

# Acculturation and Cultural Transformation of the Mising Tribe

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural intermixing and interaction give rise to the process of acculturation where one group accept and adopt the practice of another group. The present paper examines how the misings who resides in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam mainly in Brahmaputra valley got acculturated to the plains of the valley over a period of eight hundred years. This paper empirically looks at the stages of acculturation and the threat of possible cultural extinction with regard to the misings.

**KEYWORDS:** Misings, Acculturation, Ssocio-Cultural Interaction, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Mishing or Mising are also called 'Miri' are an ethnic group inhabiting the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. In Arunachal Pradesh, they are settled in East Siang, Lower Dibang Valley and Lohit. In Assam they are mainly settled in upper Assam districts namely Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sonitpur, Jorhat and Golaghat. They are called riverine tribe in Assam as they are settled in riverine island of river Brahmaputra and bank of its tributaries. They belong to Mongoloid group and are categorized as the scheduled tribe by the constitution of India. They have their own culture, social customs, traditions and language. Historians and researchers believe that the Misings migrated from the upper courses of river Huang Ho and Yangtse Kiang.

The Mishing (exonym Miri) is one of the major ethnic tribes of Assam and forms the second largest tribe of Assam after Bodo. According 2001 census, the population of the Mising tribe was 5,87,310 which constituted more than 17.8% of the total tribal population of the state. The literacy rate of the Mishing was 60.1% (male 71.4% and female 48.3%).

## II. Definition and meaning of Acculturation:

Social scientists and researchers have defined 'acculturation' in various terms. According to

Redfield, Linton and Herskovits 1936, 'Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when a group of individuals having different culture come into continuous first hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture pattern of either or both group'. Robert H. Winthrop (1991) adds that it is the process systemic cultural change of a particular society carried out by an alien, dominant society.' Acculturation is a gradual process and compromises those changes in a culture brought about by another culture which result in an increased similarity between the two cultures.

To study the process of adaptation of culture of the mainstream by the immigrant, theories have developed to redefine the process of acculturation since 1970. An acculturation theory was developed by Parker in 1978 which had three stages- contact, accommodation and assimilation. According to this model immigrant come in contact with mainstream people to accommodate, which result in assimilation and cause of intermarriage and mixed relationship.

## III. Methodology:

In order to analyze the process of acculturation with respect to the Misings we may take help of the fourfold theoretical framework promoted by John

Berry (1980). This framework organizes the acculturation into for generic types depending on the relative importance of the first culture (F) and contact culture (C). The framework involves the two issues of retaining cultural identity and of positive relations with the dominant society.

1	(-F+C)	The first culture is abandoned and the contact culture is favoured (assimilation)
2	(+F-C)	The first culture continues and the contact culture is disfavoured (rejection)
3	(+F+C)	Both the first culture and the contact culture are favoured (integration) and
4	(-F-C)	Both the first culture and the contact culture are disfavoured (deculturation)

On the basis of these acculturation theories, Mising scholars tried to study the acculturation process of Mishing tribe. Dr Jatin Mipun, a scholar belonging to the tribe was the first one who has done a systematic study on the acculturation process of Mishing tribe. According to Mipun, the acculturation of Mishing has three phases. First phase, Misings were hill dwellers in Arunachal Pradesh. Second phase Misings migrated to the plains of Assam. Third phase, they came in contact with neighbours and adopted their language and religion. This process of acculturation is described as “the growing relationship between the macro (tribal isolated village) middle (regional economy, culture and polity) and micro (mythology, belief worship, ideology and caste system levels “, Mipun 1987, pp54). He analysed the process acculturation with the theoretical framework of the concept of the dominant and the weak culture of Mead and Herskovitz and the little and the great tradition of Radfield. As per Mead and Herskovitz the dominant culture will influence the socio-religious and the traditional practices of the weak culture. It causes the problem marginality for the community members as well as the community of the weak culture tried to find the common element between the two cultures i.e., dominant and weak one. As per Radfield, the contact of the little tradition with the great tradition results in acculturation which put an end to the isolation, self sufficiency and homogenous nature of the little tradition. On the basis of these theoretical framework the acculturation process of Misings on religious practices, adaptation of Assamese language, changes on dress, housing pattern, tools and implements have been studied by Mipun. As per the study of Mipun, due to contact with Vaishnava Gosains and Satras, the Misings

converted into Hindus. After conversion they followed sect like Bhagavaita, Mahapuruhia, Kewalia, Kalsanghati, Nisamalia and so on. The Sadhu Bura, Hattulas and Bhaktas became the head of all religious activities. They are given the responsibility in the community by the Gosains of Satras after performing proper ritual. They also act as the preacher of Hinduism in the community. Mipun noticed due to acculturation the position of Mibu (priest) lost its importance and status and villages have namghar. Misings began to practice sect of Vaishnavism in their own way by retaining their traditional religious practices along with strict adherence to Vaishnava teaching. Due to acculturation new food habits and food articles were added in the menu. Beside food habits, Assamese culture is absorbed by the Mising by offering betel nut and tea to entertain guest, which is the core of Assamese culture.

Scholar Rajiv Doley also applied Berry theoretical framework to understand the process of acculturation among the Misings. This theoretical framework organizes acculturation among the Misings. The theoretical framework organizes acculturation into four stages. This theoretical explain the issue of retaining traditional cultural identity as well as maintaining positive relation with dominant culture. As per this theory, dominant culture (F- first culture) influences the culture of community (c- contact culture) who are in the process of acculturation.

The author describes the historical background of the tribe which is an important episode without its knowledge the reason of their acculturation will not be understandable. The migration of Mising from North West China to the plains of Brahmaputra valley, it took about four millennia and in the process, they have lost certain cultural trait. They had reached about thirteenth century in the Brahmaputra valley. In the plains they came in contact with communities like Chutiyas, Ahom or British. However, they remain isolated themselves from society and political authority for a considerable time. According to author the reason for isolation have been their feeling to remain sovereign and unsub missive nature as well as socio-cultural norms of the community. Till the seventeenth century they were outside the subjugation of the Ahom authority and not accustom to the culture as well as lifestyles of the plain neighbours. This stage of Mishing is described as (+f-c) as per the acculturation theoretical framework. Towards the end of seventeenth century the acculturation process began with the accommodative nature of Ahom govt. The Mishing were inducted into civil and military services of the Ahom to subdue the Nagas, Kacharis

and Jaintias. Besides providing royal services the Misings began to assimilate with the plain neighbours. They adopted their religion, wet agricultural cultivation, musical instrument, dress, language for communication and so on. The mixing of cultural elements of indigenous culture with contact culture is represented with “+f+c” which means continuation of traditional culture and favor the contact culture. According to him “-f+c” and “-f-c” are not applicable to Mishing acculturation process (Doley, 2013).

#### IV. Conclusion:

A massive acculturation of the Mishing to the plains of Assam over a period of eight hundred years has resulted in a shift of social, linguistic and religious practices from the original culture to a great extent. In the process, a cultural syncretism between the indigenous trait of the Mishing and that of the plain of Assam has taken shape. However, the group has not altogether shunned their original culture also. A great deal of culture, linguistic and religious element still actively prevail in the community. Further, the socio-cultural organization like the Mising Bane Kebang, Mising Agom Kebang (Mising Literary Society) and the Mising Dirbi Kebang (Mising Cultural Organisation) are continuously making effort to

protect and preserve the socio-cultural heritage of Misings.

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