

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

NINTH SESSION

GUWAHATI ; 1988

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PREFACE

The ninth session of the North East India History Association at the Gauhati University was indeed the fulfilment of a long cherished objective of the Association to hold a session in the premier University of the region. In fact, there had been efforts on the part of the Association ever since it came into existence in 1979 to hold a session at the Gauhati University. We are thankful to the authorities of the Gauhati University for inviting the ninth session and organising it in an excellent manner.

Shri Bhisma Narain Singh, the Governor of Assam, inaugurated the session. Professor D. P. Barooah, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. N. Phukan, Head, Department of History, Gauhati University did the Association a great honour as Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor Bhupen Qanungo of the North-Eastern Hill University. More than one hundred and fifty delegates attended the session in which eighty-five research papers were presented and discussed.

The present volume is the proceedings of the ninth session of the North East India History Association held at the Gauhati University on November 3-5, 1988. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. M. S. Sangma and Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

Shillong

The 25 August 1989

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The Mishing Society in Transition

Dambarudhar Nath

The Mishings *Miris* constitute a major section of the tribal population of North-East India inhabiting the region from time immemorial. Numbering 2,59,661 souls according to the Census of 1971, the Mishing people, along with other tribes of the region, were known to the early Aryans as the *Cinas, Kiratas, Danavas, Asuras* and *Mlecchas* (Nath, 1985:1). In this paper, therefore, we shall make an attempt to look into the process and the course of transition of the Mishing social set-up of Assam since their coming into the contact of the plains people during the medieval times.

Transition in the social life of the major tribes of Assam, has been marked since their coming into contact with the plains. The Mishing which came into contact with the Ahom political and social systems of the 16th-17th centuries Assam, had been influenced by the process of 'Sanskritisation' which had already begun smearing the tribal societies of the Brahmaputra valley. The urgency of importing food-stuffs like-rice and fish, and other necessaries of life to the hills (Devi, 1968:158-165) in exchange from the plains people, had finally necessitated the tribe to cultivate these items for themselves when the age-old system of trade by barter, or act of plunder (Bhuyan, 1962:40; Baruah, 1930: 192-194) could not meet their needs. The result was that the tribe not only began coming down to the plains, but also started imitating plains culture notably agriculture and dresses and ornaments. The early British records referring to the Mishing people of the plains of Sisi, Dhemañi and Bordalani (all at present in the Lakhimpur district of Assam), mention that in those regions they had adopted shifting cultivation of *Ahu* and *Bao*. The same people who had adopted hunting and jhumming as professions while in the hills, now accepted rice culture of shifting variety as the major ways of livelihood after coming down to plains; and that too they subsequently changed to high-yielding wet rice culture of *Sali* variety where it was geographically

feasible. It is now found that almost all the people of the tribe dwelling in those and other regions, use to cultivate productive *Sali* rice except on certain circumstances, when they have to turn towards *Ahu* and *Bao*. Increase in the volume of production however affected the Mishing society in many ways. Besides changing its basic economic pattern, the change had effects on the tribe's land systems. Ownership of land on individual tenure instead of traditional communal ownership of land in the hills, came into being. This resulted in growing the germs of a feudal society into the socio-economic fabric of the tribe. The notable thing in this context, as pointed out by the eminent tribal researcher Bishnu Prasad Rabha (1984:8), was the growth of the sense of distinction between man and man, i.e. rich and poor. In fact, society here began developing a distinct class structure.

Economy of the plains is basically agrarian and self-sufficient to the barest extent; and the tribes which came down from the hills, adopted the systems gradually. Advanced production appliances and production-procedures, if there were any, came to be adopted by the Mishings also. As mentioned earlier, the old way of communal jhuming by fire and stick in the hill slopes gave way to the shifting *Ahu* and *Bao* cultivation in the plains along with other major cash-crops like mustard and pulses. An interesting record of such a period of tribal agriculture transformation in the north eastern region indicating the ways of cultivation is found in John Butler's (1847:21-22) *A Sketch of Assam* :

The native set fire in the jungle to clear the land of cultivation, and to open the thoroughfares between the different villages, and the awful roar and rapidity with which the flame spread cannot be conceived. A space of many miles of grass jungles, twenty feet high is cleared in a few hours. The jungle is burnt down, and for three successive years two crops are annually realised from it. In February, mustard seed is gathered in;.....and in June the Spring rice, 'sown broad-cast' is reaped. After the land has been thus impoverished, it is allowed to remain fallow for three years; and fresh jungle land is burnt and prepared in the same primitive

way and with most simple implements of husbandry. Today, besides the use of plough and bullock in cultivation, most upto-date implements, such as fertilisers and tractors, have also been used; and the transplanted high yielding *Sali* varieties have largely taken place of the *Ahu* and *Bao* cultivation of early 19th century. The growing population in the plains however has resulted in the gradual contraction of cultivable lands, and thus in lessening of soil fertility. Absence of facilities like irrigation for winter cultivation has proved to be a hindrance in this case. But the major cause to this disinterestedness may be explained in the lack of initiative and programme implementation to be undertaken by the appropriate authority.

