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### **The Samugurias: Assamese-Speaking Mising People**

Rupanjali Morang Saha  
North Lakhimpur College, Assam, India  
rupanjalimorang3@gmail.com

#### **Abstract**

Assam is situated in the Eastern part of India (Bharat). The great river of Assam names Brahmaputra is also known as Tsangpo (Purifier) in China flows through the green plains of this end. There are many tribes in Assamese Society. The Mising are second largest tribes in Assam of the Brahmaputra Valley which from anthropological and linguistical point of view belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese and Indo-Mongoloid people. In Assam the Misings are divided into many different clans, viz. (i) Ayengia, (ii) Bebezia, (iii) Bihia, (iv) Bonkual, (v) Chamua, (vi) Chayengia, (vii) Dambukial, (viii) Delu, (ix) Moyengia, (x) Pagro, (xi) Samuguria and (xii) Temera. Again the Misings are linguistically divided into two broad groups; (i) Mising speaking and (ii) Assamese Speaking. The Assamese speaking Misings are Bihia, Bonkual, Chamua, Samuguria and Temera. Here it will be discussed on the Assamese speaking Mising society of Samugurians only. Samugurians are those living only in the two districts of Assam; Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. There are no sufficient research works on the Samugurian people till today in scientific method. So it will be a unique work. The aim of this paper is to highlight the socio-cultural life of the Samugurians; which are Assamese speaking Misings. It is an honest trial to study the process of assimilation of this society in the time being. At present the influence of globalization is leading to the extinction of this very small population of the Samugurias. Therefore it is a necessity to draw attention, highlight and research on this topic.

*Keywords:* Tibeto-Burmese, Assamese Society, mising, division, Samuguria, assimilation, existence, highlight, research, scientific method

#### **Introduction**

Assam is situated in the North Eastern part of India (Bharat). There are many tribes in Assamese Society. The Mising are second largest tribes in Assam of the Brahmaputra Valley. They are concentrated in the Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Majuli, Golaghat and Sonitpur Districts of Assam. From the anthropological and linguistical point of view the Misings belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese and Indo-Mongoloid people. The Mising are officially known as Miri till the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Edward gait the word 'Miri' means a go-between or an interpreter.<sup>1</sup> The name Miri actually suggest a middle-man between the Assamese of the plains and the Miris of the hills (Arunachal Pradesh).

The first Mising Historian Sonaram Panyang Kataki wrote in his chronicle, 'Miri Jatir Buranji (History of Mising Tribe) that there is no tribe called Miri. The Misings living in the plains are known as Miri<sup>2</sup>. However, it can be said that the word Miri as supported by N. Pegu and Torun Chandra Pamegam were given by the Assamese people during the Ahom reign-Miri is neither an Assamese nor a Sanskrit word. So it is believed that the word Miri came from Mising word Mirui<sup>3</sup>. Because there was no kinship system

in Mising Society and the Dandai (deoidhai or priest) was the Chief of the Mising Society which was known as Mirui.

The Misings are divided into many different clans, viz. (i) Ayengia, (ii) Bebejia, (iii) Bihia, (iv) Bonkual, (v) Chamua, (vi) Chayengia, (vii) Dambukia, (viii) Delu, (ix) Moyengia, (x) Pagro, (xi) Samuguria and (xii) Temera. Again the Misings are linguistically divided into two broad groups- (i) Mising speaking and (ii) Assamese speaking. The Assamese speaking Mising are Bihia, Bokual, Chamua, Samuguria and Temera.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this paper is

- (i) To highlight the Socio-Cultural life of the Samugurians.
- (ii) To study the process of assimilation of this society in the time being.
- (iii) Moreover, at present the influence of globalization is leading to the extinction of this very small population. Therefore, it is necessary to draw attention on the topic.
- (iv) To study the changes, if any, in their traditional socio-cultural life brought about the influence of other factors.

### **Area of the Study**

The name of the area of this paper is Pohumora of North Lakhimpur. There are many villages which are inhabited by different communities in this area. But the Samugurians are found only in ten villages situated in this area. The names of villages are- Bamundoloni, Ujani Miri, Sumoni, Dum-Chapori, Ujani Khamti or Geranto, Ujani Pohumora Miri, Dikhounukhiya or Singora, Na-Bhanganiya, Dhuba-Gendhali and Deobil.

