



ATTEMPTS TO INSTITUTIONALIZE THE TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE MISINGS BY MEANS OF DONYI POLO YELAM KEBANG

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Abstract: *The Misings are a tribal community of Assam. They belong to Mongoloid group and linguistically they are Tibeto-Burmans. Census of 2011 records the total population of the Mising as 680,424 and most of them are settled in Upper Assam. The Mising have their own traditional religious beliefs and practices that falls within the purview of Animism. Animism is the belief that inanimate objects and natural phenomena have souls. The Misings believe in Do:nyi-Po:lo (Sun-Moon) as their eternal heavenly beings on all animistic rites, but they do not worship them as their deities. But the lesser supernatural beings viz. Benevolent and Malevolent spirits are worshipped or propitiated, in general. This is because they believe in the supernatural powers of these spirits. Another characteristic of their belief is offering prayers to their forefathers. In every ritual, they recall the name of their forefathers of up to ten or more generations.*

However, the Misings since the last decade of the 20th century have made an attempt to institutionalize their traditional beliefs and practices. This started after the formation of 'Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelam Kébang'. The objective of the paper is to look into the factors responsible for the recent attempt to institutionalize the traditional beliefs and practices by means of 'Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelam Kébang' and its impact upon the Misings.

Keywords: *Misings, Donyi-Polo, Kebang, Religion*

Introduction:

North-East India is comprised of eight states viz. Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Sikkim that are also popularly known as 'Eight Sisters'. The region as a whole is comprised of different tribes, race, caste, creed, language and religion. However, majority inhabitants of the region are of tribes that belong to Mongoloid group of people. Mention may be made of some of the tribes of different states of North-East India viz. *Bodo*, *Mising* (*Miris*), *Deori*, *Tiwa*, *Sonowal Kachari* and *Karbi* of Assam; *Khasi*, *Garo* and *Jaintia* of Meghalaya; *Adi*, *Dafla*, *Nyishi*, *Apatani*, *Monpa* of Arunachal Pradesh; *Hmar*, *Mara* of Mizoram; *Maram*, *Tangkhul*, *Maring* of Manipur; *Bhil* and *Chaimal* of Tripura; *Angami*, *Ao*, *Konyak* of Nagaland and *Lepcha*, *Bhutia* of Sikkim. It is interesting to mention that all these tribal communities of the region bear resemblance either in the bodily structure or in their lifestyle in some way or the other. As has been mentioned above the *Misings* are tribes that belong to the state of Assam though few of them are also settled in Arunachal Pradesh.

The *Misings* are a tribal community of Assam. They belong to Mongoloid group and linguistically they are Tibeto-Burmans.¹ Census of 2011 records the total population of the Mising as 680,424² and most of them are settled in Upper Assam. Centuries back, they migrated down from Siang and Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh and settled in Assam around 14th -15th century.³ One unique identity of this tribe is that their entire civilization is found by the riverside and as a result, they are known as 'Riverrine Tribes'.

As per the Constitution of India, the *Misings* are officially known as *Miri* and not *Mising*. They are regarded as '*Miri*' by the Constitution of India (Scheduled Tribes) Order 1950 as amended (modification) Order 1956 & SC/ST Orders (Amendment) Act, 1976. However, the community prefer to identify themselves as '*Mising*' and therefore, in the year 1972 A.D. the supreme literary body of the community, i.e. *Mising Agom Kebang* have advocated the use of the term '*Mising*' to address the community. On 27th April 2012, the Bill for changing the name of the community from '*Miri*' to '*Mising*' was introduced in the Parliament of India.⁴

Methodology:

Historical methodology has been followed in the research work. Necessary data and information have been collected by consulting both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consists of Archival data, Government proceedings and Census Report that have been collected from Census Office, Guwahati, Archives Office, Dispur, Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Panbazar. Moreover, field study based on interviews and questionnaires have played an important role in enquiring about the history and nature of Vaisnavite influence upon the Misings. Articles in newspaper and Research papers on the related topics of the community will be used as secondary sources. Website information has also contributed to the study.

III. Religious Beliefs and Practices:

The Mising have their own traditional religious beliefs and practices that falls within the purview of Animism. Animism is the belief that inanimate objects and natural phenomena have souls.⁵The creation of the Universe, as per oral tradition, have been described in the *Miboo Ābāngs*.⁶*Miboo* is the traditional priest of the *Misings* that conduct various religious rituals and *Ābāngs* are the religious chanting that he utters during rituals. They believe themselves to be the offspring of *Do:nyi-Po:lo* literally meaning “Sun-Moon”. Many of the tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh like the *Āpātāni*, *Ādi*, *Mising*, *Tāgin* and *Nishi* considers themselves to be the offspring of *Do:nyi-Po:lo* as well. All these tribes including the *Misings* consider *Ābotāni* as the first man on earth. These groups of people believe that, it was *Ābotāni*, who introduced the technique of rice cultivation.⁷It may be mentioned that these belief in common ancestors binds together and develop brotherly bonding among these tribes.

