

The Mishings, their Origin, Migration and Relationship with the Mipags - An analysis

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The Mishings, one of the early Mongoloid groups of the Tibeto-Burman family who migrated to the plains-land of Assam, constitute a dominant tribal group in Upper Assam. Their present population is over 3 lakhs (1971 census records Mishing population as 2,59,511). The Mishings are spread over mainly Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh and Sonitpur districts of Upper Assam and East Siang and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. They are sparsely found to inhabit in the Koliabor area of Nowgong and also in Goalpara districts.¹ Unlike all other tribal groups of Assam, the habitations of the Mishings are concentrated along the river course of Brahmaputra, Simen, Burisuti, Tongani, Jiadhah, Subansiri, Ghunasuti, Boginadi, Ranganadi, Dikrong, Pichola, Buroi, Jiabharali and mainly in the island of Majuli on the north bank and Dibru, lower parts of Dihing, Disang, Dikhow and Dhansiri on the south Bank of Brahmaputra. Recently they have started building homesteads at places other than the river-course also. They have started settling alongside the railway lines of Jonai, Talem and Jamjing area. Though a very important tribal community, having long antiquity with distinct language and culture, it is very interesting to note that no systematic study has been attempted till date* on the traditions and beliefs, history and culture of the Mishings. Passing mention may be found in the Ahom chronicles and the writings of the British explorers like Delton, Dunbar, Lorrain, Needham, Waddel etc. Pious attempts have been made by late Sonaram Panyang and Dr. N.C. Pegu to bring to record the history of the tribe from the legendary tales, but they cannot give much authenticity. Recently research on some aspects of the tribe has been done by Dr. Jatin Mipun.

Till recently the people of this tribe in the plains of Assam were popularly known as the Miris. The Ahom chronicles (*Buranjis*) and the monumental works of the British explorers of the nineteenth century mention them as 'Miris'. Late Sonaram Panyang, who himself was a man of this tribe, gave the title of his book, written on

the tribe and published in 1935, as '*Miri Jatir Buranji*'. Even Dr. Nomal Chandra Pegu, the first medical graduate from this tribe, while writing an account of this tribe in 1956, titled his book as '*The Miris*'. The book has been revised in 1981 and in the revised edition Dr. Pegu has substituted the title '*The Miris*' by '*The Mishings*'. The movement to call this plains tribe of Assam as Mishing has started in the sixties of this century. Of course, Col. L.A. Waddel has mentioned in 1901 itself that the people of this tribe called themselves 'Mishings' but were known to the Assamese as 'Miris'² Even now, to call the people of this tribe as Miris by the non-Mishing people of Assam, is not completely out of use.

How did this tribe came to be called as 'the Miris' is still an open question. Historians like Delton³, Mackenzie⁴, Gait⁵ and Laxmi Devi⁶ are of the opinion that the word 'Miri' is an Assamese word which means 'go between'. This view is untenable, because no Assamese dictionary gives the meaning of 'Miri' as 'go between'. No doubt, the people of the tribe were used by the plains people of Assam as 'go between' or link-man to contact with the Abors, but the words used for such purpose were 'Duania' and 'Dobhasi' and not 'Miri'.

Bhriqumuni Kagyung contends that the word 'Miri' is a broken form (*Aprabhans*) of the word 'Mishing'. After migrating to the plains of Assam when the Mishings came in frequent contact with the Assamese people the word 'Mishing' took the shape of 'Miri' in the tongue of the Assamese people⁷. This view does not carry any weight, as 'Mishing' is not so difficult a word for the Assamese people as to degenerate its pronunciation to sound like 'Miri'.

Gireson mentions in '*The Linguistic Survey of India*' (Vol. III, Part III) of a tribe called 'Mru' belonging to Tibeto-Burman family, branched off the Burmese at a very early date, who were perhaps the forerunners of the great Burmese invasion of further India. The word 'Mru' is phonetically akin to 'mirui' and the Mru tribe might be the Miris. Further studies have not been made to arrive at a conclusive opinion. Moreover, to regard the Mru tribe as the Miris is to accept that the Miris migrated to the plains of Assam from the east, which goes against the legends. Legends of the tribe profusely state that they have migrated to Assam from the north.

Tarun Chandra Pamegam opines that the word 'Mrigo' is the root of the word 'Miri'. This view originates from the fact that the people of this tribe were good hunters and they used to come down from the hills and kill deer (Mrigo) very often in the plains areas. Because of their expertise in deer-hunting the people of the plains called them as 'Mrigis' (deer-hunters) and in due course of time the word 'Mrigi' became 'Miri' in the tongue of the plains people of Assam⁸.

