterinary facilities are yet to reach most of the villages beyond a distance of 15 kms. The distance is made worse by the absence of motorable roads. The study showed that a few villages of far flung areas of the district depend upon foot tracks and fair weather katcha roads.

4. Modern Education:

The Mising population has realized the benefits of modern education and hence they have started getting their children enrolled in schools, both government and privately run. While 76% of the villages have elementary schools within the villages, many parents send their children to missionary schools which impart education in English medium. The nearest colleges are located at a distance of 15 kms. However, due to the availability of seats reserved in all government run educational institutions, their children often get admitted in institutions far away from their villages.

5. Agriculture and Land Use pattern:

It is to be noted that most of the villages are not surveyed and recorded as revenue villages and hence many of the villagers do not possess periodic patta of their land. The low lying areas in which they inhabit is fit for cultivating wet paddy varieties. Nearly 66% of the families are, however, marginal farmers. As mentioned earlier annual floods take toll leading to loss of agricultural lands. As many as 544 (72.53%) families have lost land due to flood and erosion. It was interesting, however, to note that flooding also leads to creation of new arable land and many poor families have been able to occupy newly created land for cultivation. Some 10% of the villages were found to be landless. Ahu and Bao (wet land varieties) are the major crops of the people followed by mustard seeds.

6. Family Patterns:

Traditionally the Misings practise joint family system. However, due to modern education and economic factors, majority of them have resorted to choosing nuclear family as the norm. Almost all the eligible youths marry before the age of 28. There are very few widows as widow remarriage is well accepted. Widowers are few and far between.

7. Modern Economic Practices:

Being dependent on marginal farming and other economic activities, majority of the Mising households are without any debt. The overall economy of the Mising remains in the subsistence level mainly due to large numbers of dependents in each family in comparison with the earners. The number of unemployed youths is increasing every year. Lack of higher and skill education, employment opportunities, and lack of exposure to industrialized societies can be cited as the main reason behind this high incidence of unemployment. However, the womenfolk, besides helping the men folk in agricultural activities keep themselves busy with their traditional handlooms weaving colourful clothes, thereby contributing towards the family income. Animal husbandry is supposed to be solely their responsibility. Of late many of the Mising youths are entering into trade and commerce. Quite a few are serving in various Government Departments and private companies. Some of them have entered into non-traditional labour market as wage labourers, rickshaw pullers, wine sellers, fish vendors and butchers.

CONCLUSION:

Although this study was confined to a few villages of Lakhimpur district, the findings are equally applicable to all other districts of Assam where the Misings traditionally dwell. They are one of the scheduled tribe communities who are enthusiastically integrating with the non-tribal cultures that surround them, besides embracing modern education and economic activities. While the development projects are being extended to their remotest villages, many of them have started to move to more convenient and better developed places for permanent settlement. As such, very soon their geographical isolation will become a thing of the past. However, access to modern education and socio-economic development has provided them better opportunities for the development of their linguistic and cultural resources along with the right to enjoy their democratic political aspirations. Tribal identity for them is going to be changed forever within a few decades.

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Corresponding Author

Lohit Hazarika*

Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology,
Lakhimpur Girls' College

Lohit Hazarika^{1*} Bhupen Chutia²