The *Misings* believe in *Do:nyi-Po:lo* (Sun-Moon) as their eternal heavenly beings on all animistic rites, but they do not worship them as their deities.⁸No any ritual is worshipped in the name of *Do:nyi-Po:lo*, *Se:di-Me:lo*, *Runé-Péné* but instead invoked frequently in every primitive rituals. It is the lesser supernatural beings viz. Benevolent and Malevolent spirits that are worshipped or propitiated, in general. This is because they believe in the supernatural powers of these spirits. Accordingly, various rituals are performed to appease the benevolent as well as malevolent spirits. Another important aspect of their belief is that they do not have particular place of worship and instead their rituals are performed either in the forests, by a riverside, under a granary or in the house depending upon the particular spirits being dedicated.

Another characteristic of their belief is offering prayers to their forefathers. In every ritual, they recall the name of their forefathers of up to ten or more generations.

IV. Attempt to institutionalize traditional beliefs and practices by means of *Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelam Kébang*:

Although the *Misings* had different beliefs and practices to appease both the benevolent and malevolent spirits, yet these were never institutionalized nor performed in a uniform way. As per their belief, the spirits come down to the earth when they are invoked, receive the offerings, bless the worshipper with good fortunes or withdraw the curses and then leave for their heavenly abode. Therefore, the *Misings* neither had any particular Gods or Goddesses to worship daily and regularly, nor did they have a permanent place of worship like Temple for Hindus, Church for Christians, Mosques for the Muslims etc. Traditionally their rituals were performed under a tree, granary, and forests or by the riverside. Moreover, they never had any religious texts to provide guidelines and instead rituals were performed based on the advice of the *Miboo*. These customs transmitted over from generation to generation.

However, the *Misings* since the last decade of the 20th century have made an attempt to institutionalize their traditional beliefs and practices. This started after the formation of ‘*Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelam Kébang*’. The ‘*Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelam Kébang*’ was first formed among the *Adi* community of Arunachal Pradesh under the initiative of

Talom Rukbo on 31st December, 1986. Thereafter it spread among other descendants of *Tani* group including *Misings* of Assam. Accordingly, they formed a branch of this *Kébang* in Assam in the year 1996. Again, thereafter, the *Misings* formed their own '*Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelam Kébang, Assam*' by a conference held on 10th May, 2003. Since then they have been making an effort to preserve the traditional belief system.

The main objective of the movement is to preserve as well as to fight the challenges posed by other religion towards the very existence of their traditional beliefs and practices.⁹ They name the new movement as '*Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelam Kébang*'. All other benevolent and malevolent spirits are at mercy of *Do:nyi-Po:lo* and their existence is not possible without its presence. No any deeds in this world can be concealed or hidden from the luminous eyes of *Do:nyi-Po:lo* and who so ever tries to do so will surely meet his doom. Believe in *Do:nyi-Po:lo* by the *Misings* is based on the notion that it acts as the guardian and protector of the people in this universe.¹⁰ This might have influenced the *Kébang* to name the movement for revival of *Mising* traditional belief and practices as '*Do:nyi-Po:lo*'. The *Kébang* have also gained the recognition of *International Association for Religious Freedom, World Council of Elders and Ancient Tradition and Culture, International Centre for Cultural Studies, North East India Tribal Faith and Cultural Protection Forum*.

The leaders of this new form of *Do:nyi-Po:lo* have released a book titled *Mising Samajor Puja Poddhoti* (Ritual Methods of the *Mising* Society) that serve as religious text as well as guidelines regarding the process of worshipping of this reformed new faith. The guidelines of this book are prepared to adjust the traditional belief system with change of time so that the expenditure as well as time-consuming nature of worship may be minimized. The *Kébang* have published another religious book titled *Angun Bédang* that contains prayer songs for different rituals.

The aims and objectives of '*Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelam Kébang*' clearly reveal about the revived and restructured form of traditional beliefs and practices. The *Kébang* believes 'preservation of religion is the preservation of culture'.¹¹ Therefore, their main aim is to preserve the traditional beliefs and practices. However, in doing this, the *Kébang* have taken in to consideration different aspects like its practicability, economic and time-consuming aspects in the present-day society. They have made it clear that the traditional beliefs and practices should be affordable and convenient to the people and not a burden upon their life. Therefore, the *Kébang* have strictly forbidden use of *Apong*, meat or fish during rituals as it requires heavy budget. According to them it should be optional not mandatory. This is in strong contrast to the traditional nature of rituals in which the focus seemed to be more on food and drinks and there were instances of *Miboo* taking occasional drinks break in the midst of rituals. The *Kébang* do not find any justification in animal sacrifices in the name of rituals just because it was practised in earlier times. Instead, they focus more on spirituality and prayers.