Authorities like Dr. N.C. Pegu, Nahendra Padun etc. are of the opinion that the word 'Miri' is derived from the improper intonation of the Adi word 'Mirui' - meaning an institution of priests. The sound represented by 'Mirui' is difficult to utter. It has a peculiar phonetic tongue-twisting which is quite alien to the Aryan tongue, and so, in their tongue the word 'Mirui' took the shape of 'Miri'. The argument in favour of the view seems to be quite reasonable. The term 'Mirui', used by the Adis to call their priests, is, even now, pronounced by the people of the plains as 'Miri'.

In spite of the divergent opinion about the origin of the word 'Miri' it may be said with definiteness that the nomenclature 'Miri' has been acquired by the people of this tribe after coming down to the plains of Assam in their interaction with the plains people. In the Abor Hills (at present, the Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh) from where they have migrated to Assam, they were never known as the Miris. The Abors (at present, known as the Adis) from whom they branched off, called them as the Mishings. But it is difficult to ascertain as to whether the people of the tribe themselves introduced as Miris at the time of their first interaction with the plains people, or the Assamese people coined the word to call them so. The view put forward by Pamegam leads one to believe that it is the people of the plains who coined and used the term 'Miri' to call the people of this tribe. But if Dr. Pegu and Padun's interpretation of the term is accepted there is reason to believe that the people of the tribe introduced themselves as the 'Miris' in their first contact and interaction with the people of the plains of Assam. However, the fact is that the people of this tribe were called as the Miris in the plains of Assam, both by the non-Mishings as well as the Mishings, till the fifties of this century.

Further it is difficult to understand how the same word 'Miri' came to be used for two distinct tribes-the 'Miri' of the plains of

Assam and the Hill 'Miri' of Arunachal Pradesh, both having different cultures and traditions. The Miris are a branch of the Adi group of tribes and have migrated from a place of Adi habitat to the plains of Assam where they have settled, whereas the Hill Miris have migrated from the furthest north-western corner of the Subansiri river from a place where Ane-Singik (mother Subansiri) takes rise, settled down in the areas between the areas occupied by the Gallongs in the east and the Nishis on the west in Arunachal Pradesh and have socio-cultural linkage and racial affinity with the Nishis. As Heimendorf, the noted anthropologist, has put it, the Hill Miris are a part of the Dol group of the Daflas (Nishis)⁹. The use of the same word 'Miri' for both the tribes creates confusion among the historians to dubt the Mishings as only an offshoot or extension of the Hill Miris of Arunachal Pradesh in the plains of Assam. They confuse that the Miris of the plains had their origin in the Miri Hills situated in the foot of Sonagiri or Sovarnagiri Hills¹⁰. Except having co-sanguinity due to their common origin in Abu Tani, as is with the other tribes of the Tani group like the Nishis, the Tagins, the Apatanis and the Adis, this tribe of the plains has no similarity and link with the Miris of the Subansiri Hills.

From the sixties of this century the people of the tribe started rejecting the term 'Miri' to be used for them, as they developed a feeling that the Assamese people call them Miris in a derogatory sense. Now they call themselves Mishings and this word is in current use for the tribe. Like the word 'Miri' there are also many interpretations about the etymology of the word 'Mishing'. One interpretation is that it is derived from two Adi words-'Mi' meaning 'Man' and 'Yasing' meaning 'white, good, true or unpolluted'. They call the people of the plains, other than their tribe, as 'Mipag' ('Mi' means 'man' and 'Ki-pag' means 'polluted' or insignificant). They regard themselves as unpolluted and the people of the plains who are not of their tribe as polluted. One very forceful interpretation of the word 'Mishing' is that it is derived from the Adi words 'Mi' (man) and 'Ashi' (water)¹¹. The people of the tribe tend to use 'ng' to suffix many Adi soft words. For instance, 'Pega' (hornbill). 'Taye' (bees), 'Ponu' (song) etc. are pronounced as 'Pegang'. 'Taying', 'Ponung' in Mishing. Examples of such words can be multiplied in support of the probability of the derivation of the word 'Mishing' from 'Mi' and 'Ashi' i.e., 'Mishe'. The people of the tribe, by nature, preferred to

