



Acculturation and the Misings of the Brahmaputra Valley

Dr. Rajeev K. Doley Deputy Director (T&P), Tezpur University, Tezpur – 784028, Assam (India)

ABSTRACT

Social interrelation and cultural intermixing give rise to the process of acculturation where one group accepts and adopts the practices of another group. The present paper examines how the Misings, a major tribe of the Brahmaputra valley, got acculturated to the plains of the valley over a period of eight hundred years. It is interesting that while the Misings, once dwellers of the hills of the present Arunachal Pradesh, have adopted a substantial amount of the contact culture, they are still continuing with a good amount of their original culture also. The paper empirically looks at the stages of their acculturation in the light of the four-fold model propounded by John Berry. The paper also looks at the threat perception of a possible cultural extinction with regard to the Misings.

KEYWORDS: Acculturation, First Culture, Contact Culture, Socio-cultural Interaction.

Introduction

Socio-cultural plurality is one the chief characteristics of many societies the world over today. Interrelations in the social, cultural, religious and professional fields set stages for interaction and intermixing of cultural practices among various ethnic groups living together in the society. Such practices, over the years, give rise to acculturation, a process in which an ethno-cultural group adopts the cultural beliefs and practices of another group. In an acculturation, the flow of cultural values usually takes place from the dominant group to the minority or less dominant group. However, in some cases, the dominant culture also adopts some features of the less dominant culture in a reciprocal acculturation.

Definitions and Scope

Social scientists and researchers have defined 'acculturation' in various terms. According to Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936), "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups". Robert H. Winthrop (1991) adds that it is the "process of systematic cultural change of a particular society carried out by an alien, dominant society". Acculturation is a gradual process and comprises those changes in a culture brought about by another culture which result in an increased similarity between the two cultures. Here, A.L. Kroeber (1948) states, "This type of change may be reciprocal, however, very often the process is asymmetrical and the result is the (usually partial) absorption of one culture into the other." From the above definitions, it is understood that acculturation involves cultural and behavioural changes in the affected group resulting in a massive shift of interest from the indigenous culture to the new culture. However, although the process of acculturation causes massive changes to the old culture, it does not necessarily mean that it replaces the indigenous culture in entirety. In this regard, Dennis O'Neil (2006) says, "There often is a syncretism or an amalgamation of traditional and introduced traits. The new traits may be blended with or worked into the indigenous culture to make them more acceptable". In the light of this elucidation, the present work deals with the various stages of acculturation in respect of the Misings living mostly in the upper half of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam.

The Target Group Misings

The Misings (exonym Miri) are one of the major ethnic groups of Assam, India and they form the second largest tribe of the state after the Bodos. According to the 2001 census, the population of the Misings in Assam was 5,87,310 which constituted more than 17.8% of the total tribal population of the state. Of this, 88% (5,17,170) are speakers of the Mising language and the rest 12% have gradually switched to Assamese in the process of their acculturation in the Brahmaputra valley (Taid, 2010: 4). The literacy rate of the Misings, according to the same source, was 60.1% (male 71.4% and female 48.3%). However, a survey conducted in 2006 by a non governmental organization Native Planet put the Mising population at 12,57,596 living in 1724 scheduled villages. The Mising population is found in the upper half of Assam spreading over the districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, and Sonitpur in the North

Bank and Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, and Golaghat in the south bank of the Brahmaputra. A sizable Mising population is found in the eastern districts of Arunachal Pradesh also. With the proliferation of education among the Misings and a good number of them being inducted to government and public jobs, a large number has settled in cities like Guwahati, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Tezpur, North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and other towns of Assam; as well as Pasighat, Oyan and a few other towns in Arunachal Pradesh.

Historians and researchers believe that the Misings migrated from the upper courses of the rivers Huang-Ho and Yangtse-Kiang in North-west China and entered India around 2000 B.C. and finally landed in the Brahmaputra valley between the thirteenth century and the fourteenth century A.D. (Pegu, Nomal 1998, 34).

A Look at the Previous Works

A number of articles and essays have been written on Mising culture and language and published in popular magazines, souvenirs and compiled works, but research based empirical studies have rarely been carried out on the subject. The most important work on Mising history, culture and language is Bhriyumoni Kagyung's compiled work "Mising Sanskritir Alekhya" written in Assamese and published in 1989. This collection has essays written by eminent writers and scholars on Mising culture and language till the end of 1980s. Another collection titled "The Misings : Their History and Culture" edited and brought out by Dr. J.J. Kuli came out in 1998. This book also contains essays and articles on Mising cultural traditions and their continuity and acculturation. In 2000 Dr. N.C. Pegu brought out a book titled "Mising Hakalar Itibritaru Sanskriti" in Assamese outlining the history and culture of the Misings of the contemporary period. However, a research based pragmatic study will put the arguments more authentic and hence the present paper.

Methodology

In order to analyse 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 four generic types, depending on the relative importance of the first-culture (F) and the 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 contact culture are favoured (integration); and
(4)	[-F-C]	both the first culture and the contact culture are disfavoured (deculturation).

