

**KINSHIP  
AFFINITY AND  
DOMESTIC  
GROUP**

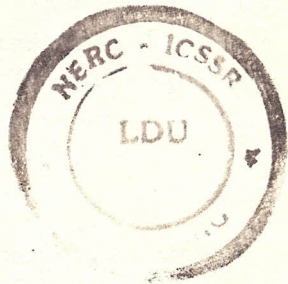
**A Study among the Mishings  
of the Brahmaputra Valley**

**J S BHANDARI**

# Kinship, Affinity and Domestic Group

A study among the Mishing  
of the Brahmaputra Valley

J.S. BHANDARI



**GYAN PUBLISHING HOUSE**

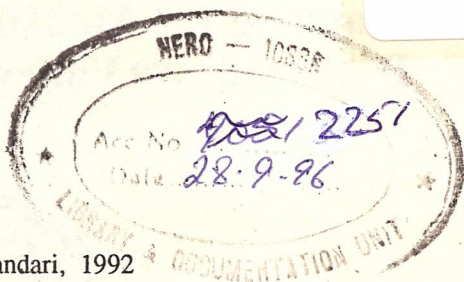
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## PREFACE

The study of kinship has been considered an essential part of social anthropological study. The preeminent place of kinship studies was based on the assumption that kinship systems provide the basis for social formation of nonliterate societies. These studies emphasized the content of human social relations in extremely diverse forms of social systems on the basis of the lowest common denominator of culturally conceptualized biological relatedness, viz. kinship.

The study of tribal societies in India have a very long history and we have many outstanding monographs about several tribes many of which have been studied with kinship systems as their focus. With the country achieving independence, anthropological studies underwent a change engendered by priorities that were envisaged for the new nation were largely centered around problems of integration and development. Caste and peasantry played a pre-dominant role in this respect. The village and the village societies thus became the focus of all attention. Consequently anthropological studies moved from the tribal to rural. Kinship studies did remain within the frame of anthropological enquiry but the focus shifted. Thus, despite a very significant number of distinct tribal societies in India, we have very few analytical studies of their social structures in the past 2-3 decades. The theoretical advance in anthropology were not adequately reflected in Indian tribal ethnographies as few of them were conducted in recent times. The scholarly attention remaining confined to caste and Sanskritic traditions which encapsulated most of the current theoretical debates. Such attention was denied to tribal studies which were represented largely by the classical ethnographic traditions and later by some focus on development.

The present study is aimed at providing an analytical study of the kinship system of one of the largest tribal communities of the plains of Assam, and thus fills in a much felt gap by providing a theoretically

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oriented tribal study. The main emphasis in this work has been reiteration of the views that kinship system forms the basis of social relationships, descent, filiation, consanguineal ties, and affinity. The reality of kinship is understood in terms of kinship per se and not as a reflection or epiphenomenon. In other words this study intends to restore kinship to its rightful status which was getting lost in a plethora of materialistic explanations.

The study has passed through many phases of introspection to be finally presented in its present form. I should like to express my grateful thanks to a number of friends and scholars who have commented upon the work. My sincere thanks are due to Dr. Subhadra Channa, Mr. Soumendra Patnaik and Mr. Sukant Chaudhury for their sincere and ungrudging help in giving the present work its final shape.

Delhi February 29, 1992

J.S. BHANDARI

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## Introduction

The Study of Kinship has occupied the centre stage of anthropological research for a long time and has provided not only the major field of enquiry but also the central concept to generations of anthropologists for writing and analysing the behavioural and organizational dimensions of human society. But even after more than a century of research and discussions, many issues remain unresolved and continue to attract academic interest.

Of late, the two major questions that have engaged the attention of anthropologists revolve round (i) the question of whether Kinship is rooted in biology/ nature or is it purely social/cultural and (ii) what exactly is the nature of kinship; is it be explained as a "thing-in-itself" or is it an epiphenomenon of a deeper more fundamental structural reality.

The nature/culture dichotomy has formed the focus of debate, which includes among others, Needham (1971), Barnes (1973) and Gellner (1987). Needham (1971) is of the strong opinion that kinship is purely social, in fact for him there does not exist anything as kinship in the sense of a blood relationship or any kind of relationship. It is simply a transference of rights and duties from one generation to the other.