reside on the bank of the rivers or river-islands. Though, time and again, rivers have created havoc and disaster for them, they never have left the river banks. A more plausible suggestion is that the term 'Mishing' has come from the name, Mishing an offspring of Dosing who was, in turn, the son of Pedong Ang¹². Late Apak Jamoh, the head Interpreter of N.E.F.A. in British India, supported this view, quoting from the Adi legends, in 'Lolad' (1948), a mouthpiece of Sadow Asom Miri Chatra Sammelan held at Tarigaon. Dr. N.C. Pegu is of the opinion that all the groups and clans that constitute the present Mishing community of the Brahmaputra valley are not the direct descendents of Mishing, the son of Dosing, nor they form a single family for that matter. It could be presumed, in absence of any authentic record to show it otherwise, that the offsprings by Mishing formed a small nucleus of the 'Mishing group' and, then, many run-away families from various clans and groups joined them during their downward migration, through different routes, at different times¹³. Late Sonarma Panyang is of the opinion that majority of the Mishings have come from Minyong-Abors, a few from Gashi-Abors and the rest from Damro-Abors¹⁴. No proof has been found of the use of the word 'Mishing' in the hills before these people migrated down. Most probably, they have taken the name only after they have come down to the valleys of Assam.

There is hardly any historical data on the origin and migration of the Mishings to the plains of Assam. For this purpose one is to depend mostly upon the legends which came down from generation to generation in the form of oral literature the 'Abangs'. In the absence of authentic historical data, the legends expressed in the Abangs sound quite reasonable in getting an idea of the origin and migration of this tribe.

One of the legends says that the Mishings sprang up from Sedi and Melo. Out of Sedi and Melo's conjugal effort Dilling was born, Dilling was survived by Litung, Litung by Tuye, Tuye by Yepe and Yepe was survived by Pedong-Ane. Pedong-ane was most prolific in procreation and gave birth to many sons, some of whom were Domi, Do-Pang, Do-shing and do-bang. From domi came the Minyongs, from do-pang the Padams, from do-shing the Mishings and from Do-bang the Gallongs. This legend shows that the Mishings are only a branch of the great Adi group of people. Even if the legend is not

relied upon, the linguistic and cultural affinities of the Mishings with the Pasi, Minyong and Padam Abors in particular prove the fact.

One contention is that the Mishings had migrated from a place called 'Mungri Mungram' situated somewhere in the hills east of Patkai range and followed the path of the Ahoms. But this proposition does not hold weight as the Mishings have hardly any similarity with the Ahoms in so far as their culture, belief, tradition and language are concerned. Myths mentioned by Verrier Elwin¹⁵ lend support to the idea that the progenies of Sedi Melo first lived and flourished in some snow-clad mountains somewhere in Tibet, and for reasons not known today, they migrated south across the snow-bound high hills. The offsprings of Pedong-ane, thereafter, spread centrifugally to cover all the mountainous regions from the Subansiri river in the west to the Dibong river in the east. The Padams occupied most of the areas between the Dibong and the Dihong (Siang), the Minyongs dominated the area between the right bank of the Siyang and the Siyom. The Pasis migrated further down and settled in the lower region along the Siyang river. The Gallongs occupied the areas west of the Siyom river upto the left bank of the Subansiri river. An area called 'Regi-Regam' is remembered by the Mishings till today with reverence as their abode after their migration from the snow-capped mountains of Tibeto-Chinese border. The location of the place, 'Regi Regam' is not easy to find; however, a place called 'Riu-Raga', somewhere near Tuting in the Siyang valley, has been identified as the legendary place. From there the Mishings migrated to Karko-Simong area, down and around the Doshing pass. Legend goes that the Mishings have migrated from their Tibeto-Chinese abode much earlier than their fellow brothers the Padams, the Pasis, the Minyongs and the Gallongs.

The different groups of the Adis came down, most probably in search of cultivable fertile land and secure places, and in the competition for grabbing better lands clashes naturally were taking place among the various groups and in the clashes the stronger groups of the Adis drove away the Mishings, the weaker group, from their places of habitat in the hills and at last the Mishings came down to the plains and took shelter under the Ahoms¹⁶. Captain E.T. Dalton notes that the Abors claim the Mishings as their run-away slaves¹⁷. There is much room for doubt in the contention of the Abors. Rather

there is more reason to hold that the Mishings were more advantageous groups and had moved further down to accommodate themselves better and in this process they came down and at last set their foot on the plains of Assam, in search of fertile cultivable land. This seems more convincing because the Mishings had not settled down in the jungles of the foot-hills like the Nepalis migrating from Nepal to Assam, rather, coming down to the plains, they had occupied the fertile river-valleys of Upper Assam, particularly on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. More-over, if they were run-away slaves, they would not have been allowed to settle down in the plains land of the Abor Hills, where Mishing villages still exist. In the Lohit district also their settlements are found in the plains areas.

