



ME-DAM-ME-PHI AND ALI-AI-LIGANG – CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE TAI-AHOMS AND THE MISINGS OF ASSAM

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Cultural identity is the characteristic of the individual and the culturally identical group of members sharing the same culture or upbringing. Its importance in preserving uniqueness and distinctiveness amidst cultural diversity in a country like India can never be undermined. Cultural identity of a community is marked by its culture and tradition which includes festivals, costumes, religious faith, food habits, music, dance forms, etc. Assam, the most prominent of the North-Eastern states, takes pride in its rich cultural heritage. Inhabited by a large number of tribes and communities, the state is marked for being a rich storehouse of multiple culture and tradition. Among those tribes and communities, the Tai-Ahoms and the Misings occupy an important place. The festivals Me-Dam-Me-Phi of the Tai-Ahoms and Ali-ai-Ligang of the Misings have given them distinct cultural identities. The present paper is an attempt to trace the cultural identity of the Tai-Ahoms and the Misings through our study of the concept of cultural identity and the rituals of the festivals Me-Dam-Me-Phi and Ali-ai-Ligang.

Key-words : Culture, Tradition, Identity, Me-Dam-Me-Phi, Ali-ai-Ligang

Cultural identity can be understood as the identity of belonging to a group with certain distinct features. It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation or locality that has its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual and the culturally identical group of members sharing the same culture or upbringing. Considered from the point of historical heritage, culture is an important factor in shaping identity. As one of the chief characteristics of a culture is its "historical reservoir", a few groups entertain revisions, either consciously or unconsciously, in their historical record in order to either bolster the strength of their cultural identity or to forge one which gives them precedent for actual reform or change. The importance of cultural identity in preserving uniqueness and distinctiveness amidst cultural diversity in a country like India can never be undermined. Cultural identity of a community is marked by its culture and tradition which includes festivals, costumes, religious faith,

food habits, music, dance forms, etc. Assam, the Gateway to the North- Eastern States of India is characterized for the diverse culture and tradition of the multiple communities living harmoniously in the state for ages. Among the multiple tribes and communities of Assam, two most prominent and vibrant communities are the Tai-Ahoms and the Misings. The observation and celebration of the festivals Me-Dam-Me-Phi by the Tai-Ahoms and Ali-ai-Ligang by the Misings have given them distinct cultural identities. The present paper is an attempt to trace the cultural identity of the Tai-Ahoms and the Misings through our study of the concept of cultural identity and the rituals of the festivals Me-Dam-Me-Phi and Ali-ai-Ligang.

Me-Dam-Me-Phi is one of the most important annual religious festivals of the Tai Ahoms. The word 'Me' means offerings, 'Dam' means ancestors and 'Phi' means gods. The words put together means offering oblation to the dead ancestors and gods. The Tai-Ahoms worship the dead ancestors as God. According to their belief, after death, a person remains in the state of 'Dam' and only after the relatives of the person worship God, the dead becomes God or 'Phi'. The Tai-Ahoms do not believe in rebirth. They believe that a person becomes God after death and goes to heaven.

In ancient times, the Ahom kings observed Me-Dam-Me-Phi after wars and victories to keep imminent dangers at a bay. The rituals are performed during Me-Dam-Me-Phi to evoke blessings from the ancestors so that the living generation may live in peace and prosper in life. It is believed that if Me-Dam-Me-Phi is not celebrated in the customary way, the gods will be displeased and consequently there would be crisis in the State like natural upheavals, political rivalry, military urgency etc. In the present context, this socio-religious festival of the Tai-Ahoms has gone far beyond its literal meaning. An indepth study of the festival suggests that it is celebrated for invoking the life force in human life to secure social control for solidarity, vitality in national life at the time of national danger as well as peace and prosperity.