"Let me simply adopt the minimal premise that kinship has to do with the allocation of rights and their transmission from one generation to the next. These rights are not of any specific kind but are exceedingly various : They include most prominently rights of group membership, succession to office, inheritance of property, locality of residence, type of occupation, and a great deal else. They are all, however, transmissible by modes which have nothing to do with the sex or genealogical status of transmitter or recipient. Certainly they have no intrinsic connexion with the facts, or the cultural idioms, of procreation" (Needham 1971 : 4).

Further he writes : "These jural systems and their component statuses can be genealogically defined. Why this should be so is a fundamental question that has never been properly resolved, and *I cannot take it up here*" (op.cit.) (emphasis added). It is this fundamental question unanswered by Needham that underlies the crux of the debate regarding the true nature of kinship. Needham evades all responsibility by conveniently sidestepping the issue.

In a strong criticism of Needham, Gellner upholds the merits of studying kinship as a set of relations derived primarily from biology. There need not be a one-to-one correspondence, but the ultimate referent remains biological. "There is of course an element of truth in the view Needham stresses..... : namely the fact that social kinship systems are not identical with the reality of physical kinship, but on the contrary, systematically add to it, omit from it, and distort it" (Gellner 1987 : 168). The use of clan names, for instance which after a few generations do not correspond to real genealogical connections may be taken as an example of what Gellner has said "Makes anthropologists insist on not equating kinship beliefs with kinship reality"(op.cit.).

But here the social relationship has as its referent, a physical relation, even if indirectly. An adopted son for instance, is recognized as not having a physical relationship as against biological relationship son, but the social relationship is understood only with reference to the biological relationship, as being established parallel to it. Kinship is a 'function' of biology bearing in mind "that function is not identity" (op. cit.)

Barnes (1973) is concerned with physical kinship in the sense of the beliefs of members of the society about the physical processes involved. Paternity in the physical sense is not in any society a scientifically established fact but a social one in the sense that physical kinship is physical to the extent that it is socially recognised as such, "physical motherhood to physical fatherhood is as nature is to culture" (Barnes 1973 :72). However, according to Gellner, whatever maybe the reasons, biological paternity is rarely questioned. In a society where biological paternity is known , very few persons ever have any doubts about the identity of the biological fathers.

Without any reference at all to genetic fatherhood one could not be talking of a father at all. If simply one were to deal with a role of provider/protector without any reference to biological paternity, then why use the term 'father' -with its implication of paternity, either biological or social or both. What Gellner has tried to point out is that ultimately the referent will be biological. This has nothing really to do with Barnes' distinction between a 'physical-physical' relationship or a 'socially recognized physical relationship'. As long as the basic relationship is biological - the social interpretation of it can then be understood only as an interpretation. "If a term is to be classified as a kin term, it must refer to a type of biological relationship, and if a type of relationship is to be held to be a kin relationship, it must be built upon a type of biological relationship. If this logical condition is waived, kinship simply disappears " (Harris 1990 : 38).

Since the Pagro-Mishing are a classical example of what the Neo-Marxist School has defined as a lineage mode of production I would like to give a brief resume of this debate to show that ultimately, no matter how we approach kinship, its reality can only become apparent by the biological referent and ideology of cooperation and amity.

The Neo-Marxist School of thought represented largely by the French Marxist school, struggled hard to rise above vulgar materialistic determination while subscribing to the tenet of determination by the economy in the last instance. Kinship was not to be seen directly determined by productive forces, yet there are differences of opinion as to what exactly is its relation to the economy. One major debate centered around what was widely known as the lineage mode of production, which was concerned with pre-capitalist societies of the non-state type, whose social organisation was based on the patrilineal ideology, where there was a clear cut distinction between elders and youngsters, men and women, dead and living, elder sibling and younger sibling etc. These differences led to relations of mutual dependence, not necessarily of exploitation. Women, except in their relationship to men were not accorded independent social and ritual status. They even had to worship their husbands' ancestors and not their own.

An attempt to explain these societies through historical materialism gave rise to a crucial theoretical problem because Marx was not aware of these types of society and had not given his own analysis of them. So the questions were, whether or not and in what way Marxism could be used to explain these societies. One school of thought believed that they represented groups of exploitative classes and thus evolved through their own contradictions. Other school of thought believed that classes as classes existed only in a state society and to talk of classes in a stateless society is itself contrary to classical Marxism. With reference to the concept of kinship, this debate raised questions about the ideology of kinship: whether it was genuinely based on cooperation and amity or did it serve to mask relations of exploitation between different classes of people.

