

**The
Mishings
(Miris)
of Assam**

Development of a New Lifestyle

Jatin Mipun

The main focus of this study is to analyse the process and impact of contact between a tribe with features of primitive organisations (micro level), regional Assamese culture with distinct language, policy and productive system (middle range or regional) and the great tradition and high culture (the macro level), the Indian traditional and culture represented through Hinduism mythology, beliefs, rituals and social organisation. For the analysis of the influence of Hinduism among the Mishings, various aspects such as religious practices and social institutions have been considered.

Moreover, the influence of the regional Assamese culture on their housing pattern, food habit, dress, language and in tools and implements are also considered for the discussion of acculturation among the Mishings in Assam. The aim of including all these aspects is to see the total process of culture change among the Mishings. As they came in contact with the Hinduism through regional culture, the other dominant group tried to apply the notions of purity and pollution (the caste system). They picked up the beliefs and myths and social organisation of the great tradition of Hinduism.

While keeping in mind the above, it is tried in this study to highlight the interrelationship between the three variables - acculturation, communication and development - in the contexts of the

(Continued on next flap)

Rs. 180

Mishings, a tribe in Assam. It is an attempt to see how two independent variables 'acculturation' and 'communication' have influenced the dependent variable 'development'.

Both the independent variables 'acculturation' and 'communication' are correlated with each other, without communication, acculturation is impossible and the continuity of the process of acculturation means the presence of communication in between two societies with different cultures. The development cannot be a reality in a society without the former variables.

The author through the present study wants to fill up the gap of inadequacy by probing into the process of acculturation, communication and development among the Mishings, a major tribe of Assam.

Dr. Jatin Mipun, who belongs to the Mishing tribe, did his M.A. and Ph.D. in Sociology from Dibrugarh University.

Dr. Mipun has joined the Indian Police Service in 1983 and presently serving in Assam-Meghalaya Cadre. Earlier Dr. Mipun had served as a Lecturer District Research Officer under Government of Assam and as Extra Assistant Commissioner in Assam Civil Service.

He writes poems and short stories in Assamese languages, besides research papers for learned journals.

ISBN : 81-212-0437-4

F233
314

THE MISHINGS (Miris) OF ASSAM

Development of A New Lifestyle

JATIN MIPUN



GIAN PUBLISHING HOUSE

New Delhi-110002

Gyan

THE MISHINGS
(Miris)
OF ASSAM

Development of A New Lifestyle

NEHU LIBRARY
Acc. No. 21706
Acc. by
Date
Class by
Sub Heading by
Enter by R. N. S. S.
Transcribed by

NE
301-4510954162
MIP:4

The Mishings (Mirirs) of Assam

ISBN: 81-212-0437-4

©Jatin Mipin

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without written permission

Second Edition Published in 2000
First Edition Published in 1987
in India by Gyan Publishing House
5, Ansari Road
New Delhi-110002

Printed at Goyal Offset Works, Delhi

FOREWORD

Socio-cultural changes because of culture-contact through different media are inevitable in the modern dynamic world. Dynamism is a sign of progress. The individuals as well as groups are exposed to these changed situations and hence adjustments become necessary for survival. But the processes and factors involved are always not identical in all the situations. Therefore, it is interesting to know what is happening where and among whom. The author has looked at the Mishing life from this point of view. By studying three villages in detail he has attempted to project the changing situation in the tribe.

The Mishing is a major tribe of Assam, the homeland of a large number of populations, both tribal and non-tribal, of different ethnic origins, linguistic affiliations and having varied socio-cultural traditions since long past. There has always been socio-cultural as well as biological interaction among these populations, and as a result the tribes are at different levels of modernization. The influence of Hinduism is very strong among many tribes. Among these some members have accepted Hinduism, while others are Hinduised.

The neo-Vaisnavite movement was launched by the great Assamese saint Srimanta Sankardeva in the later part of the fifteenth century. Gradually it started gaining momentum and was spread to different parts of this region of the country. It had great impact on the Mishings as well. They accepted Neo-Vaisnavism, though side by side they followed some of their traditional rites and rituals. The neo-Vaisnavite faith brought remarkable changes in the socio-cultural life of the Mishing. The author has found this to be the strongest force for acculturation.

