

INTRODUCTION

(1) Geography of the area under study:

Assam, one of the states of Indian subcontinent and located in the North-East, is “one of the greatest routes of migration of mankind”¹. It lies roughly between the geographical extent of 89° 86’ and 96° East longitudes and 28° and 24° North latitudes. Assam is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the North; Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram on the South; Manipur, Nagaland in the East and West Bengal, Meghalaya and Bangladesh on the west. In other words, on the north of Assam, lies the Eastern Himalayas reaching the highest altitude in the north-east at Namchu-Burwa (7,756 meters above the sea-level). The different parts of the Sub-Himalayan region, where there is diversity in elevation are named after the tribes who inhabited those hills. The range continues towards the South-East and joins the Patkai Hills, the natural boundary between Assam and Burma.² The so called Assam range in the middle is also occupied from the east and to the west by various tribes like the Nagas, Jaintiyas, Khasis and Garos. On the south lie Chin and Lushai (Mizo) hills, Chittagon hill tracts and hill Tipperah.³ Topographically Assam can be divided into three district Zones, namely : The Brahmaputra Valley in the North; the Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills in the middle and The Barak Valley in the South. The long and narrow Brahmaputra Valley stretches across the state from east to west. The plain zone starts from the eastern districts of Tinsukia and Dhemaji to Goalpara in the west covering an area of 56194 square kilometers. The Barak Valley lies on the southern side and it is fertilized by the river Barak and its tributaries.

It covers an area of 6222 square kilometers. In between the two valleys, there lies the Karbi plateau and the North Cachar hills. The average height of this plateau is 800 to 400 meters. The highest peak is known as *Singhasan* which is about 1360 meters. Two hill districts covering an area of 15322 square kilometers. The soil of the two valleys is alluvial and hill areas are red and acidic. The total area of Assam is 78,520 square miles.

Assam's extraordinary fertile soil, rich natural and mineral resources and a population of mixed character, offer interesting subject of research and study to natural and social scientists. As already mentioned, except on the west, she is bounded on all sides by mountain ranges inhabited by different hill tribes, mostly of Mongoloid stock, infact, her cultural and political relations with the hill people is so close that the history of Assam cannot be separated from the history of the neighboring hill areas. Indeed present day Assamese culture has grown out of an assimilation of elements of tribal and Hindu culture ⁴.

(a) Flora and Fauna

Nature is very lavish in bestowing all her beauties on Assam. The hills and the forests, besides enhancing beauty to the land, contain valuable flora and fauna, some of which are in the world. Sub-tropical evergreen forests are found in the whole region. The total area under forest in Assam in 2011 was 27,673 square kilometers, which is 24.58% of the total geographical area. The reserved forest area of the state is 22.77 per cent. ⁵

In this forest region there grows enormous number of vegetation species. Timber, bamboo, cane, gum, lac and medicinal herbs are such

forest products. The soil of the state is suitable for growing cotton, silk, coffee, sugarcane and most importantly, tea.

Besides these rich floras, the forest regions in Assam abound with many animals and birds. Some of the species found in the state are either exclusive to her or are rarely to be seen in any other part of the world. In this connection mention may be made of species like one-horned rhinoceros, elephant, wild buffalo, tiger, leopard, bison, Himalayan bear, black panther, hoolock gibbon, the stump-tailed macaque, the golden langur monkeys, the pigmy hog, the golden cat, the white-winged-duck etc. During the winter season, this region also receive visit by varieties of migratory birds from all over the world.

(b) Mineral Resources

Amongst the mineral resources of Assam, petroleum, natural gas, coal, and lime stone are very important. Assam produced crude oil which amounts more than 55% of the total production in India. According to an official statistics, Assam has an estimated coal reserve of 850 million metric tones. ⁶

(c) Climate

Assam has a tropical climate. Due to its constant high humidity, it has a moderate climate. The monsoon starts here generally from mid-May and continues upto September. The winter season begins from the mid October and continues upto the March. Although there is wide variation of temperature between summer and winter months, but neither the summer is extremely hot nor the winter extremely cold. Shihabuddin Talish, the historian who accompanied Mirjumla in 1662-63 A. D, made a correct observation of the climate of Assam and wrote- “it rains for eight months in year and even the four months of winter are

not free from rains. ⁷ Indeed, floods are the most common and regular natural calamities in Assam. The plight of the people during the time of flood begger's description. Villages situated on the river banks are submerged. Paddy fields, standing crop and cattle are washed away and thousands living in these areas are rendered homeless. As Misings, the people under study, traditionally live in villages on the river banks, always are the worst hit of the clamity. The climate of Assam is aptly described by an author in the following words "Perpetual humidity, frequent and heavy rainfall and moderate temperature changes of the warm summer and cool winter especially distinguish the valley of Assam" ⁸