### **Review of Literature**

Literature on the Social and Cultural characteristics of the Samuguria Mising is meager and there is no history and authentic reference evidencing the ethnic identity of this group of people. Therefore much data of the present study have been gathered from secondary published materials, interview of knowledgeable Samuguria and write ups of public leaders and scholars of this community. It is to be noted that all valuable records of the Samugurias of this area had been destroyed on the earthquake of 1950, one of the most massacres flood of 1972 and one of the most dangerous and artificial flood of NIPPCO on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2008. This is the reason why no written documents of this community are available.

Tonkeswar Loying, the author of 'Mising Janajivan' (life of Mising) brought to focus some new information about this community. In his book he recorded that the term Samuguria was derived from the place of Samuguri<sup>4</sup> of Sivasagar where these people settled during the time of Ahom period. As regards the language of this community is concerned this author compiled a list of their Mising Language in which about Mising words have been compiled.<sup>5</sup> Only one author namely, Prof. Boloram Bhuyan dwelt upon their culture in his book 'Samuguria, Mising Samajot Ebhumukhi (At a glance on Samuguria Mising Society). However his description about their culture is very brief, containing as much as 37 pages.

### **Research Questions**

- (i) How and why the Samugurians compelled to give up their mother tongue? What is the main reason?

- (ii) What is the present socio-cultural status of this society?
- (iii) What are the main cultural characteristics of this society?

### Methodology

The primary and secondary both methodologies are used in this seminar paper. The field study is the main source to prepare the seminar paper. Data Collection, Sample Collection, Interviews, questionnaires, observations are main sources for this paper.

### Findings

- (i) The first finding is that the Samugurians had used Assamese language.
- (ii) The Second finding is that they do not celebrate the Mising festival Ali-Aye-Ligang. (Agricultural festival). Instead of Ali-Aye-Ligang they celebrated the three Assamese Bihu viz. (i) Bohag or Rongali, (ii) Kati or Kongali (iii) Magh or Bhogali.
- (iii) The Samugurians solemnized the puberty attend of a girl, which is absent in Mising Society.
- (iv) The Samugurians had no Murong House and they do not perform the dobur and po:rag also.

### Discussion

There is a traditional story amongst the Samugurians as to how they forgot their own language. The story goes that before they came down to the plains of Assam they lived in hills of Arunachal Pradesh. There were two villages lived on opposite banks of a river. A conflict of a serious nature began. A gam of a village murdered the gam of the other village and kept the body concealed in a cave. One day the second son of the slain gam proceeded to approach the gam of the enemy village and got to know about his father's death. On return he took oath by giving below on earth by his dao (sword) to take revenge. A young group of men determined to avenge the death of the leader. A raft was said to have been used for crossing the river. The raft was tied by rope from both the sides. After giving puja to their deity, they drank apong (rice beer) in large quantity and in the midnight they prepared to cross the river in a drunken stage. As a result they untied the wrong rope and eventually they reached their own village and cut the heads of the sleeping members of their own. When they came back to their senses, they realized their fatal mistake. Out of their regret, remorse and despair they decided to come down to the plain. This incident is considered by the Misings as "Mikapalat" and the people are called Mirang (only men folk).

On the plains, in the Ahom kingdom, one kind of flying snakes called danhi caused terror amongst the people. The king declared a reward for anybody who could kill the snakes. But nobody dared face the poisonous any flying snakes. This group of hilly people, who massacred their own kith and kin, had nothing to care for their own lives. Moreover, they knew how to tackle any dangerous creature of the jungle. They came forward to face these snakes. They destroyed the snakes to the last. Being satisfied the Ahom king offered them reward. As they were lonely having no families, the king offered them Assamese women and gave settlement. As the wives were Assamese-speaking women, their descendants could not speak Mising.

This was the main reason to leave the Mising language. The Ahom king was settled them near Sam tree of Sivasagar which area was known as Samuguri. Then this small group of people identified themselves as Samuguria.

### **The Socio-Cultural life of the Samugurians**

Cultural synthesis between the Aryans and different Tibeto-Burman Groups is evident indifferent spheres of folklore and folk life as well as traditional cultures of both the tribal and the non-tribals etc.<sup>6</sup> But in course of time, such groups have accepted the Assamese language. Not only in the case of language, have they adopted the Assamese culture as their own.