Business pursuits among the tribe are very insignificant. In fact, the term 'Miri' (Mishing) which was once explained to mean a middle-man or 'go-between' (Gait, 1926:322) of trade-exchanges, or rather hill-traders exchanging hill-products with those of the plains, has now become almost obsolete. The Mishing tribe is now no longer a trading community. Lack of proper knowledge or training in modern method of production of consumer goods may be accounted for this. Besides, absence of adequate means of communications - or rather isolated location of the Mishing villages- are some of other major hazards in this regard.

Typical dresses and ornaments of the north-eastern tribes as described in the early Vedic literature or in the later literary works, or as described by the early British writers (Robinson, 1975; Dalton, 1975; Waddel, 1975) are no longer in existence. Tribal costumes, or more specifically, those of the Mishings, are very rare now. Besides younger generations and the elite class, even the villagers have been now used to upto-date styles in dresses and ornaments. But change of traditional things does not always mean a step forward towards modernism. It should be noted that almost all the tribes of North-East India including the Mishings, were once expert in spinning and dying cotton threads and weaving clothes. The beautiful *endi* cloth, and what is called *Mirijim*, are still some of the genuine contributions of the Mishing tribe to the cultural life of the people of the North East. In materials, techniques

and designs- they now form a mixture of both tribal and non-tribal culture. Now-a-days, one can see Mishing girls putting on wollen shawls and synthetic *Saris* quite freely

Although the tribe came into contact with the valley-culture as early as the 16th century (Nath, 1985:7-12) they were little influenced by the religions of the plains. It is true that some of them began imitating Hindu religious rites, but practised their own religions simultaneously, and thus combined both tribal and non-tribal modes of worship together. The Neo-Vaishnavism of Sri Sankaradeva (1449-1569) and his disciples had some impact on the tribal life-styles of the valley. But except a very few people, who were Hinduised in name only, the masses had no occasion to be influenced by this new sect, for after the death of the great Saint Sankaradeva, his disciples and subsequent religious heads paid little attention to the religious aspects of the tribes. as pointed out by some of their own people (Kagyung, 1972:300) the Hindu religious leaders remained content in collecting merely the religious taxes (*Kar*) from the Mishing devotees rather than explaining the secrets of religion to attract them to the faith. According to the writer, it was because of this that people used to pay taxes on the one hand and follow at the same time their traditional beliefs on the other (Kagyung, 1972:300). As such, Hinduism- in whatever form it might have existed- could in no way Hinduise the Mishing society as a whole. Casteism, orthodox outlook of religious leaders in general, and the growing tendency in the minds of the elite section of the tribe to keep intact the independent identity of their culture, are some of the vital factors which keep the Mishing religious life still in traditional set-up. One interesting aspect of Mishing religious life is, however, very recently marked: this is an attempt of the people themselves to modernise their socio-cultural life through westernisation. The aversion of tribals towards Brahmanical Hinduism and the imperialist policy of the Western capitalist countries resulted in their (the Mishings) attraction towards Christianity. This trend was marked long ago among almost all the hill tribes of the North - East, although it has

come very lately and slowly to the Mishing society of the plains.

As a result of the growing sense of 'culture-Protection' programme, several important developments have been marked among the tribe since independence. Emphasis has been laid on increasing the percentage of education among the people. Schools and colleges have been gradually coming up in Mishing dominated areas. With the constitutional protections and economic help, an educated class has emerged, but with all non-tribal character. It is they who now play major role in tribal politics and share every facility accorded to the tribal development programme of the country. The Mishing-participation in state politics, however, is as old as the days of the Ahoms (the Shan rulers of Assam) when they not only served in the fighting Ahom forces, but also took active part in administration (Devi, 1968: 163-164; Nath, 1985:9). But it was during the British rule that the tribe had no political interest except in their own system of tribal administration. During the freedom movement a few persons from the community took active part along with others. It is, however, clear that the political steering is always in the hands of the elite and as such for the best interest of a small section; the masses are simply used to this effect. The growth of modern political consciousness among the intelligentsia has resulted in the erosion of traditional values of the tribal society like co-operation, equality and village self-government and its replacement by the individualistic, bureaucratic and money-oriented values of the middle class (Bhattacharya, 1978:1).

Political culture has helped develop another trend to change their oral cultural pattern. Oral tribal literature has been slowly converted into written literature. The elite section of the community resent domination by the neighbouring Sanskritic languages and they want to express their experiences in words and valid documents (Bhattacharya, 1978:2). It is for this purpose alone, that we see large organisations of the tribe being formed in recent years, and held to discuss matters relating to language and literature. Organisation of socio-political interests like *Bane Kébang*,

an important sitting of which was held in Majuli in 1982, has brought about results of great importance to the Mishing society. In that (All Assam) organisation long and important discussions were held in regard to the status of the Mishing language, its culture and development. Already a set of literature in the Mishing language has been brought out to make their children learn "the mother tongue which is acquired in infancy as a divine gift" (Taid, 1978:29). But then, Mishing is no longer a virgin language untouched by words of other languages - notably Assamese. As pointed out by some linguists (Dutta, 1985:14) "the Mishing language has incorporated many features of the Assamese language, particularly in the matter of vocabulary. Significantly, most of the Mishing vocables connected with settled cultivation are loan words from Assamese - which could be called Mishing-Assamese which is characterised by distinctive Mishing phonetic and other features". It is doubtless that in course of time the Mishing language would be established as one of the parallel sisters of other developed tribal languages of the country.

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