(2) People of the study

Being situated in "one of the greatest routes of migsation of mankind" as well as human settlement, Assam forms a museum of races. People of different races and cultures have come to this part of the world and contributed to the formation and enrichment of Assamese culture and civilization through out the centuries. Assam is a meeting point of colourful tribes consisting of both hills and plains tribes having different ethno-linguistic background. Among the plain tribes of the region, the Misings occupies a significant position, being the second largest group (next only to the Bodos) with a population of 680424 souls as recorded in 2011 census. ⁹ In remote past they were orginially a hill tribe living in the hills between the Nishi and Adi territories. In other words, the eastern part of the Sub-Himalayan range of mountainous region especially the Siang Valley of present Arunachal Pradesh was the home land of the Misings. They came to the plain during the Ahom rule. They settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra and The Suvansiri rivers and their tributaries with agriculture as their main occupation. They are

divided into two main endogamous groups Baro Gam (twelve gams) and Dah Gam (ten gams), which are subdivided into a large number of minor groups. As the Misings have been living mostly along the banks of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries, they are called riverine people. At present they spread over wide range of plains of eastern Assam and are mainly found in the districts of North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Sunitpur and Tinsukia.

The Misings are of Mongolid stock and belong to the Tibeto-Burman languages speaking group. Their dialect is allied to the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh. Linguistically the Misings of Assam can be divided in two groups-Assamese speaking and Mising speaking. It can be noticed that the Assamese speaking Misings are more adaptable to forces of socio-economic transformation than those of the dialect speaking. However, be it the Assamese speaking or Mising speaking, the Misings present very attractive varieties of material culture, such as spinning, weaving, basketry, cane and wood work which have been known to the tribe for quite a long time. Their excellent taste of colour and patterns bears testimony of technical perfection achieved over the time immemorial. They are self-sufficient and self-reliant for centuries with their home products. But in the recent times the inevitable forces of globalization, has introduced significant changes in almost every aspect of their lives.

(3) A Brief History of the land of the study

The country presently frequented by the Misings formed a part of the kingdom known as Pragjyotish and later as Kamrupa. It is by these two names that Assam has been referred to both in epigraphs and literature. The modern state of Assam is but a part of the extensive

kingdom of Pragjyotisha or Kamrupa. In the period of epics the kingdom of Pragjyotisha included the greater portions of modern Assam, along with Koch-Bihar, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Bogra, Mymensing, Decca, Tripura, portions of Paban and probably a portion of Nepal. ¹⁰ The area of the Kingdom is given by the Chinese Pilgrim Yuan Charang, who visited the court of Bhaskaravarmana in 643 A.D as more than a myriad *lie* or 1667 miles (1 li = 1/6 of mile) in circuit. ¹¹ Thus it appears that the Kingdom of Pragjyotisha – Kamarupa once covered the major portion of Eastern India.

Pragjyotisha – Kamarupa sprang up from a long period of oblivion following the great Mahabharata war, under a new line of kings called the Varmanas, whose government lasted for about three centuries (c. 355 – 650 A.D.). The Varmanas were followed by the Salastambhas (650-990 A.D) and the Palas (990 A.D.- 1142 A.D) during the reigns of the rulers of these three dynasties, varying fortunes brought by conflicts with the neighbouring powers in the west sometimes pushed back her boundary across the river Karatoya and sometimes extended it beyond the river. But “in any case it is clear that Pragjyotisha or ancient Kamarupa was a much larger kingdom than most of the other kingdom mentioned in the Mahabharata and most of the sixteen Mahajanapadas existing during the time Gautama Buddha.”¹²