The Mishing have their own language, but they have accepted the Assamese language to a great extent. Many of the neo-Vaisnavite literature are written in old Assamese, and hence learning of Assamese helped the Mishings of understand the new ideas, beliefs, practices, etc. Thus religion helped in the spread not only of Assamese language, but also the Hindu way of life among them.

It is a known fact that different types of communication network break the isolation and bring different populations closer. In this process several factors are associated. The author has clearly demonstrated how these factors are interacting to bring changes in the Mishing society.

The process of acculturation and improved communication system have accelerated the pace of development of the Mishing people. They are no longer an isolated community, but has become a part of the greater whole. The noteworthy changes in their attitude towards economy, education, health practices and the like have helped in the overall development of the Mishings under study. However, the author has observed that the present processes operating in the Mishing society have widened the distance between the rich and poor sections and have created new elites among the Mishings, a situation which deserves special consideration.

Dr Jatin Mipun deserves congratulations for his presenting such a vivid picture of the socio-cultural changes in the Mishing tribe and analysing the forces and factors involved in the process by undertaking an in-depth study. Such work among the tribes in this part of the country are rare. The book will be a valuable addition to the existing literature on the sociology and ethnography of north eastern India.

Department of Anthropology **B M DAS**
Gauhati University

PREFACE

The study on socio-cultural change among the tribes of India is always fascinating. Numerous studies have been conducted on interaction and social change, highlighting the result of contact between the literate and preliterate, between the primitive and civilized and between tribes and non-tribes.

In Assam, the interaction between the non-tribal Assamese population and the Mishings have been taking place for the last several centuries. The Mishings were originally hill dwellers in Arunachal Pradesh. After their shift to the plains of Assam, they became the part of the regional Assamese culture. It has happened due to acculturation and the impact of growing communication. In this study, an attempt has been made to analyse the interrelationship between acculturation, communication and development with special reference to the Mishings.

In my research work, I received help from different sources. I am thankful to the University of Dibrugarh for providing me a research fellowship (1976-79) which greatly helped me in conducting my research work. I express my sincere gratefulness and indebtedness to my teacher and supervisor Dr. S.M. Dubey, M.A. Ph.D., Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology, Dibrugarh University, for his guidance and stimulating suggestions throughout the entire course of the study without which the work would have not been completed.

I am also grateful to Dr. D. Doley, Dr. C.K. Gogoi, other teachers and research scholars of the Department of Sociology who offered help, suggestions and encouragement from time to time. I joined government service in 1979 and while I was busy in official duty, Sri O.P. Agarwal I.A.S., Sri S. Thakur, A.C.S. and numerous other friends helped and encouraged me to complete this study. I am thankful to them.

I extend my thanks also to Sri T. Dihingia and Sri T. Bhuyan who helped me from time to time in typing out the chapters. I must express my thanks to Sri K. Gogoi for typing out the final draft of the chapters of this dissertation.

I shall be failing in my duty if I do not thank the villagers and respondents of this study who helped me from all sides. I shall continue to remember their love and affection.

Jatin Mipun

CONTENTS

Foreword (v)

Preface (vii)

1. Introduction 1
2. Mishings : A Portrait of the Traditional Social System 15
3. The Field of Study and Methodology 32
4. Social Background of the Respondents 44
5. Acculturation Among the Mishings 54
6. Impact of Modern Communication 77
7. Socio-Economic Development 97
8. Overview and Concluding Remarks 121

Appendices

- I Bibliography 129
 - II Village Schedule 145
 - III Glossary 159
- Index*

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I

The Mishings are an Indo-Mongoloid tribe settled in the plains of Assam. Originally, they were hill dwellers and lived along with the Adis in Arunachal Pradesh. On the basis of the legends of the tribe and available historical records, they moved to the plains of Assam, around the 13th century A.D. Still, they retain their mythological, linguistic and institutional affinity with the Adis and the Nisis of Arunachal Pradesh. After their migration to the plains, considerable changes have taken place in their ecology, pattern of adaptation, cultivation, language, rituals, dress and house construction. The residence in the plains has offered them a better system of communication. The present dissertation is an attempt in understanding the process of acculturation, communication and development among the Mishings of Assam.