The debate has been summarized very well by Kahn (1981) and Clammer (1985). I shall reproduce only a brief sketch of it. Apart from the questions of exploitation and classes, the other question was of the primacy of kinship in pre-capitalist (or specifically lineage) type of societies.

Meillasoux (1986), who through his classical study of the Guros was the father of the debate, talked of the determining role of a certain level of development of productive forces. Lineage, as a type of social organisation occurs in conjunction with a level of development of productive forces which he calls the Agricultural Domestic Community. Though he talks of the authority of the elders, he does not speak of a class based exploitation. The exploitation he speaks of is of a more fundamental nature based on men's appropriation of the fertility of woman. Patriarchy, according to him, is a control of a female womb, socially necessary for the men who cannot procreate. This is, however not directly related to the Marxian concept of class exploitation neither are the women 'conscious' of themselves as classes.

Terray (1972) has taken Althusser's conceptualization of the social formation as relatively independent levels of economic, juridico-political and ideological structures. He has adopted Althusser's

distinction between determination and domination to say that kinship becomes the dominant element when society is self-sustaining and there is no exploitation of labour. Thus the lineage mode with its dominance of kinship is seen to have no exploitation. According to him class antagonism gains strength as a concept by distinguishing between societies that have classes and that do not have classes, and would lose all meaning if imputed to lineage societies.

At a later stage Terray (1979) slightly modifies his stance to speak of classes, at least classes-in-themselves, based on pre-existing categories, but not 'self-conscious' classes-for-themselves.

For Godelier (1972) kinship is dominant in pre-capitalist societies but determined in the last instance by the economy. Kinship becomes the dominant principle of social organisation when it performs the 'functions' of both superstructure and infrastructure, i.e. kinship itself functions as relations of production. The unanswered question remains as to why kinship forms the relation of production and not any other superstructural element?

Clammer (1985) has extended Meillasoux's analysis to traditional Chinese society and finds it inadequate. The relatively undifferentiated egalitarian lineages of the Guros (similar to that of the Mishing), are not present in China where there is lineage segmentation, feuds and oppression of the poor and exploitation by an extension of the kinship idiom of lineages, yet determined by conditions outside of it. It is the existence of class differences in society at large that is associated with class difference within lineages.

In view of the great difference in structure of the Guros and the Chinese, Clammer raised the doubt that if it is possible to talk of a lineage mode of production at all? Earlier Hindess and Hirst (1954) had also talked of a uniform stage of Primitive Communism based on collective appropriation marked by a division into simple (hunters and food gatherers) and complex (horticulture, pastoralists) re-

distribution. The dominant instance here is ideology. They had also denied the existence of a separate lineage mode of production/.

According to Clammer (1985:108), "The lineage itself forms a sociological and ideational framework within which different labour processes--farming, fishing etc. are organized; but it itself is not a mode of production ... it is also a kinship system *per se* "

Further as a reversal of Meillasoux's contention he says that "Control over the processes of production allows the elders to exercise in practice, the control over reproduction *already assigned to them by kinship ideology*" (*ibid.*:109) (Emphasis added).

Godelier (1979) too, is skeptical about the concept of the 'lineage mode of production' and also points to the Marxist anthropologists' failure to answer the central question of kinship analysis.

One moot theoretical point raised by Clammer (1985:113) is "that structurally similar kinship systems (in this case the patrilineage) can be found in conjunction with different systems of production and in different ecological settings .... what it does suggest is that there are only a relatively limited number of structural permutations which kinship system can take *given the unchangeable biological factors which underlie all such systems* and that the specific choice of system is a product of history and cultural decisions, as much as it is ecology or of a particular mode of production (which, as we have stressed, is analytically independent of the kinship organisation)". Further he writes, "Kinship does not merely have a function in production, nor does it actually 'mask' actual relations of production. It may do both these things, while still retaining its status as a system of *social organisation* in and for itself" (*ibid* :114) (emphasis added).