The Mishings migrated to the plains, not all at a time by a single route at a given time of history. The different groups came down at different times through different routes. Legends say that clans like Mili, Kumbang, Patir etc. came down through the Regam Hills following the old route of Damro, Adi-Pasi and Mebo; clans like Tayung, Taye, Taïd etc. came down through Bapi Hills following the present Pasighat-Pangin road; the clans like Pait, Pawe, Payum etc. came down following the old route of Kebang, yesing and Ledum through the Torne and Jogeng Hills¹⁸. Many of the Shayang clans came down sometimes later, from a place called 'Pesha-Shayang' near Dambuk¹⁹. Adi verbal history is silent about the course of migration of the Pegu and Doley clans of the Mishings. But that they were at one time inhabited in Karko-Simong area of the Abor Hills wherefrom they had migrated to the plains is evident from the existence of a place called 'Pegu' beyond 'Tayek-Piugo' in the upper region of the Abor Hills and a lake named 'Pegu-Sieng' in the upper region of the Abor Hills and a lake named 'Pegu-Sieng' near the present Karko primary school. Probably the two clans - Pegu and Doley - came down from their Sino-Tibetan abode much earlier than all the other Adi groups and hence the two clans did not find place in their legends. They did not have any encounter with rival groups during their journey downwards along the Siyang valley. Probably they had come down to the plains of Assam, without any pressure from any group, just to avoid the hard life of the hills and to have a better economic and secure life. It might be because of their early migration to the plains of Assam and coming in contact with the more civilized people of the-plains that they are more advanced than

the other groups and clans of the Mishing community. According to some authorities the 'Samogurias' and the 'Temars' were the first among the Mishings to migrate to Assam and due to want of any other Mishing group to communicate with, they had to mix up so intimately with the people of the plains that in due course of time they had even forgotten their own language. The history of migration of the Chamua-Mishings who are, at present, settled down in Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh, is still more difficult to trace out. Even they do not have any legend to tell about their migration to that place. The clans like Bori, Regon, Char, Pangin which are found, at present, among the Mishings, were clans of the Adis and they came down to the plains much later than the other Mishings. Many of their villages are still to be found in the plains areas of the East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Most of the authorities on the tribe are of the opinion that the Mishings are contemporary of the Ahoms and they migrated to the plains during the period when the Chutia kings were on the decline and the Ahom kings were on the rise. Most probably, the period of their migration ranges from 14th to 15th century, A.D. By the first part of the 16th century, definitely, they had settled down firmly. The story goes that during the bad days of the Chutias, after the defeat and killing of the Chutia king, Nitipal (1523 A.D.) by the Ahom king, Suhungmung or Dihingia Raja, the Mishings gave asylum to a few Chutia nobles with their families who fled away from their kingdom to escape the wrath of the Ahom king. In course of time, they inter-married with the Chutias, who, later on, came to be known as Chutia-Miris. Some authors, of course, opine that the Ahoms applied the term 'Chutia Miri' to the Miris living inside the Chutia kingdom.

On getting victory over the Chutias, the Ahoms brought under control the entire stretch of land from Sadiya to Subansiri river on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river, which was formerly under the Chutias. In doing so, the Ahoms came in conflict with the Mishings, whom they persuaded to come to friendly terms. It is said that in an unwritten treaty the Mishings agreed to help the Ahoms in subduing the remaining tribes of the northern hills who frequented with surprise attack on the bordered areas of the Ahom kingdom. With that end in view 12 leading persons from the Pag-Ro group and 10

from the rest of the groups of the Mishings were selected by the Ahom king to act as 'Gam' or chiefs. The Ahom kings, in fact, originated the two terms - 'Barogam' and 'Dohgam' - representing the Pag-Ro group and the rest of the groups respectively. The two terms were very much in vogue in the last century as can be seen from the famous Assamese novel, *Miri Jiori* by Late RajaniKanta Bordoloi (first published in 1890) and the Census Report of 1881. The Census Report of 1881 states thus, "The Miris are divided into two mutually exclusive sections, which are respectively known as 'Barogam' and 'Dohgam'.

The Mishings had, at times friendly and at other times belligerent, relations with the Ahoms. It has been on record that the Ahom kings offered women of the plains to a group of Mishings who came down bereft of their families, as a reward of their bravery in killing some deadly snakes which terrorised certain Assamese villages. They were given settlement at Samoguri for which they had ultimately come to be known as 'Samoguria Miris'²⁰ King Jayadhaj Singha employed a section of the Chutia Miris as soldiers in the Ahom army, because of their valour, in order to fight foreign invaders. Accordingly, the king ordered to appoint these Miris as Kahri. Some Mishing families, living around Subansirimukh, still bear the title Kahri²¹. It was again, the brave Mishings attacked the Nagas, destroyed many of them and compelled the others to fly away to their mountains. The Ahom king rewarded their services by presenting them money, clothes, blankets, bracelets etc. During Rudra Singha's time the Mishings served as soldiers in the Ahom armies and fought the Jayantia war²². The Ahom kings recognised duly the valuable services rendered by the Mishings. They gave equal privileges to the Mishings with others, without any discrimination or caste prejudice, as soon as the Mishings came to the fold of the Ahoms. King Suhungmung offered a chair of honour to Taosunglung Kungrin who defeated Lora Raja by giving him the name Thawmung Mungthao and ordered him to sit in front of all. He was Miri by caste²³.