In the social sciences, the concept of 'acculturation' gained currency during the late nineteenth century. For the first time, Powell (1880) wrote of the 'force of acculturation' which was about 'changing indigenous traditions under the influence of civilized people'. McGee (1898) discusses later on about 'piratical acculturation' by which he meant 'cultural interchange under advantageous condition.' In the writings of the earlier twentieth century, the term was often employed interchangeably with diffusion and assimilation. In the British studies, it was used in terms of 'culture contact'. Though various studies have already been conducted on culture contact and social change, only in the early part of the twentieth century, Redfield, Linton and Herskovitz (1936) attempted to draw for the first time a systematic definition of the concept. According to them—

Acculturation includes those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first hand contact, with subsequent change in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups (1936:149).

In spite of much criticism, the definition formulated by them has been able to pave the way for the future study of acculturation in different societies. In the middle part of the twentieth century, Herskovitz (1955:472) stressed on acculturation as the 'study of culture transmission in process' and tried to assess the levels of material cultures of different societies. Murdock (1955:3) has defined the term as the 'assumption of culture through contact', especially with the people of higher civilization'. Spindler (1955:3-4) expands the definition of the term as

the total adaptive process that occurs in cultural patterning and value system, group alignments, systems of control, social organization, and economy and in the psychological structures and functions of individuals, as adoptions are made to the changing conditions of existence created by the impact of populations and their cultures upon each other.

Having lots of criticisms and modifications of the definition of the term, social scientists have, however, accepted acculturation as an important aspect of the study of social change which especially denotes the transformation of cultural or social elements from one society to another (Beals: 1951; Eaton: 1952; Keesing: 1964; Hallowell: 1957; McGee: 1960; Gould and Kolb: 1964; Moore: 1965; Task and Nelson: 1974; Lewis: 1976; Friedle: 1976).

In the world perspectives, various works have been conducted on the process of acculturation in different societies (e.g. Mead: 1932; Herskovitz: 1938; Linton: 1940; Malinowski: 1945; Sharp: 1952; Redfield: 1953; Newcomb: 1956; Bacon and Herskovitz: 1959; Wilson and Wilson: 1965; Alba: 1976). In this context, Mead's study of the plains Indians (1930) and Herskovitz's study of Carebeans (1938) are of special significance. As the plains Indians were not in the position to adjust with the demands of new culture, Mead tried to see the problems of disorganisation as a result of contact. She pointed out how the Indian indigenous religious practices suffered due to the settlements of whites with the Indians. Due to the acceptance of Presbyterianism, the American Indians were regarded neither as the followers of indigenous religion nor Presbyterianism. Amidst this situation, Mead discussed the disorganisation and disintegration of the traditional way of life which was the product of the culture contact between the whites and the Indians. Herskovitz's major concern was with the reinterpretation of the new cultural elements so that it can be adjusted with the traditional culture of the people. He pointed out that the blacks have always tried to find out relationship

between their African Gods and the Catholic saints. The ultimate result is the acculturation among the blacks in spite of their obligations to old norms and values.

On the basis of the studies of Mead and Herskovitz on acculturation, the following conclusions have been derived:

- (a) The acculturation results as a contact between two societies or cultures where the dominant culture often influences the weaker or primitive culture.
- (b) As a result of the influence of the dominant culture, the weaker culture is either changed totally or gradually.
- (c) The contact between the dominant and the weak cultures leads to disorganisation of the religious practices and the traditional way of life of the latter. It creates marginality among the members of the weak culture.
- (d) In certain situations, the people belonging to the weak culture try to find out the common elements between their culture and the dominant culture.