Assam is a unique homeland of a variety of ethnic groups having varied cultures and speaking different languages and dialects. Among the varied inhabitants of Assam, the Tai-Ahoms are a culturally rich community. Their culture, an old and historically rich one, is marked for its distinct features. As the Tai-Ahoms had originated from China, as recorded by historians, they have some similarities with the Chinese culture of Yunan province of China. With the passage of time, after the assimilation into the greater Assamese society, the Tai-Ahom culture has lost some of its originality. Notwithstanding the influences of time and environment, the Tai-Ahoms have succeeded in maintaining a greater part of their traditional culture. Even though the Tai-Ahoms of Assam have embraced the Hindu religion and assimilated into the greater Assamese society, a portion of them still continue to worship chief gods which they call 'Fra'. Their chief gods of worship are 'Khaokham', 'Lengdon', 'Ja-Sing-Fa', 'Jan- Sai-Hung'. Lang-Kuri', 'Nang-Si-Chao', etc. They still offer their worship in their traditional form.

So far as the origin of the festival Me-Dam-Me-Phi goes, it is believed that two thousand years back when Lengdon (the Lord of Heaven) who happened to be the progenitor of the Tai-Ahom, sent down two of his grandsons Khun-Lung and Khun-Lai to earth to find a state. He advised them to celebrate this festival annually by making offerings and oblations to Him to continue uninterrupted political hold over the masses. During the days of the Ahom Kings, Me-dam-me-phi celebration was attended by the kings and his ministers and other higher officials and a great number of people. It was celebrated at Charaideo, the religious centre of the Ahom kings, with the huge burial mounds (Maidams) standing there as witness. At that time, the celebrations lasted for several days. At present Me Dam-Me-Phi is celebrated on the 31st of January every year and attended by a large number of people.

The belief in the divinity of the dead is an ancient one and it is said that all the Tai (Thai)-speaking people have had the custom of worshipping the ancestors as gods in their own way. According to the Tai Ahom belief, man is

not reborn after death. One of the important customs among them is that the dead body is not burnt but buried and called the burial place “Maidam”.

It is also written in history that Chaolung Siu-ka-pha, the first Swargadeo (heavenly king) of the Tai Ahoms observed this sacred ritual of Me-Dam-Me-Phi and sought the blessings of his forefathers in the new palace. After his death, Chaolung Siu-ka-pha was buried in Charaideo and Me-Dam-Me-Phi was observed by his son who became the King after him. As all the kings and queens of the Tai Ahoms got buried in this sacred place, Charaideo became the “Jerusalem of the East” for all the Tai-speaking people and the designs and techniques of the Maidams have become a strong object of attraction and the subject of research for all inquisitive learners.

It so happened that during the reign of Jaydwaj Singha, the ritual was not observed. When Jaydwaj Singha was defeated by the Mughal Army led by Mirjumla, the King said to the Prime Minister, Atan Buragohain, in deep anguish and grief, “Gohain, gods have forsaken me.” Gohain then said, “Swargadeo, do not grieve. Victory and defeat are two sides of the same coin. When gods will favour us, then Swargadeo will defeat the outsiders with his own might.” The king believed that since this festival was not performed, he couldnt win over the enemies and had to accept defeat to the rising powers of the Mughal Army.

After his death, the younger brother Chakradwaj Singha could realize why the mighty Ahom King was defeated by the Mughals. He performed the worship won the Battle of Saraighat to re-establish the glory of the Ahoms.

Historical sources also records that Swargadeo Siu-huim-mong “performed the ceremony of Me-Dam-Me-Phi” (Ahom Buranji,p.77), Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha performed Me-Dam-Me-Phi and offered sacrifices to the Ahom gods (p 264) . About Swargadeo Pramatta Singha, it is observed “on the 28th of the month of Dinkam (paua), on the day of Dap-plao, the king left for Charaideo. On the day of Mong-Mao, of the month of Din Sam, the king worshipped all the Ahom gods”.(p. 279) It is also recorded about Rajeswar Singha, “ In the month of Din Sip Song on the day Rai Singha worshipped the Ahom gods at Charaideo”. (p. 313)

Ali-ai-Ligang is the most colourful festival of the Misings which marks the first sowing of roots and fruits in the cultivable lands. “Ali” means root and seed, “ai” means fruit, and “Ligang” means to sow. This is why the onset of sowing seeds begins on this day. The festival begins every year on the first Wednesday of the month of ‘Gimur Polo’ or ‘Fagun’ month of the Assamese Calendar. This festival marks the beginning of the cultivation of Ahu paddy. Porag is another agri-based traditional festival of the Misings, who had been agriculturalists since time immemorial.