#### **Language**

When and how racial admixture took place in Assam nobody can give us definite data. But historians believe that it began in the very early days of migration.<sup>7</sup> As it had no written records, it is difficult to pin point when exactly they shifted Assamese language and culture. Most probably they have given up their own Mising language perhaps a century ago.<sup>8</sup> When the mirang menflok married the local Assamese women for whom their culture, manner and mode of living were enormously influenced by the Assamese culture and language.

#### **Dress**

Amongst the Samugurians the typical Mising dresses are not found anymore. The Samuguria womenfolk wear pat, muga or cotton cloths like Assamese women in any festivities. In the day-to-day life in home they use cotton cloths made by themselves men folk wear dhoti, genii, shirts etc. like the Assamese men folk.

#### **House Pattern**

They live in machang house. It is said that the Misings construct their machang house as precaution of flood. But this theory is doubtful because the Mongoloid people live in machang house even on hill tops<sup>9</sup>. Under the machang, women can weave, their live stocks like, poultry and pigs are kept under it. The kitchen is of a machang house for several reasons. The oven is prepared in a wooden frame filled with earth. Over the oven there are three or two tiers of platform. The first one is very simple any used for drying fish or meat. The next one is used for drying pots of apong and storing other materials of the kitchen.

#### **Education and means of Livelihood**

The Sarvashikshya Yojana (Education for all) is strictly well done for education even remote place of Assam. Every child has practiced from their childhood to going the Anganbadi School. Therefore, the up growing generation is almost hundred percent literate. Cultivation is the main occupation of these villagers, but only few persons are engaged in government, semi government, company and private institutions services in the capacity of professor, subject teacher, school teacher, engineer, junior engineer, office-assistant, police or military personnel, peon, paramedical staff etc. Of course, there are some families which are very poor. They earn their bread through manual labour. And some other families earn money by selling vegetables, fishes, pigs, fire-woods, rice-beer etc.

#### **Religion**

The Samugurians traditionally perform their all religious activities according to the process of Kala-Samhati pantha (sect).<sup>10</sup> Although the traditional religion of Mising is called the pantha of Kala Samhati of Hindu (Vaishnava) yet there are some differences between the Kala-Samhati and Hindu (Vaishnava). In the Sakamas of Kala-Samahati, pigs, cocks, ducks, fishes and apong are offered to deities. But in the Hindu Vaishnava,

there are no sacrifices of any animals. Some villagers of these areas have started to follow other panthas of Hindu religion, i.e. (i) Vaishnavism, (ii) Anukul Thakur and (iii) Krishnaguru.

### **Matrimonial System**

Strictures in connections with the marriage system amongst the Samugurians are definite and strict. There cannot be a marriage within the same lineal clan.<sup>11</sup> Hence, like other tribes of Tibeto Burma, the Mising boys and girls can marry with the daughters and sons of maternal uncle and paternal aunty, which is known as cross-cousin marriage in Tibet.<sup>12</sup>

### **Food Habit and Drinks**

As agriculture is the main occupation hence rice is the major food of these people. They eat meats of pig, goat, cock, duck etc. They domesticate these live-stock and poultries. They drink rice-beer called apong. The role of apong in the Mising society is closely connected with their lives. It is a common drink in all the auspicious occasions and in any other festivities. Even they offer apong to their departed souls of forefathers.

### **Rituals & Festivals**

They never perform the so-called native festivals of the Mising people such as Ali-aye-ligang, Po:rag and Do:bur etc. Instead of these they heartily observe three Bihus and two nas (new meal known as na-khowa by the Assamese). The rules and regulations regarding Bohag Bihu are the same as that of the Assamese Society. Songs used in Hunsari and Bihu are basically the same with that of the Assamese. Kati Bihu and Magh Bihu are also observed in the same way as the Assamese people do. In the month of Aghon (15<sup>th</sup> Nov- 15<sup>th</sup> Dec) a ritual known as na-khowa is observed. Old men and women under the leadership of priest with the entire family offer this new meal of harvested rice to the departed souls of the forefathers. The most notable feature is that there is no Oi-Ni:tom (Mising Folk Song) and Gumrag So:nam (Folk dance) or Do:bo Ka:ban (tragedy song) found in this society.