Another marked difference is the development of a new place of worship called '*Gangíng*'. This is in sharp contrast to their traditions as place for performing traditional rituals depended on the nature of rituals being performed. However, with the development of *Gangíng*, a temple like concept has emerged among the new section of the community and as a result their place of worship is also limited to four walls just like other religions. In every *Gangíng* the prayer is presided over by *Miri Abu*. *Miri Abu* plays the role of a *Miboo*; the *Kébang* select a person who is well versed in traditional religion as *Miri Abu*. But he is different from a *Miboo* because it is believed that he do not possess the supernatural power that the *Miboo* have had.

Factors responsible for development of *Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelam Kébang*:

There seems to be many factors responsible in their attempt to launch a movement to protect traditional beliefs and practices. Awareness among the propagator of this movement seems to have developed in the last decade of the 20th century. Only during this period, their intensity to popularize this movement has increased gradually. As a result majority of *Misings* of Dhemaji district have embraced the religion adopted by the *Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelam Kébang*.

Although the *Misings* were under the influence of Vaisnavism and other forms of Hinduism but they never seemed to have felt that the existence of their tradition was under threat. The reason is due to the fact that, even after getting influenced by the above religions at no point of time they parted from their traditional beliefs and practices nor was there a sudden change or conversion. As a result, vaisnavism and other religions existed side by side in their society.

In comparison to them, the Christianity, on the other hand has been making an all-out effort to convert the *Misings* in to Christianity. The educated section of the community seems to have been alarmed by this development. The *Misings* were staying with Hinduism and Vaisnavite society for long many years and as such, they were very acquainted with their culture, religion and ways of life. So, their gradual adoption of Hindu and Vaisnavite characteristics was the result of long process of interaction with them. On the other hand, Christianity was a religion that penetrated into their society within a short period of time. Even the propagators of this religion were initially outsiders. This may have compelled the educated sections of the *Misings* to raise many questions about their intentions. Moreover, even after adopting Hindu religion they never gave up their own traditional beliefs and culture. But Christianity or Christian mode of prayer does not provide any scope for practicing their traditional ones.

Following points seem to have influenced the *Kébang* and its activities:

- Christians were outsiders and their sudden influence to a great extent compelled them to feel threatened about their own culture.
- Expensive nature of their traditional beliefs and practices was another important reason; and conducting several rituals in a single year thereby draining out a family economically. Under the present economic condition, performing several rituals is not practically possible.
- Influence towards Vaisnavism and other forms of Hinduism was a gradual process of assimilation rather than conversion. On the other hand, several people of the community are converting towards Christianity thereby concerning the educated sections.
- Awareness created by the growing number of highly educated people among the *Misings*. These sections of people seem to be determined to preserve their own traditional beliefs and customs and strongly believe that loss of culture is loss of identity.

Response of the people towards new movement:

The *Do:nyi Po:lo Yelam Kébang*'s attempt to institutionalize traditional religious beliefs and practices is still at an early stage. Till date there are over 100 *Gangíngs* in the state. However, except in Dhemaji district the *Misings* of other district are yet embrace it with an open heart. In this district, almost 70% of the *Misings* that were under Vaisnavite influence have totally given up Vaisnavism. Instead, these sections of people follow the new institutionalized form of the *Misings*. A 'Central *Gangíng*' is being set up at Silapathar Akajan Kulamuwa and people have voluntarily donated 26 bighas of land for its construction.

Gangíng have been established in different place of Assam. In North Lakhimpur district it is found in Sabuti and Narayanpur. Gogamukh in which the Mising Autonomous Council (MAC) headquarters is located have *Gangíng* in Mingmang and Ukomathi. Similarly, in districts like Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh one or two *Gangíng* have been set up. There is a local committee of *Do:nyi Po:lo Yelam Kébang* in all the places where *Gangíng* have been established.

In Majuli, though the response is not much but in Phulani karkichuk area, which can also be regarded as the main centre of the new movement in the Island, around 40 *Mising* families mainly of *Mo:ying* group have actively embraced it. The popularity of this faith has spread to other villages of the Island viz. Naya Bazaar, Natun Chapori, Selek Chapori, Bordowar, Maalapinda, Mohrichuk, Sitadarchuk, Karkichuk. An interview with Prabhat Mili, main propagator of the new movement in Majuli has revealed that around 2000-3000 people are followers of the new faith. However, this newly revived faith has still unable to touch places like Jengraimukh which is the strong hub of both Vaisnavism and Christianity.

VII. Conclusion:

The traditional beliefs and practices of the *Misings* witnessed different phases of changes in due course of time. In the process, they have been influenced by different forms of Hinduism as well as Christianity. In most recent years it has been found that a process of institutionalization have been initiated by the *Do:nyi Po:lo Yelam Kébang* to preserve their traditional beliefs and practices. However, it is still at an initial stage and its real impact among the people would be witnessed only in the near future.

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