The main focus of this study is to analyse the process and impact of contact between a tribe with features of primitive organisations (micro level), regional Assamese culture with distinct language, polity and productive system: middle range or regional) and the great tradition and high culture (the macro level, the Indian tradition and culture represented through Hinduism, mythology, beliefs, rituals and social organisation). For the analysis of the influence of Hinduism among the Mishings, various aspects such as religious practices and social institutions have been considered. Moreover, the influence of the regional Assamese culture on their housing pattern, food habit, dress, language and in tools and implements are also considered for the discussion of acculturation among the Mishings in Assam. The aim of including all these aspects is to see the total process of culture change among the Mishings. As they came in contact with the Hinduism through regional culture, the other dominant group tried to apply the notions of purity and pollution (the caste system). They picked up the beliefs and myths and social organisation of the great tradition of Hinduism.

II

The term communication refers to the materials, mechanical systems, media of mass-communication and interpersonal linkages used for the transmission of messages. It is difficult to give a definition for this concept.

Some social psychologists and sociologists have confined their interests in communication largely to the study of languages and the analysis of the vehicles and messages in communication, although they have also been interested in the functional effects of communication (Lundberg, Schrag and Larsen: 1954, 360; Quine: 1960; Newman: 1966,62).

In the field of communication, several works have been conducted by the social scientists (e.g. Ayer: 1955; Damle: 1955; Broadbent: 1958; Crowley: 1962; Dexter: 1964; Schramm: 1967; Dube: 1967; Mishra: 1973; Bhattacharyya: 1976; Atal: 1977; Hockings: 1977). In Indian situation, the works of Damle (1955), Dube (1967) and Bhattacharyya (1976) are significant. Damle conducted his study in the early fifties in six Indian villages. One of the major findings in his study is that the villages which had an idea and interest in communication, were more informative and alert. They were in a position to inform the author about the situation of Indian villages of that time. But the main problem, as raised by the author, is that the situation was not there whereby the villagers could know the significance of communication in their development.

The study of Dube: (1967b) on communication, innovation and planned change in India is also remarkable in this field. This study shows the relationship between innovation, planned change and media of communication. Bhattacharyya discusses how, with the introduction of satellite communication, people of the world have come into closer contact. According to him, the world organizations like U.N., UNESCO and others have been playing a cardinal role in the field of global communication.

The role of communication is extremely significant in acculturation and development.

For the purpose of the present study, the communication has been divided into the following two parts:

- (a) the traditional communication which includes oral system of communications, transport (elephants, boats), messengers and announcement through drum beating etc., and
- (b) the modern system of communication includes formal and written communication, post and telegram, transport (roads and rails), mass-media (radio, newspapers and cinema).

III

The term development is frequently used by the economists and other social scientists. But the theoretical framework of the term 'development' in sociological perspective has emerged only a few years back when the

emphasis was laid on non-economic and human factors (Eisenstadt: 1961; Smelser: 1963; Earringer: 1965; Bhumer: 1966; Horowitz : 1966; Aron: 1967). It is to be noted that most of the contemporary social scientists have concentrated on the societal development (Gresinger: 1971; Havers: 1971; Warner: 1971; Elberts and Young: 1971) and the significant role of value in development (Von Wiese: 1956; Horowitz ; 1966; Myrdal : 1968). Moreover, sociological theory on development has given emphasis on the 'Statis' to 'dynamics' of society (Moore: 1960a; Parsons: 1961; Martindale: 1962; Horowitz: 1966; Hobbs: 1971).

A few social scientists have regarded development as a type of social change (Greiger: 1971; Havens: 1971; Warner: 1971). Others have given emphasis on normative aspects (Seers : 1970; Warner : 1971; Kim : 1973). According to Seers (1971: 1-2):

Development is inevitably treated as a normative concept, as almost synonym for improvement, to pretend otherwise is just to hide one's value judgments.

Kim (1973) discusses development by giving emphasis on the following aspects:

- (a) development as value concept;
- (b) development as societal structural change; and
- (c) importance of political leadership in development process.