Ultimately there appears no consensus to treat any form of kinship organization as mode of production and to believe that any type of kinship structure corresponds to any specific invariant

relationship to productive forces. That in certain types of societies at certain historical points of development of productive forces, kinship may function as relations of production, does not justify talking of any form of kinship structure such as lineage as a mode of production.

Further, except for Dupre and Rey none of the other Neo-Marxist scholars agree that there exist relations of real exploitation in the lineage. None of the theories can satisfactorily explain why kinship is the primary form of social relationship in pre-capitalist societies. We have to look towards what Clammer has mentioned as the unchangeable biological factors that make kinship relations the primary form of relationship in all societies whether capitalist or pre-capitalist. As Clammer has rightly pointed out, the variations in kinship structure are only a few and these occur in conjunction with a large number of political and economic organisations. In each society the relations external to kinship may be reflected to some extent in kinship structures. In the hierarchical state society of traditional China, the lineages show a degree of stratification not exhibited, for example, among the Pagro-Mishing. In an egalitarian society like the Pagro - Mishing the relationships within the lineage are guided by the ideology of kinship i.e. of amity. It then depends upon the level of stratification of the society whether or not the lineage is used as mode of exploitation.

Classes actually occur when there is a breakdown of kinship ideology, when groups formed on the basis of appropriation and accumulation actually tend to separate out from the kin-groupings. Kinship in itself is not based on exploitation nor does it have a class character determined by the economy. The kinship idiom may be widely used, however, to perpetuate any other type of structure, even classes.

Thus the basic character of kinship remain rooted in biology and it is this that gives it primacy of importance in almost all social organisations. With capitalism, there is a separation of kinship from economy; whereas in pre-capitalist societies they remain embedded in

each other. Till such time as it is superseded by ideologies of exploitation and conflict mainly arising in the extra-kinship domain, kinship ideology is based on affective, emotional ties which to some extent are retained even under highly capitalist conditions. Irrespective of the functions performed by kinship, amity is the principle that is invoked even in the performance of the most pragmatic tasks.

The Pagro-Mishing, who are the subject of the present study, show an overwhelming concern with biological fatherhood at the level of the functioning domestic group. This is somewhat inexplicable in a society otherwise based on a strong principle of unilineal descent. Membership into the patrilineage is strictly on the basis of what is socially recognized as biological paternity. At this point it is valid to stress that the Pagro-Mishing do recognize a biological father established through the act of coitus. Unlike other patrilineal societies like the Nuers, the social factors are not responsible for the incorporation of the child into the lineage; it is not the sociological husband of the mother i.e. the pater, but the actual genitor who is responsible for incorporating the child into the lineage.

This is not in tune with the existing theories of descent groups. Actual biological paternity does not affect the corporate nature of the descent groups (Fortes:1969) neither does it affect the status of descent groups as units of exchange (Levi-Strauss:1969).

Among the Pagro-Mishing, the concept of biological paternity is strongly linked with the ritual of ancestor worship which is the central organizing principle of their society. According to Meillasoux (1986) agricultural domestic community have ancestor worship because it is the ancestors who are ultimately responsible for passing on the seeds (for agriculture) to the descending generation. The Pagro-Mishing society is characterized by a patrilineal clan based organization which is strongly marked by the rituals of ancestor worship. Economically they approximate quite well to what Meillasoux has called an agricultural

domestic community. In such communities the lineage elders maintain their authority over the youngsters through the institutions of bridewealth. For the Mishing the bridewealth has a ritual significance in that it makes the ancestors of the groom accept the woman as an affine. A woman is not considered to be fully integrated into her husband's patri-clan unless at least a token bride-price has been paid for her at the time of marriage. In this society, it must be mentioned, the incorporation of a woman into her husband's group is total.

On the lines of the characters given by Meillasoux, the Pagro-Mishing can also be identified as an agricultural domestic community. The economy is largely agricultural supplemented with fishing. They are self-sufficient in terms of production and consumption, there is a definite predominance of 'use-value' over 'exchange-value' although market relations are not totally absent. Technologically, they are dependent on human and animal energy. They weave their own cloth and the cash cropping is only sufficient to provide for their subsistence. It is not as much technology, but the "socially accepted effects of its uses" (Meillasoux:38) that determine a particular type of economy. The Pagro-Mishing society is definitely organised around agriculture and all other activities are subservient to it.