Ahom king Pratap Singha gave settlement to Bhaluka Gohain of Borgohain family, who adopted a Mishing boy as his son. This Mishing boy, later on, came to be known as 'Miri Handique'. It was one of the descendent of this Miri Handique that king Gadadhar Singha appointed as Sadiya-Khowa Gohain. Not only that, the Borua

Pegus of Dehemaji, Chamuas of Namsai, Patgiris of Lohitmukh had similar titles offered by the Ahom kings with much pride.

The Ahom kings employed that Mishings as 'Duanias' or interpreters to contact with the Abors and to maintain with them political as well as trade relations. Over and above acting as trade-link between the Abors and the plains people, the Mishings themselves had long-standing trade relations with the people of the plains, even when they were there in the hills.

But it was not always that the relation of the Mishings were good with the Ahoms. The relationship definitely strained since the reign of king Pratap Singha, subsequent upon the annexation of the Chutia kingdom by the Ahoms. It became very severe during Gadadhar Singha's reign. In 1683, in the month of Sravana (July-August) the Sadiyal miris set fire to the house of Kanu Gohain Rup Handique, the Sadiyakhowa Gohain and burnt to death his wife, children and inmates. The mishings killed 200 people of the neighbouring villages and plunged their villages²⁴. However, king Gadadhar Singha stopped the rebellion, by defeating the Mishings. The mishings understood the futility of fighting against the Ahom army. So, not only that they ceased hostility, but also established friendly relation and rendered valuable service to the Ahom kings.

During the British period, the relations that the Ahoms were keeping with the Mishings, were not to be found, except that the British rulers used them as Dobhasis, Gams and Kotokis to make communication with the Abors and for keeping trade relations.

The fact is that the Mishings maintained their identity distinct from the other communities of the plains of Assam by calling the non-Mishings of the plains as Mipags or polluted man. In spite of this, their social relationship with the Mipags have always been cordial and friendly. Never has an incident of communal clash between the Mishings and the Mipags been heard, as is found in case of the Bodos.

The felling of deprivation and fear-psychosis of identity crisis has gradually taken shelter in the minds of the tribal groups, giving rise to ethnic politics. Politics of deprivation and ethnicity has infected, alongwith other tribal groups, the Mishings also, as a result of which the rift between the Mishings and the Mipags has widened

so much so that there is, at times, political demand for autonomy. But fortunately the demand is still confined within the constitutional limits, and has not yet taken the shape of terrorist activities like that of the Bodos. Timely steps within the constitutional framework, with sincerity, can only bridge the rift and bring back the cordial relationship between the Mishings and the Mipags.

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Although chieftain-ship, laws, customs and method of governance were different among some tribes such as the Konyaks, the Somas or the Mao Nagas, chieftainship was modified by democracy among others like the Chakmas. In such cases, every village was an independent unit, each village was administered by a council composed of the elders of the village enjoying seniority, wealth and influence and were selected by the people.

At present the Chakmas Nagas tribe is comprised of eighty-two villages in the North-Eastern portion of Nagaland. Bordered by Tuensang District on the Northern side, Manipur on the Southern side, Burma (Mynamar) on the East and Kohima district on the western side, the Chakmas tribe occupies an area of 202600 sq. km. The whole territory is hilly and is without any plain.

The name Chakmas is an acronym for three Nagas tribes which has in recent times adopted this name. What this paper seeks to write is the village administration before the development. During the colonial days, in the matter of village administration, the Chakmas Nagas were administered by a village council also included a chief who was usually the Priest. The Chieftaincy was hereditary but it was not necessary that a son of the chief succeed his father. Any person from the chief clan could become chief by performing a certain ceremony and of lasting for 30 days, which many persons could not do.

Some villages had more than one chief, the number might go up to three of just had only one chief who was very powerful. The village chief officiated in different functions and enjoyed tremendous influence in the village. The chief was present in all function whether it was religious or otherwise since he was considered the head of the village. As a religious head, he was the first man to sow the seeds