With the fall of the Pala dynasty in the early part of the 12th century, the powerful kingdom of Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa disintegrated. It led to the emergence of the number of independent or semi-independent kingdoms or principalities of the feudatory rules of Mongoloid Chiefs. The early part of the 13th Century saw two major events in the history of Assam one was the beginning of series of invasions from the west led by the Muslim Powers of Bengal and the

other was the foundation of a kingdom by the Tais, who came to be known as “Ahoms” in the south-eastern part of the Brahmapura Valley. The former was an outright invader and annexationist and the later an agriculturist. Eventually, however, the Ahoms not only pushed back the Muslims from the Brahmaputra Valley, but also occupied the entire Valley by subjugating the various tribal kingdoms and thus formed the mighty Ahom Kingdom. The Ahoms united the people of the entire Brahmaputra Valley under one political umbrella and ruled the country for almost 600 years. The Misings who came down from the northern hills in about 13th to 16th Century A.D, came into close contact with the Chutiyas who had a Kingdom around Sadiya. The Chutiya Kingdom was devastated and annexed to the Ahom Kingdom by Suhungmung Dihingia Raja (1497-1535). Suhungmung also subjugated the Bora Bhuyans who were ruling the northern bank of mighty Brahmaputra. This extension of the Ahom Kingdom from Brahmakunda in the east to the Subansiri river in the west on the northern bank Brahmaputra river heralded the beginning of the Mising Ahom relations. The Ahoms in course of time accorded to the Mising the status of a subject population and also recruited some of them to the fighting forces and used to give important assignments in state administration.¹³ It is therefore a fact that by the 16th and 17th centuries the Misings were recognized as citizens of Ahom Kingdom.¹⁴ The Misings on their part, served loyally to the Ahom administration and contributed in no way less significantly in Assamese nation building process. After the collapse of the Ahom Kingdom, when the British assumed the charge of Assam by 1826, the major portion of Mising territory, particularly the Murkongselek and Sadiya area, had remained free from British occupation till 1911, when a British expeditionary force finally conquered this area along with

adjoining Adi territory. The colonial rulers grouped and regrouped, joined and bifurcated the tribal peoples and their territories for their own selfish colonial interest. The colonial rulers thus played with the geography, ecology, demography, environment and future of the tribals of the North-East as well as other tribes of their Indian colonial empire. Infact, when the colonial rulers left India, they left everything in a mess, particularly in the territories of the tribals, which indeed remains to be undone till date. ¹⁵

(4) Aim of the study

The Misings of the plains of Assam has undergone important social, economic and cultural changes leading to transformation of their tribal lifestyle. But no systematic study or research has been done on this topic. The aim of the present study is to collect elaborate data on the transformation occurred in post colonial Mising tribal social structure. Moreover, the present study attempts to analyse the forces of changes in the field of their socio-cultural and material condition caused by various factors including globalization.

(5) Scope of the study

The present study is confined only to the systematic study of the society, economy and culture of the Mising people of Assam and changes seen in these aspects. The study includes various aspects of socio-economic and cultural activities and traditions of the tribe like folklore, history, social institutions, festivals, rituals, new development in religious life, rites, material culture etc. Attempts are also made to portray the distinctiveness of the Misings from other tribes such as in the field of weaving, house building etc.

(6) Objective and Significance of the study

The importance of the study of socio-economic and cultural transformation of the Mising is great from the point of view of both Assam and India. Such study certainly reveal truth and provide historic continuity, culture progress, skill and needs of the marginalised tribal people, particularly those of Mongoloid origin. Unlike the united culture of India which was started by the three forerunners, i.e. The Austric, the Dravidians and the Aryan speakers, that of the North-Eastern part of India was basically started By the Mongoloids. But the extent to which works have been done on The Austrics, the Dravidians and the Aryans, has not been maintained in doing work on the Mongoloids of the North-Eastern region. Besides its being an important aspect of Indology, a study on these tribes would certainly form an important contribution in revealing aspect of country's civilization.

(7) Methodology of the study

(a) Interview method

During field study a number of representatives of the villages, both Mising and non-Mising, belonging to the area under investigation were interviewed. The purpose of this interview is two fold: (i) securing first hand information on the subjects under study and (ii) to obtain a vivid picture of present position, transition and appreciation of the Mising socio-economic and cultural life.

(b) Participation Method

During the field survey a number of elderly people who have witnessed the train of changes and transformation that has occurred in the life of Mising community since independence in the areas under investigation were consulted in order to get first hand knowledge on the

subject under study as well as to compare them with the informations received in various relevant books and journals.