"The social organization of the domestic agricultural community is built (simultaneously and indissolubly) both upon the relations of production in so far as these emerge from the economic constraints imposed by agricultural activity undertaken under conditions defined by the level of productive forces and upon the relations of reproduction necessary to perpetuate the productive cells" (op.cit). And because the productive cell is composed of kinship relations, society emphasizes kinship.

In such a society the ancestor becomes the object of worship because ultimately it is he who is the provider of seed. Agriculture is a cyclically repetitive activity in which seeds of one season are passed

on to the next and in this cycle of 'advances and returns' ultimately one generation is beholden to an earlier one for the seeds which it requires for agricultural production. It is this 'gratitude' that leads to the ancestors to be worshipped according to Meillasoux's reasoning.

Bride wealth here serves as a token of respect to the ancestors who are ideologically viewed as commanding respect and even after death to be an integral part of society. The ancestors are not simply worshipped; they appear at various levels of integration of Mishing society. The lineages are united at higher and higher levels through the worship of common ancestors. All those who can worship a common ancestor, even at the highest level of inclusion, are regarded as kin, and marriage to any one belonging to a kin category is incest. The affines can never worship the same ancestor as a kin. A woman after marriage is totally a part of her husband's patrilineage and will worship only his ancestors and not those of her natal lineage.

It is the ideological and structural aspects of ancestor worship that has been viewed as the organizational basis of the Pagro-Mishing society. It is through the institution of ancestor worship that 'descent' and 'alliance' can be seen as theoretically integrated and at the empirical level it provides the structuration of Mishing society. The relevance of 'biological paternity' is visible in this context. The ancestors are worshipped at several levels, the nearest one being worshipped at the level of the 'minimal lineage' which is of three generations depth.

The persons who enter into ancestor worship must be the direct descendants in the male line of the ancestor being worshipped and the link must be real (biological) and not social. The ritual significance of kinship is here related to the biological link and not the social, or what is socially recognized to be 'biological'. The cultural explanation is that the ancestors will not tolerate anyone who is not actually linked to them by blood and obviously one may fool living persons but one cannot fool the dead. The emphasis on biological paternity is thus not explicable in itself by reference to any particular

material or structural condition, but is part of a 'holistic explanation' which takes 'ancestor worship' as the integrating variable for the entire Mishing social organisation.

The existence and influence of the supernatural ancestors here assumes the form of an ideology that has its own independent existence. Both 'descent' and 'affinity' are linked together in this ideology. Structural points of differentiation in the Mishing society arise out of who can or who cannot sit together to worship a common ancestor and this occurs at several levels, finally separating the kin from the affines. Every social division of Mishing society is symbolically represented and acted out ritually in ancestor worship. 'Ancestor worship' looked at from inside gives us the people's own rationale for organizing their society. It gives the rationale for bridewealth, for integration of the domestic group, marriage and other aspects of society. At the etic level it gives the structural rules for organisation of Mishing society. In the absence of any other visible regulating mechanism, such as war (as in the Nuer), the cult of ancestor worship provides a model for analyzing this society.

The link between biological fatherhood and ancestor worship becomes clear further, when we look into the practice of adoption. In case there is no child after a few years of marriage, the young couple resort to adoption. Invariably, the child adopted is that of a brother. The significance of this becomes apparent when we see that the minimal unit, which worships a common ancestor, is the minimal lineage which is of three generations depth.

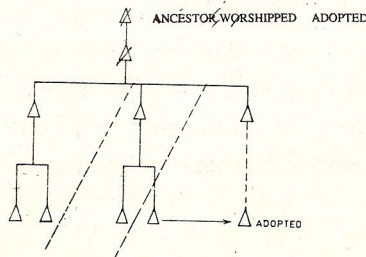


Fig. 1.1 Adoption and Ancestor Worship

Figure 1.1 shows that the fact of adoption does not change the position of the child in the minimal lineage. His position does not change with respect to the ancestor which he would be worshipping by virtue of being the natural son of his father. In other words, it is ensured that the person remains in a social position to worship the common ancestor whom he would have worshipped by fact of biological paternity. Thus adoption is always done in such a way that the structural relationship within the lineage does not change.