### **Burial of the Dead**

The Samugurians are Hindu but the dead bodies are never cremated like other Hindus.

A grave is dugged east-west wise about 6 ft in length, 3 ft. wide and 4 ft deep. After the body is laid to rest the head facing west, a symbolic house is built over the coffin and everyone attending the funeral put something in the grave, by his or her left hand. After enough soil is put over it, another symbolic house with a white sheet of cloth is constructed over it, and the area is fenced round with bamboo trellis work to ward off wild animals.

### **Limitations**

- (i) As mentioned earlier there is no written record about knowing the Samugurian culture. Therefore the research is very difficult.
- (ii) The field study is the best policy to knowing the culture. But nowadays the known aged persons also gradually died, so it is a big problem to research on this society.
- (iii) Oral literature is also source for this topic. But known persons are gone. Therefore, it should be written as fast as possible to conserve otherwise oral literature also be vanished.

### **Some Changes on Socio-Cultural life**

With the spread of education intellectual awakening have taken place in both men and women. At the first instance, we find the changes of their residence, with the development of pecuniary condition and shortage of building materials of their raised platform (machang) house, by using iron, cement, bricks etc. Now, tea is taking the place of apong. Even coffee and other cold drinks are available in highly educated and aristocratic Mising intellectuals' residence. Formerly they cooked in an open oven. But now even in some villages people use liquid petroleum gas, stoves, and electrical oven etc. Pressure cookers and other cooking utensils acquainted with the modern age and civilization. A few decades ago, school going children with scanty and nasty dresses, barefooted along with a mat made of banana leaves (dry rods of the leave used) or a chest in hand for sitting on the floor of the school building are not seen now. In its place we see the school going children with neat and clean uniform properly clad with schools and with tiffin boxes and school bags rush forth to the English Medium School. Under the same principal the educated Mising pronounce Assamese Language more correctly than the illiterate forefathers of them and the Mising kinship terms like Nan (Maa) and Bap (Deuta) have been change to Mom and Papa. This is a clear evidence of the process of language shift that is taking place. The Mising women and girls are busy with the present day life. They have no more leisure time to devote in weaving or agricultural works. So the weaving industry is badly affected. But on the other side, some people have taken it as profession by establishing small scale industry of Miri-jim and other Mising colourful dresses which have high demands in the Assam and North East. With the growth of population, spread of education and shortage of cultivable land, have enough influences upon the people. As a result, the occupation of life is also changes to a great extent. Likewise, we have seen that fisheries, sericulture, piggeries, poultries etc. are grown up as business and profession. Time and education are successful factors to give a scientific changeable shape of the Mising Society. Impact of globalization is also one of the most important reason to changes the culture of all societies of the world, especially those which are minority in number.

### **Recommendation**

Some enlightened and conscious educated people have made efforts to conserve the oral literature and culture by making recording, video cassettes, and writing books etc. In the Samugurian society now two parallel sides are seen :

1. To accept modern culture and
2. To conserve traditional culture to the possible extent.

### **Conclusion**

About long process of mingling of people, language and culture, we can point out many instances. The Ahom people, though they were the ruling class, but were minority have lost their original Tai Language and religion. They have adopted Assamese language and Hinduism. Similarly the Koch kings were nothing but the Bodo people who turned Hindus. The lalung Kacharis also forgot their Tiwa language. Likewise, some parts of Mongoloid people Ahom, Chutia, Konch, Sonowal, Thengal, Some Deuris, Some Miris, Rabha Kachari, Saraniya Kachari have completely merged into Assamese language and culture. Hence the Samuguria, Temars, Bonkual, Bebezia and Bihia Misings are no exceptions. The process of Assamisation was taking place automatically and voluntarily. No force was used for any quarter. But in this age of enlightenment, the great and silent process is being wounded and that is too, beyond repairmen, which results of conflict and

crisis of identity of people belonging to various groups and communities in the North-East India.

### Hypothesis

1. At the end of the paper we can see that till today there's much sources to research on this community. It is not sufficient research work for this type of community.
2. It can be developed to search a whole lot of various different matters from these communities as they are always under identity crisis.
3. The socio-cultural life is not easy and specific for research. Therefore, there are always some clues for social researchers to these types of small societies.

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