How the value perspectives have been helping in the change of personal values and thus help in attitudinal change are analysed by the social scientists from various angles (Weber: 1958; Lerner: 1958; Hoselitz: 1960; McClelland: 1961; Boulding: 1963; Warshay: 1964; Inkles: 1966; Kahl: 1968; Myrdal: 1968; Kim: 1973). However, it is agreed upon by the social scientists that the term 'development' is an ideal goal in itself.

One of the best examples in the field of value judgment and societal development is Max Weber's (1958) monumental work 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism'. The author discusses the relationship between Capitalism and Protestantism on the basis of historical evidence, and thereby he tries to analyse the effects of Protestantism in the growth of Capitalism. Weber shows that there is a closer relationship between religion and economic ethics. The basic issue as propagated by him is that something is there in Protestantism which helps create the system of economic norms, which lead to rationality and acquisitiveness. The other religions of the world lack this spirit according to Max Weber.

Another noteworthy work on development is Myrdal's 'Asian Drama' (1968). In his study Myrdal attempted to give an actual picture and prospects for developments in the South Asian countries. After the Second World War, numerous attempts have been made by Governments of South Asian countries for the development of their respective States. In his three volumes, Myrdal tries to include almost all the aspects responsible for the backwardness of the countries of South Asia.

For the purpose of the present study, the development includes :

1. The development in socio-cultural activities.
2. The development in occupation and the subsidiary occupation adopted by the respondents.
3. Agricultural innovation and alternatives for self-sufficiency and the learning of investment of income.
4. Acceptance of medical science and family planning.
5. Respondents' education and preference of education for their children.
6. The attitude of the respondents towards development.

IV

Since the early part of the twentieth century, various studies have been conducted dealing with social change among the Indian tribes. The sociologists and the anthropologists who first paved the way for empirical and systematic study of social change among the tribes in Indian situation were Chattopadhyaya (1922a), Majumder (1937), Karve (1942), Srinivas (1942a), Ghurye (1943b, 1952c). These studies did not use the term 'acculturation'. In place of it, they often used the term 'cultural change', 'social change', and so on. By studying the process of change among the Indian tribes, Ghurye (1963b) says that in spite of the expected changes among the tribes, they are the sufferer of stresses and strains resulting out of conversion to Hinduism. Srinivas (1966c) discusses the pattern of social change in India by using few terms and models, e.g., Sanskritization and Westernization. As indicated above, without using the term 'acculturation' Indian social scientists studied the problem of 'culture-contact' through the concepts of social and cultural change.

Several scholars (Ghurye: 1940a; Mehra: 1954; Dutta Majumder: 1956; Srinivas: 1961b; Jay: 1961; Sinha: 1962; Sahay: 1962 and others) have conducted researches to assess the impact of the contact between Hinduism and tribal communities in India. As commented by Vidyarthi,

Three distinct processes have been usually studied and noted: (1) the renunciation of certain tribal practices and adoption of others followed by higher castes, (2) the creation of legends and myths of ancient Hindu tradition, and (3) the exercise of economic and political dominance wherever possible in seeking recognition to a higher status (1978 : 440).

Along with the former studies on culture contact, the studies on acculturation among the tribes of India have also been conducted with equal enthusiasm by several social scientists (Sachchidanand: 1964; Agarwal: 1968; Aurora: 1972; Vidyarthi and Rai: 1977).

Alike the field of acculturation, various studies have been conducted in Indian situation on the field of communication also. In this context, the studies of Damle (1955), Dube (1967b), Bhattacharyya (1976), Atal (1977), Hockings (1977) are worth mentioning. Of course, numerous studies on inter-tribal and tribal-non-tribal relationship have been conducted by various authors which depended mostly on the study of communication system. From this point of view the studies of Dasgupta: (1961), Furer Haimendorf (1962), Das (1967), Majumder (1972), Goswami (1972), Dubey (1972a) are noteworthy.