Socially and culturally, adoption is then done to ensure emotional and economic support during one's life-time by someone who is in the category of a classificatory son. If at any point of time the lineage undergoes fission, as indicated, the adoptive father would have a son to look after him in his old age and to perform his last rites. If after adopting a son, the parents have children of their own, the status of the adopted son remains the same as the eldest child. Blood parenthood is seen as directly linked to the concept of ancestor worship, than to merely the physical relationship between father and son. The biological paternity here acts as a link between the child and his ancestors and adoption, whenever it takes place, ensures that this link is not disturbed.

Since pre-marital sex is prevalent in the community, one may well ask -- what is the status of illegitimate children in society? A boy and a girl would almost never enter into intimate relationship if they are not already in the marriageable categories. Sexual relationship with a girl of a prohibitive kin category is regarded as incest and severely sanctioned against in society. If found out, the boy and his entire family is subjected to severe pollution. The girl may even commit suicide out of shame. Otherwise the child born is almost certainly killed and the girl is married off to anyone who will take her, again within the prescribed categories. She will normally find it difficult to get a proper husband and may have to be content with someone old or very poor.

In case a boy and girl who are in the proper marriageable category do have intimate pre-marital relations which result in pregnancy, they would normally get married; such marriages are not infrequent in this society. However, due to certain personal or socio-economic reasons, the boy may not want to marry the girl he has impregnated. Under these circumstances it is imperative that the girl declares the name of the child's father. She cannot deliver this child in her father's house because no child can be born into a house where its own (that is genitor's ancestors) are not present. The girl then has to deliver in an especially constructed place outside her house. After birth the child may remain with mother for its nurturance. When the unwed mother eventually gets married, the child may be handed over to its natural father to be brought up in his family. Otherwise the mother may also carry the child to her affinal household where it will only have right of nurturance. If the child is a girl, she poses no problem for she is incorporated into the lineage of her husband as soon as she is married. If the child is a boy then he must on maturity leave his mother's house and set up his own house because he cannot worship his own ancestors (through his natural father) in some one else's house, which is the abode of their ancestors. Under no circumstances can he worship the ancestors of his mother's affinal household.

An interesting case arose when a girl had eloped with a boy of her choice but since the parents on either side disapproved of the marriage, the couple were brought back after they had lived together for 6-7 days and the girl was almost immediately married off to another boy. The question which came to my mind here and which I also put to the parties concerned, was that how was anyone to know, in case of an early pregnancy, whether the child was of the legal husband or of the boy she had cohabited with for a week? After much pondering, the reply was that a child, if born, would be treated as the child of the legal husband. In case of a girl there is no problem. In case of a boy, he would worship the ancestors of his legal father. In case no calamity befell the

household he would continue to do so. However if repeated misfortunes made it apparent that the household had invoked the displeasure of its ancestors, then a *mebo* (Shaman) would be brought in to determine the real parentage of the boy. The ancestors as we know are never fooled.

In the agricultural domestic community, access to land is through affiliation into a community, either through kinship or affinity. Access to resources is through one's previously existing social relationships, quite often, as in the case of the Mishing, through membership into a descent group. Land and resources are hence seen as integrally tied up with one's ancestors. Just as a man is incorporated into his descent group through the physical links with his ancestors, it is through these links that he reproduces himself and his progeny forming an unbroken chain of association of land and human beings. Ancestors are then responsible for providing him with both the means of production and reproduction and hence worshipped.

What exists in such a society in terms of ownership and transference of goods is not a concept of 'property' but of 'patrimony'. Reproduction is the central concern of such societies and relations of affinity which establishes the marital unit responsible for reproduction are important. To this are associated elaborate social and ritual institutions as well as prestations.

Interestingly enough Meillasoux writes, "Father does not in fact mean genitor but he who nourishes and protects you, and who claims your produce and labour in return. In fulfilling his functions of regulating social reproduction, the 'father' is also he who marries you" (Meillasoux 1981:47).

Amongst the Mishing, the father is precisely the genitor. The significance of ancestor worship among the Mishing lies not only in the functions mentioned above but in regulating the fission and fusion of lineages in a manner in which it is regulated by 'complementary opposition' in the lineages of the Nuer.