The Misings belong to the greater group of Tani people, who speak languages of the Sino-Tibetan family. The Mishing belongs to Yilueto- Burmese group, sub- race of Mongoloid race. There is no written history of Misings about their migration from Northern China to the plains of Assam but history was passed down orally in the form of folk songs and stories by the ancestors from generation to generation and is still prevalent among their society. Though they belong to Tani group of tribes and they used to be hill dwellers, they started living on the banks of rivers in the plains of Assam. The reason for this change of habitat is not known, but there are theories. One theory says that the Misings presently living in plains of Assam were not one single tribe, but it evolved into one when many tribes from various Tani tribes of Arunachal Pradesh migrated to the plains of Assam. This explains the presence of many Mising clans with different Mising dialects as well as different levels of development.

In the past, the celebration of Ali-ai-Ligang was not fixed. It was celebrated according to the convenience of the locality, their social structure and the geographical situation of the place. In the year 1956, the largest socio-cultural and economic organization of the Misings, “Nene Kcbang” took an unanimous decision to celebrate it on the first Wednesday of the Assamese month Fagun, considered to very auspicious by them. The Misings consider this day as the day of Lakshmi(wealth). Traditionally the celebration of the day is started by the head

of the family who goes to the field with a handful of seeds, a yokpa, apong, purang, take, peero, si-pag onno which are preferably carried in a vgvn (a cone shaped structure made of bamboo). The headman uses the yokpa to clean a small patch of land in the eastern part of the field. It is decorated with the peero and si-pag onno in a square of circular patterns. The apong, purang, take and si-pag are placed at appropriate places within the decorated area and then the seeds are sown over the area. At that point, he chants the forefathers "Medi Melo, Karsing-Kartag, Donyi Polo, etc" to bear witness the sowing seeds sown into the womb of mother earth for abundant crops, good harvest, etc. Then the assembled people promise to share the harvest amongst the benefactors and the beggars. All these rituals are done in the forenoon. In the evening, the head of the family offers prayers to the forefathers again including 'Koje Yango' (Goddess of fertility)

Mising has its own religion named 'Donyi Polo'. Donyi (Sun) is their God. The traditional religious beliefs and practices amongst the Misings are animistic. They believe in different supernatural beings haunting the earth, usually unseen. These supernatural beings fall into four categories, viz. uyu or ui (usually malevolent spirits inhabiting the waters, the woods, the skies, etc. capable of causing great harm including physical devastation), urom po-sum (hovering spirits of the dead, who may cause illness or other adverse conditions), guhmeen-sohing (benevolent ancestral spirits), and epom-yapom (spirits inhabiting tall, big trees, who are generally not very harmful, but who may abduct human beings occasionally, cause some physical or mental impairment and release them later). Barring the epom-yapom, all the supernatural beings need to be propitiated with sacrificial offerings (usually domestic fowl), both periodically and on specific occasions of illness, disaster, etc. Even the benevolent guardian spirits are propitiated from time to time for the all-round wellbeing of a household. For the prevention of unknown diseases they worship their ancestors with "pujas" like "Dalevar", "Dotgang", "Uram", "Apin" etc.

The Misings believe Abotani as their ancestor is supposed to be a son of mother Sun and father Moon of the Heavenly abode. The Mising people inhabiting by the plains believe Gumín as one of the earliest ancestors, the forefather of a lineal family of Abotani. The sons of Gumín are grouped in clans (opín), the names of which are represented by the existing surnames in the society. They are all blood related brothers with a social restriction of matrimonial relationship among them.

