



UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF SANSKRITIZATION OF MISING TRIBE OF ASSAM: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The objective of the study is to understand the process and pattern of sanskritization in tribal community with special reference to the Misings of Assam. The universe of the study is the Mising (Miri) people, who are part of the indigenous people of Assam. Data of this study were collected from Mising (Miri) villages of Assam. These villages are Baligaon of Sonitpur district, Ghunasuti Oyan of Lakhimpur district, Barpamuah gaon of Jorhat district. It has been observed from the study that the Misings have adopted new food habits and dress pattern but not by giving up their traditional foods and dress. In the sphere of religion the findings suggest that the Misings have been in the state of further change. Christianity has been emerging in the community in a limited way. Mising women have been given freedom to make their living better by their own efforts as evident from the findings that educated girls are allowed to work independently for their own earnings and to use it to meet their needs. In the process of Sanskritization, there is culture accumulation as well as culture depletion.

Keywords: Mising tribe, Assam, Culture, Sanskritization

Intorduction

It is easy to identify a Hindu on the basis of one's caste, as such to get an idea of a Hindu without one's caste affiliations may be very difficult. While caste system is hierarchical in nature, it is established fact that the Brahmins and the untouchables occupy the two end of the system, but there is found some sort of indeterminacy in between the two ends. It is also recognized that there are a large number of outlying groups who remained marginal to or somehow completely outside Hinduism, they are referred to as the tribals. There are the lower castes trying to take on the traditional values and customs of the upper castes, to raise their status. On the other hand, the upper castes are discarding some of these customs. India is the land of castes and tribes who form the largest population of the country and major components of its society and culture. They belong to quite different historical backgrounds and social systems. The castes, belong to the Hindu system and the tribe conceptually to



primitive way to living in forest, depending on hunting and food gathering for survival. The Misings are one of the indigenous tribes of Assam. They had become Hinduised under the impacts of neo-vaishnavite movement which emerged in Assam in the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Misings adopted the cult of kalasamnhati of the neo-vaishnavism and had become disciples of some of the satras (neo-vaishnavite Monasteries) of kala-samnhati, but they did not give up their traditional beliefs and practices related to spirits. These are still maintained along with the Hindu concepts of gods and goddesses. They call it keoliya dharma, which is a dilution of Hindu and tribal religious system. The new system has given rise to a new system of performing rites and rituals called bhakatiya method. Bhakats are the senior devotees of the neo-vaishnavism. Thus the Misings represent semi-hinduised tribes, which have the pattern of sanskritization.

Objective

The objective of the study is to understand the process and pattern of sanskritization in tribal community with special reference to the Misings of Assam.

Sanskritization

Sanskritisation (or Sanskritization) is a term in sociology which refers to the process by which castes or tribes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek 'upward' mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the dominant castes or upper castes. The concept of sanskritization was developed by M.N. Srinivas (1952) while studying the "Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India". In his study Srinivas discovered that the low castes emulate the life of the neighboring high caste – that is, the Brahmins. Tribes can become castes through a complex process of social change called 'Sanskritization' which implies the absorption of a tribal community into caste structures by a dominant society. On the basis of the observation he defined sanskritization as a process by which "low castes take over the beliefs, rituals, life style and other cultural traits of those of the upper castes, especially the Brahmins. But since the model group might not be necessarily Brahmin alone and it could be other high castes he re-defined it as "a process by which a low caste or a tribe or other groups change their customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life in direction of a high twice born caste" (Srinivas 1966:6). Thus, the concept of sanskritization can be applied to understanding the pattern of social change of the tribes who are non-Hindu but Hindu oriented.



Sanskritisation also means the adoption of new ideas and values which have been expounded in Sanskrit literature. Such the6logical terms as Karma (predestination and rebirth), dharma (duty), papa (shih punya (merit and deliverance) maya (illusory nature of the world) , samsara (universal), and moksha (liberation) are used frequently. These were essentially related to Vedas and the discussion confined mostly to Brahmins. The notion of sanskritization is not only confined to religious beliefs and practices but it also refers to occupations and role of women in family economy. The low castes are engaged in selling livestock, meat and fish, alcohol, which are rejected by the high castes. In order to improve their image therefore, the low caste give up occupations like trading livestock and try to adopt occupations of the high castes. Ahuja (1990) haa added some more points to sanskritization process as follows :The concept of sanskritization has been integrated with economic and political domination, that is, the role of local ‘dominant caste’ in the process of cultural transmission has been stressed.