(c) Review of Literature

This work is essentially based on the method of descriptive analysis which is elaborately exemplified in a good number of books written by social scientists and folklorists. Besides, the help of a number of selected published Gazetteers, Census reports, journals, bulletins, and a good number of research papers and also unpublished Ph. D thesis to portray different aspects of the subject is also taken. As there is no written history of the Misings and their culture, therefore most of the information on the subject is taken from the widely prevalent oral history. With a view to getting an in-depth insight in the socio-economic and cultural transformation of the Misings in post colonial period, field study has been carried out in ten villages located in five different districts of Assam. Some case studies are taken to provide concrete examples of practice in contemporary Mising society. Apart from these techniques, camera was used during the field work to illustrate certain relevant aspect of the subject under study.

There are several studies on various aspects of socio-cultural and economic life of the Misings. The pioneer in this direction was Sonaram Paying Kataki, who was recognized as the first author amongst the Mising community for his book '*Miri Duwan*' published in 1915. In 1935, Payeng Kataki authored '*Miri Jatir Buranji*'. Although many of the informations recorded in this book are not historically evident, but still it remains as a mirror for historical quest of the community. In post-colonial time, a number of books on the migration, history, life and culture of the tribe have been published. The notable of them are :

The Miris (1956) and the *Misings of the Brahmaputra Valley* (1981) both in English by Nomal C Pegu; *The Misings: The Sons of the Nature* by Mg.Budeheswar Doley (1997) ; *A History of the Mishings of Eastern India* by Peter Pegu (1998), *The Misings: Their history and culture* , (ed) by J.J. Kuli (This book accommodates the serious writings of D.Nath, D.Doley, Taburam Taid, B.N. Dutta, L.N. Pegu and others) ; *The Mishings (Miris) of Assam : Development of a new lifestyle* (1987) by Jatin Mipun. *The Cultural history of the Misings of Assam* by J.Nath and N.K. Pegu (2012) and an anthology of Assamese essays “Mising Sanskritir Alekhya” (1989), etc. Except the book written by Jatin Mipun, no proper study of the process of socio-cultural transformation of the Misings has been studied so far Mipun too, in his monumental work, only portrayed sociological aspects of transformation of the tribe based on acculturation , communication and development. Besides, The Misings have traversed quite a distance in their socio-economic and cultural life in the last three decades (Mipun’s book was first published in 1987). So the present study wants to fill up the gap of inadequacy by encompassing historical and contemporary processes of changes and its impacts on the socio-cultural and economic life of The Misings

(8) Organisation of the Study

In the introduction a brief description of the geography of the land and nearby mountain ranges inhabited by different hill tribes, mostly of Mongoloid race is given. Besides, the flora and fauna, mineral resources and the climate in which the Misings adopted themselves is briefly described. The original abode of the Misings and their subsequent settlements in Assam plains, their racial identity, their division on the basis of clans and language also found mention in the introductory

chapter. A brief history of the land from earliest time up to the conquest of their territory by the British imperialist force in early part of 20th century is also given in this chapter. The aims, scope and methodology of the proposed study and also organisation of the study is followed properly.

The first chapter of this dissertation deals with the demography of the Mising as projected by the decadal census of colonial and independent India up to 2011, giving importance to the fact that from the least numbers in 1872, the Misings now constitute the second largest tribe in the plains of Assam. The origin of the word ‘Miri’, ‘Mising’, ‘Mishing’, which continues to stay afloat in the inquisitive minds of the Mising intelligentsia, is given. The origin and migration of the tribe from the valley of Hwang-Ho and Yangtse-Kiang to Tibet and then to Arunachal and ultimately to the plains of Assam are dealt in details on the basis of legends, folk-lore and historical sources. A brief history of the Misings in the plains of Brahmaputra Valley including their ungoverned status during the reign of the Chutiyas, their relations with the Chutiya, and also prolonged insubordination of the Misings exhibited towards Ahom administration and ultimate reconciliation with the administration and society of the plains and resultant repudiation of age-old suzerainty of ‘The Abors’ etc. are discussed in details.

The second chapter elaborately discusses the social institutions of the Misings. These social institutions including *Ke’bang*, *Murang*, *Mimbir Ya:me* etc. has great significance in the social life of the Misings. This chapter analyse the origin, power and functions and present status of these institutions, revealing that they are the life regulating force of the Mising society wherefrom emanates all activities

starting from day to day social affairs to highest political matters concerning the security and integrity of the villages and even the state.