The Misings take part in the Ali-ai-Ligang festival decked up in beautiful handmade fabrics that are remarkable traits in their culture. While the women dressed in Ege, Ribí Gaseng, Gero, etc, the men wore Gonro Ugon, Mibu Galuk, and Dumer. The traditional craft of weaving is a very bright aspect of Mising culture. It is an exclusive preserve of the Mising woman, who starts her training in the craft even before she reaches her teens. For the male, she weaves cotton jackets, light cotton towels, endi shawls, thick loin cloths, and, occasionally, even shirtings. For women she weaves a variety of clothes, such as ege "the lower garment of Mising women", rihbi (a sheet with narrow stripes, wrapped to cover the lower garment and the blouse), gaseng (used for the same purpose as that of a rihbi, but having, unlike a rihbi, broad stripes of contrastive colours), gero (a sheet, usually off-white, wrapped round the waist to cover the lower part of the body, or round the chest to cover the body down to the knees or so), seleng gasor (a light cotton sheet, worn occasionally instead of a rihbi or a gaseng), riya (a long, comparatively narrow, sheet, wrapped, a bit tightly, round the chest), segrek (a loose piece of cloth, wrapped round the waist by married women to cover the eagey down to the knees), a pohtub (a scarf used to protect the head from the sun, dirt, etc.), and nisek (a piece of cloth to carry a baby with). A special mention has to be made here of the Mising textile piece, called gadu. It is the traditional Mising blanket, fluffy on one side, and it is woven on a traditional loin loom.

The festivity of Ali-ai-Ligang is marked by a lavish community feast. For this special occasion the Misings prepare Apong or rice beer, dried fish, dishes of fish or pork and 'Purang Apin' (packed boiled rice), the special inevitable item of the festival. The two varieties of Apong (Nogin and Poro) existing in the Mising community

are prepared in sufficient quantities for guest and visitors. The elders and visitors irrespective of age, sex and social status are served with the food items prepared for the occasion.

After the feasting of the Ali-ai-Ligang, merry making starts with the performance of Gumrag Soman. It is a combination of dance and beating of drums and cymbals. The Mising community believes that Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth) will be satisfied and bless them with a good harvest if Gumrag Soman is performed on the Ali-ai-Ligang day. So, it is basically an appeasing dance for the Goddess of fertility. All the people of the community, young and old, irrespective of sex can take part in the Paksong Moman (Dance Song). Usually the youths use to take the lead role in it. The Misings are known for their rich folk music. There are many types of Mising dances and each has their particular rules. Gumrag is performed five times in circles. Mibu Dagnam, Selloi, Lereli, Ejug Tapung Soman, Gumrag So:man and Lotta So:man are different types of dances of the Misings. Abang, Kaban, Tebo Tekang, Sílung Nitom, Bini, Midang Nitom, Oi Ni:om are the various types of songs of the Misings. Music for all kind of songs and beats for the dance are composed with instruments such as cymbal, gungang (gagana), sifung (flutes), gong, and drums, etc.

In the present context, it can be said that the celebration of Me-Dam-Me-Phi on the 31st of January and Ali-ai-Ligang on mid-February all over the state every year not only reveal the integrity of the Tai-Ahom and Mising communities but also highlights the unique cultural identity of the communities. Though cultural identity can never be fixed given the present multilingual and multicultural context, yet observance of such festivals helps in preserving the traditional customs to a great extent. At the same time, we may consider the opinion of Stuart Hall that cultural identity as a process of production and negotiation. Thus, identity is 'a matter of becoming as well as of being' (Hall, 1990:225). It is not a fixed essence, remaining unchanged outside of culture and history, but is rather articulated from a particular space and time. So, the celebrations of Me-Dam-Me-Phi and Ali-ai-Ligang, being celebrated in the lines as recorded in history, has helped in retaining the identity of the Tai-Ahom and Mising communities.

The celebrations of Me-Dam-Me-Phi and Ali-ai-Ligang have some common attributes with other ethnic groups of Assam as well as outside the state and the country. Yet, the unique identity of the communities through the celebrations should not be overlooked. These celebrations not only reflect the cultural identity of the Tai-Ahom and Mising communities of Assam, but also point to the cultural convergence in the greater Assamese society. More researches into the topic will inevitably bring more features to limelight. It is the need of the hour to preserve and maintain the rich cultural heritage of the Tai-Ahoms and Misings through celebration of festivals like Me-Dam-Me-Phi and Ali-ai-Ligang in order to make it a vibrant and dynamic one, thereby recognize the significance and importance in establishing cultural identity.

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