In the context of studying sanskritization of tribes, Shah (2003) suggested that one should be cautious in studying tribal problem because tribe is a generic term which covers number of human groups having divergent social characters in its connotation. Dube (1984:4) also held the same view that – “Despite its wide currency, the term has not been defined with scientific rigour and precision and continues to be used to describe a wide range or forms of social organization and levels of techno-economic development” Similarly, Hasnain (2001) states, “Interestingly but sadly the anthropologists, sociologists, social workers, administrators and people who have been involved with the tribes and their problems either on theoretical plane or on practical grounds are still not on the same wave length regarding the concept and definition of their subject matter.” For example – In Imperial Gazetteer of India a tribe is stated to be a collection of families bearing a common name, speaking t common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous, though originally it might have been so. It is pertinent to mention that during the process of Sanskritization only the status of a caste or group changes and not the social structure. Also many tribal societies in India who are not directly linked or related to Hinduism are the part of Sanskritization.

The effects of Sanskritization are pervasive. The low caste people are inclined toward this process as they find it the easiest way through which they can elevate their social status within the confines of caste hierarchy. Also the lower class people gradually start giving up



cleaning, washing, and other unhygienic and low-paid occupations in order to raise their economic status (Dumant, 1970).

Data and Methodology

The universe of the study is the Mising (Miri) people, who are part of the indigenous people of Assam. They have been living in Assam since the beginning of its formation, which may be traced back to the early thirteenth century. Assam can be therefore, called mother land of the Misings in which their culture have developed under the impacts of its physical, social and cultural environments and historical process. Data of this study were collected from five Mising (Miri) villages of Assam. These villages are Baligaon of Sonitpur district, Ghunasuti Oyan of Lakhimpur district, Barpamuah gaon of Jorhat district.

Findings and Discussions

Originally living in the Himalayan state of Arunachal Pradesh, the Mishing Tribe¹ has been migrating out to the Brahmaputra floodplain of Assam in the 13th century most probably in search of fertile land (Lego, 2005: 10; Mipun, 1993: 36). The second-largest tribe of the state, the Mising (who make up 17.8 percent of the state's population) are amongst the worst affected as they live on the banks of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. However, they manage to survive in their unique and traditional flood-resilient houses called *chang ghar* in Assamese, perched above the ground on bamboo stilts. From the findings of the sample villages it is clear that they are now going for modern permanent type of buildings depending on financial position. But the notable fact is that they are not prepared to give up their traditional *changghar* at all because it is a cultural symbol for them. In my own study of the sample villages, there was not too much evidence of Sanskritisation among the lower castes. There was some indication of Sanskritisation among the middle range caste groups, particularly in matters of food, housing and dresses, dwelling and to some extent in rituals.

It has been observed from the study that the Misings have adopted new food habits and dress pattern but not by giving up their traditional foods and dress. Rather attempts have been made to improve their commodities as commercial items. Thus the Misings are maintaining tradition as well as adopting new cultural items in the spheres of foods and dress. As a minority group living scattered in the midst of non-Mising communities the Misings have no alternative to accepting and adopting the national political system in which their traditional



institutions like *gam*, *kebang* and *ya:me-mimbir* become too weak to functions or irrelevant. *Gaonburah* or *panchayats* are more effective than *gam* or *kebang*, because the former have support of the state authorities. Therefore, the Misings find it more expedient to adopt new public authorities like the *gaonburah*, *panchayat* and the national and regional political organizations. So far family system is concerned the trend of change is found to be towards nuclear and smaller size of family member. In the sample villages nuclear families were found more than joint families. However, the norms of living together with parents have not been given up in the community. Majority of the joint families were found to be consisting of parents and one primary family of their sons. Thus in present of family system the Misings have been changing from traditional to modern structure.