The cultural life of the colourful Mising tribe of Assam is discussed in the third chapter. Here the folk culture of the Mising which were rooted in their ways of life in the high hills, but changed through the centuries as the landscape of their habitat changed from high hills of yesteryears to the present expanse of the Brahmaputra Valley are analysed in details. Their dwellings, food habits, drinks, festivals, marriage system, system of disposal of dead's, all concerning their cultural life are given in brief. The Mising women and their famous weaving culture got special importance in this chapter.

The fourth chapter gives the religious beliefs, myths and rites of the Misings, which are related to that of the Adivis of Siayang Valley and fundamentals of which can be traced back to their early stage of migration. The chapter also analysed the changes which are seen with respect to their religious beliefs and practices as they have been under pressure from the religion prevalent among the local populace since their migration to the plains of Assam. The spread of Christianity and its considerable impact among the Misings, particularly among those of river island Majuli, have received special attention in this chapter.

The fifth chapter forms the genesis of these research work based on extensive field study. It gives the recent picture of socio-cultural changes among the Misings and its impact on their economic life. The chapter deals with the transition of the Misings with the development of the society and changing of time. The decaying traditional institution, changing socio-cultural life beginning from their dwelling and food habits to the celebration of marriage and festivals; the imitation of

Hindu and Christian religious rites but at the same time combining both tribal and non-tribal modes of worship together ;the adoption of wet rice culture as the major ways of livelihood in place of earlier hunting and jhumming,etc., thus covering almost all aspects of the socio economic and cultural life of the Misings are dealt in this very important chapter.

The conclusion drawn on the study has been presented in the chapter six.

End Notes :

1. Mills, J.H. *Assam Review*, March 1928, p- 24
2. Barpujari, H.K. (ed). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Guwahati, 1992, vol-i, p-2
3. Ibid.
4. Barua, S.L. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi, 2009, p-4
5. Data on forest and free cover area (State of forest report 2011, of FSI), Department of Environment and Forest, Govt. of Assam. Data obtained from Directorate of Census operations Assam.
6. Kakati, D (ed). *The Brahmaputra Beckons*, Madras, 1982, p-259
7. Sir, Sarkar, J.N, (Tr), *Fathiya-i-Ibriyh*, Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society (Hereafter JBORS), Vol- i, Part- iii, December, 1915
8. Das. A (ed) *Flora of Assam*, Vol – i, Part- i, Shillong, 1934, p- xxix
9. General population tables of Assam, Directorate of Census Operation, Assam; Census of India 2011.
10. Journal of the Asiatic Society of Baengal (Hereafter JASB), 1887, p-106
11. Watters T. *On Yuan Chwang's Travel to India*, New Delhi, 1968, Part-ii p- 187
12. Barua, K.L. *Early History of Kamarupa*, Gauhati, 1966. p-7
13. Goswami, H.C (ed). *Purani Asom Buranji*, Gauhati, 1977, p-110; Devi, L, *Ahom Tribal Relations*, Gauhati, 1968, pp 159 ff.
14. Nath, D; *The Misings in the History of Assam*, in Kuli, J. J (ed). *The Misings : Their History and Culture*, Dibrugarh, 1998, p-39
15. Pegu, R. *Autonomy Movement of the Misings*, in Kuli, J.J(ed) opcit, pp 147-148.

A culture-orientated design model has been proposed to assist designers to consciously integrate culture in their design practice. The framework demonstrates how to specify, analyse and integrate socio-cultural factors in the early stages of the design process by advancing local thought, content and solutions. It advances a new approach to design education, theory, research and practice. It emerged that culture can be used as a resource of information and a source of inspiration for product innovation that connects with users' traditions. DISPLACEMENT, NEW OCCUPATION AND SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION Transformation of tribe and culture is a continuous process. Tribes of India have come in contact with various external or internal forces and are in constant change. As they are no longer in isolation, but exposed to various forces, so change in their culture is inevitable. But their contact with outside world has allowed a number of evils to infiltrate in them along with a number of benefits. Although India became independent these people lost their Scheduled Tribes Status in Assam and thus they are deprived of educational. Their migration. guarantee political representation as well as seat in educational institution. 4% are unemployed. Abstract: The colorful life of the people, their traditional customs, festivals and dances are some of the components of the rich cultural diversity of India as well as its north-eastern region including Assam. Culture is not a static identity and keeps changing. The changing environmental development makes internal adaptation necessary for culture. Thus, a lot of changes have also been observed in the Mising culture too. The impact of urbanisation and modernization has brought a major economic and socio-cultural transformation among the Mising tribe of Assam. Their society is changing not on