It is Meillasoux's contention that at the level of development of productive forces at which the domestic agricultural community exists, the relations of production are determinant of the relations of re-production. However historical materialism here does not signify the control over material means of production but human reproduction. It is with reference to this analysis that we can understand the significance of physiological genitor in this society. The elders control the means of production, that is the seeds and the land and the means of reproduction i.e. the female wombs (that are transferred from another group) and the progeny that is born of them. The ancestors transfer not only agricultural seed but their own biological seed (or blood) as well. Ancestor worship symbolises not only continuity of land and material resources but continuity of blood as well and hence the emphasis on biological paternity. In this way I would differ from Meillasoux's concept of 'father' as sociological, it is biological as well, especially in a society where the role of father in conception is known.

If kinship was only the juridico-ideological representations of the relations of reproduction which in turn are determined in the first instance by the relations of production, then social paternity established by marriage should have been a sufficient condition for the reproduction of such a society.

The importance of biological paternity can be understood if we extend the concept of continuity from production to reproduction. Not only the agricultural 'seeds' but the reproductive 'seed' also is handed down. The significance of this is apparent. According to Meillasoux the authority of elders is established by two factors. 1. The passing on the agricultural seed, established as a factor of the productive forces. 2. The control of pubescent women of their own group which is a correlate of the need to reproduce the productive cell, which cannot reproduce itself at least at the initial level, when the size of the cell is small or only geared to requirements of production. The need to reproduce this cell

required the exchange of women and the elders who by their position in the relation of production hold a higher position as providers of seed as an extension of this position become the controllers of women also. The rules of exogamy extend over wider groups as the elders extended their power. When the group becomes large enough to be able to reproduce itself demographically, the power of the elders is established through ideological means such as the rules of incest in which clan exogamy is akin to incest.

However, if the ideological basis of ancestor worship lies in the passing on of blood or biological 'seed' from the ancestor, then the fact of kinship based on biology becomes anterior to or independent of the forces of production. If it is the biological link that is most important then this biological link is independent of the relations of production or at least not determined by it. This is what Meillasoux was specifically trying to deny when he said that 'father' is not who gives birth to you but one who marries you.

This is further made significant by the fact that among the Mishing, large number of marriages are established by the young people themselves. Since there is no curb on the sexual activity of unmarried boys and girls, a number of them enter into matrimony on their own and the role of the elders is minimal. It is the same with bridewealth. More often than not the bridewealth does not consist of any real gifts or does not represent the material accumulative power of the elders. On the contrary the bridewealth is only a token payment towards recognizing an already existing ideological superiority of the ancestor. This ideological superiority is a fact of kinship derived from biology and not a reflection of any juridico-political epiphenomena of production relations.

Here I once again want to emphasize that kinship should be understood as a phenomenon in itself rather than as epiphenomenon of underlying structures.

Fortes has criticised the approach of Worsley and Leach, specifically on their overemphasis on economic determinism or as Fortes has put it "to find the hidden hand of economic compulsion everywhere" (1969 : 220).

The major criticism of all such advocates of the theory that kinship is only an expression of some other fundamental feature of social structure, is that in that case, why relate it to some real or stipulated blood ties---called kinship? In every society the biological link of mother and child and between siblings is recognized as some basis of kinship. Moreover, and importantly kinship is not merely a bundle of rights and duties---it is also emotional and affective. They are relationships of cooperation and sharing of emotional and physical security. The cultural content of kinship is an important aspect and it is recognized that few relationships can replace kinship relationships in this respect in any society. "Kinship predicates the axiom of amity, the prescriptive altruism exhibited in the ethic of generosity" (Fortes 1969 : 237).

This is a study of the Mishing, the second largest tribe of Assam inhabiting the Brahmaputra Valley. Besides giving a comprehensive ethnographic account of the people, this book raises important theoretical issues pertaining to the analysis of kinship and descent in anthropological studies. It specifically focuses on the genitor/pater debate in determining kinship status with special emphasis on the structure of descent groups.

Ancestor worship and its associated rituals is a key variable that has been used to clarify some of the theoretical ambiguities in the above mentioned debate. This study fills in a long felt gap in anthropological literature in India as little work is available on the detailed analysis of kinship in any tribal community specifically with a view to tackle the important theoretical debates going on in this field.

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Dr. J.S. Bhandari is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Delhi. He previously taught at the University of Lucknow where he had his education. He has done extensive field work among the tribes of North-East India and the Central Himalayas. His previous publications include areas like *industrialization and tribal transformation, tribal development, land and social structure and conceptual debates on tribes and peasantry, etc.*

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