There are several studies on tribal development (Chattopadhyay : 1949; Dube : 1949a; Kulkarni : 1964; Aurora : 1972; Goswami: 1972; Vidyarthi and Rai: 1976; Dubey: 1976b). But so far as the plains tribes of Assam in general and the Mishings in particular are concerned, no systematic study has been conducted upto now. Only a few books, monographs, papers (Robinson: 1841; Hunter: 1879; Michell: 1883; Waddell: 1901; Baines: 1912; Payengkataki: 1935; M'Cosh: 1937; Pegu: 1956; Doley: 1973; Bhandari: 1974; Sharma Thakur: 1976), census reports are found on the Mishings. In the monographs written by the early British administrators, there are preliminary reports about the Mishings. Payengkataki (1935) and Pegu (1956) have tried to depict the social and cultural picture of the Mishings. Really, a few studies have been conducted dealing with culture and development of the Mishings (Doley: 1973; Bhandari : 1974; Sharma Thakur : 1976; Pegu: 1981).

The major aim of the present study is to highlight the interrelationship between the three variables - acculturation, communication and development - in the contexts of Mishings, a tribe in Assam. It is an attempt to see how the two independent variables 'acculturation' and 'communication' have influenced the dependent variable 'development'.

Both the independent variables 'acculturation' and 'communication' are correlated with each other. Without communication, acculturation is impossible and the continuity of the process of acculturation means the presence of communication in between two societies with different cultures. The development cannot be a reality in a society without the former variables.

The author through the present study wants to fill up the gap of inadequacy by probing into the process of acculturation, communication and development among the Mishings.

References

- Alba, Richard D.
1976 Social Assimilation among American Catholic National Origin Groups. *American Sociological Review* 6, Vol. 41.
- Ayer, A.J. and others
1955 *Studies in Communication*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Aron, Raymond
1967 *The Industrial Society*. New York: Praeger.
- Agrawal, B.C.
1968 *From Commerce to Conquest : A Historical Study of Acculturation in India*. *The Eastern Anthropologist* 1, Vol. XXI, Jan-April.
- Aurora, G.S.
1977 *Communication and Nation-building in India*. In M.N. Srinivas and others (eds.), *Dimensions of Social Change in India*. Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Bombay.
- Beals, Ralph L.
1951 *Urbanism, Urbanization and Acculturation*. *American Anthropologist*, New Series 53:1-10
- Bacon, W.R. and M.J. Herskovitz (eds.)
1959 *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*.
- Broadbent, Donal E.
1958 *Perception and Communication*. New York : Pergamon.
- Bhattacharyya, V.R.
1976 *Communication in a Global Village*. Chetana Publications, New Delhi.
- Barringer, H.R., G.I. Blankston and R.W. Mark
1965 *Social Change in Developing Areas*. Cambridge, Massachusetts : Schenkman Publishing Company.
- Bhumar, Herbert
1966 *The Idea of Social Development*. *Studies in Comparative International Development* 2:3-11.
- Boulding, Kenneth, K.
1963 *The Image Aun Arbor* : University of Michigan Press.

Also Published by Gyan

THE KINSHIP AFFINITY AND DOMESTIC GROUP : THE MISHINGS OF BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

J.S.Bhandari

An indepth study of the lifestyle and culture of an important tribe of nothestern India. Researched for the first time by a leading anthropologist and academican.

241pp 23cm illus **Rs. 240**

1992 81-212-0350-3

KIRATAS IN ANCIENT INDIA

G. P. SINGH

A major historical work on a very significant ancient tribe of India, having numerous references in epics and other Vedic literature, cultu e system over a vast stretch of time.

1990

500pp

Rs. 360

SINGLE WOMEN IN ASSAMESE HINDU SOCIETY : An Anthropological Study of their Problems and Status

Jeuti Barooah

Based on intimate survey and research amongst a cross-section of Assamese society, it is a unique study of the status enjoyed by single women and the social and familial problems they face in life and career.

XVI+280pp **Rs. 300 (Tentative)**

1992 81-212-0416-X



GYAN PUBLISHING HOUSE

NEW DELHI-110 002