In the sphere of religion the findings suggest that the Misings have been in the state of further change. They are now divided into four groups – viz. neo-vaishnavite *keoliya*, neo-vaishnavite *bhagawatiya*, *do:nyi-po:lo yelam* and *Christian*. The *keoliya* are the oldest and largest group more than 65 per cent of the respondents were *keoliyas* and majority of the families of the sample villages belonged to *keoliya faith*. Under the impacts of neo-vaishnavite movement most of the Misings if not all had become disciple of the *satras* and adopted the *kalasamhati* sect of neo-vaishnavism; but without giving up their traditional animistic beliefs and practices. They continued their sacrificial spirit worships and at the same time adopted some additional Hindu ritual and practices. The religious beliefs and practices maintained by the *keoliya* group may be called antithesis of neo-vaishnavism which is quite opposed to animistic sacrificial worship. Two hypotheses may be put forward as explanation to the question, why the Misings could not be integrated into neo-vaishnavite Assamese communities and continued their traditional religious beliefs and practices despite having adopted a sect of neo-vaishnavism which is diametrically opposed to animism. One explanation may be that at the time of conversion to neo-vaishnavism – that is in the sixteenth-seventeenth century, the Misings were so illiterate and ignorant that they could hardly understand Assamese language and therefore, communication between Assamese and Misings was a very difficult. So, the Misings could not be well taught about the meanings and tenets of the neo-vaishnavism. They remained completely ignorant of the new faith. Secondly, in those days the caste people of Assam used to call the Misings as *pobotiya miri* (hill miri) and treated them as untouchables. However, the Misings were initiated to the *satras* not for converting them to neo-vaishnavism in real sense of the term. By initiating more disciples the *satras* could collect more revenues



them. The *gosains* (religious leaders of satras) visited Mising villages more for collection of revenues in cash and kinds than for teaching of neo-vaisnavism. So, there had been wide gap of communication between Misings and neo-vaisnavite castes of Assam. These two situations blocked the interaction of Misings with the castes and other Assamese speaking people whom the Misings called *Mipak* (non-Mising or alien group).

This was however, learnt from some old Mising men that some devotees of secret sect of *kalasamhati* used to come to Mising villages from time to time and they introduced *tantricism* among the Misings in the name of *kalasamhati*, which is more liberal in inter-caste relation. It may be mentioned here that most of the followers of *kalasamhati* belong to the low caste and non-caste Hindu. The system came to be known as *keoliya dharma* which allows meat and wine in religious function. The *keoliya gosain* introduced the nocturnal worship called *barsewa* (great worship) among the Misings who had already practiced sacrificial worship. New *bhakats* (devotees) are initiated in the *barsewa* which is held every year in the Mising villages. As result *bhakatiya* system developed in the Mising community and it has become deeply rooted in the Mising cultural system for which it has been continuing among the Misings despite becoming neo-vaisnavite.

However, of late a new thinking on religion has developed among some members of the educated section of the community. Realizing the demerits of the *keoliya* this section of the community started movement for adopting the *bhagawatiya* sect of the neo-vaisnavism which totally rejects sacrificial worship. Thus *bhagawatiya* group has emerged in the community. The *do-nyi-po:lo* movement originated among the *Adi* group of the Arunachal tribes. Since Misings were the part of the group so some of their families have adopted it and it is gradually becoming popular among them.

Christianity has also emerging in the community in a limited way for the time being. Thus Misings are becoming divided into two religious groups which may be called tribal and non-tribal systems. The *keoliya* may be put in the traditional system which contains the elements of both animism and Hinduism, and non-tribal contains the elements of monotheism.

Women's liberty is an important aspect of sanskritization. Formerly tribal women had limited role and rights. They were not entitled to inherit their parents or husband's property. They were also not entitled to share any of the family prosperity. But now the Mising women have been given freedom to make their living better by their own efforts as evident from the finding that educated girls are allowed to work independently for their own income and to



used it to meet their own needs. As such, their social status has improve. Now one find Mising women as members of various socio-political organizations. In the sample villages female members were found in all social, cultural, political and students organizations. Women's participation in the public discussion was practically tabooed in the past but now they can take active part in all public meetings.

Conclusion

In the process of Sanskritisation, there is culture accumulation as well as culture depletion. In Sanskritisation, the lower castes are givin g up their own rituals, customs, folkways, and values. Hence, there is culture depletion. On the other hand, there is culture accumulation in view of the fact that they are taking over new values, traditions, and customs from the upper castes. The Misings have been in the state of transition from tribalism to non-tribalism which is characterized by modern way of life. They are adopting some of the non-tribal Hindu cultural traits and dropping some of their own. They are retaining some of their material and non-material culture for maintaining ethnic identity and group solidarity. However, in systems like polity and economics the Misings are becoming secularized by accepting the methods or means which they consider rational and expedient in improving their standard of living. Thus the Misings are in the way of development in socio-economic sphere with their cultural identity.

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