Table : 1

Analysis and Findings

As J. Mipun (2000) has stated, before we go into the details of accultura-

tion of the Misings, it will be worthy to keep in mind three phases of their socio-cultural life. First, they were earlier hill dwellers; second, they migrated to the plains along the river courses crossing quite a distance; and third, they settled in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley in the midst of several cultures that were already existing there prior to their arrival. It is already an established fact that during the Ahom regime, a number of Misings were appointed as 'katakis' and during the British period also they were appointed as interpreters and emissaries. While performing these duties, quite often they had to play the role of moderators and interlocutors and in the process, they came in contact with several cultures and languages, such as, Assamese, Boro-Kacharis, Mikirs etc. apart from their cognate languages and cultures in the northern hills.

Let us now take a look at the Misings in the light of the above framework. While migrating all the way from North-west China to the plains of the Brahmaputra valley, which took a time stretch of about four millennia, the tribe naturally came across various stages/ages of human evolution – primitive way of living to the medieval – and in the process lost a good deal of their original traits. They arrived in the Brahmaputra valley between the thirteenth and the fourteenth century A.D. (N.C. Pegu, 1998).

As they entered and settled in the Brahmaputra valley, under numerous situations/circumstances, they had to associate themselves with various societies, such as, the Sootiyas, the Ahoms and later the British rulers. "But in spite of such early politico-social and economic association of the tribe with the plains society, the Miris maintained almost an alien attitude towards the society and political authority of the plains to a considerably late period." (D. Nath, 1998). Sankardeva, the great Vaishnava reformer of Assam whose teachings considerably influenced the Misings at a later stage, was the first to mention of the Misings (Miris) as one of the tribes of the plains of Assam (Bhagavata, Book II, V. 181). It is evident that until the time of Sankardeva, the tribe remained aloof from the main cultural arena of the Brahmaputra valley. The reasons for this aloofness could have been (a) their social and cultural self-esteem; (b) alien and sovereign feelings; and most importantly (c) their assertive behaviour and lack of submissiveness.

Researchers feel that until the seventeenth century, the Misings could not reconcile with the cultural pursuits and ways of living of the plains people and thereby they could not accept themselves as part of the subject population of the Ahom regime. Until this stage the position of the Misings was (+F-C) as per the above theoretical framework.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the Misings began to reconcile with the plains society and gradually accepted cross-cultural elements heralding a new era of socio-cultural-linguistic syncretism. There are some significant factors that led to this stage :

- (a) By now, the Ahom rulers adopted a conciliatory and accommodative outlook towards the Misings. Under many Ahom kings, Misings were inducted into the civil and military services and given important positions, such as, Miri Barua, Miri Sandikoi, Katakis, etc. It is also said that the Mising fraction of the Ahom soldiers rendered great services to the Ahom army particularly in subduing the rebellious neighbouring tribes, such as, the Nagas (P. Pegu, 1998). They also played a significant role in the Ahom victory over the Kacharis and the Jayantiyas (S.K. Bhuyan, 1930). Therefore, among other things, the Ahoms had altogether a good feeling about the Misings.
- (b) Towards the end of the seventeenth century and beginning of the eighteenth century, the Ahom kings had adopted a policy to build an integrated society of the Mongoloid tribes by the process of 'Ahomisation' (D. Nath, 1998). To this end, they through their emissaries (which included the Misings also), contacted almost all the mongoloid clans in and around their kingdom for a cultural amalgamation. This helped, to a great extent, in the socio-cultural and even religious transformation of the Misings in the subsequent periods.
- (c) As time passed on, the Misings gradually began to concede to the beckons of the ways of living of the plains people. Their attitude towards the socio-cultural pursuits of the plains gradually changed and a sense of acceptability began to loom large in their mind.
- (d) The British succession over the Ahoms and their take-over of power following the agreements in the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826, brought about a significant change in the Assam valley. On one

hand, the British entry brought a psychological solidarity among the inhabitants of the valley and on the other, their quick political integration and expansion involved a large number of locals including the Misings.

The following three centuries, i.e., eighteenth, nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, saw a massive amalgamation of the Mising cultural traits with the plains mostly Aryan culture. The transformation resulted in a commotion in the whole social-cultural system of the tribe. First, the nomadic life of the tribe came to an end and a permanent nature of living was adopted by the Misings. Groups of Mising families built their houses together in clusters like the villages of the plains, on fertile riverine lands where they could cultivate various crops. Gradually, villages and societies grew up giving birth to a new social identity. Second, the main occupation of the tribe shifted from hunting to cultivation. One of the major changes was that the tribe gave up the primitive method of cultivation (farm equipment) and adopted the ox-pulled equipment called Nangol and Moi for tilling and levelling the soil which were already being used in the plains. Third, a new organized family life evolved among the Misings. A patriarchal system of family administration that was prevailing in the plains, evolved in them according to which the head of the family was the eldest male alive - be it a father, a grand father or a great grand father. Fourth, the speech system got severely affected giving rise to a new bilingual communication system. Fifth, the tribal way of religious beliefs also got affected and many members of the tribe got converted to Hinduism in groups in successive times. Sixth, the basic dress culture of the tribe shifted to the new system. Giving up the earlier one-piece dress the women began to wear "mekhela-sador" and the men started using tailored garments. Seventh, the traditional musical instruments used by the Misings like "Dérki Tapung", "Éjuk Tapung", "Lé: no-Marbang", etc. gradually got replaced by "Muruli", "Pepa", "Dhol-Taal", etc. of the new culture.

It is significant to note that in spite of the massive acculturation, the Misings continue to practice many of their indigenous socio-cultural practices vis-à-vis the newly adopted ones. In many cases, the practices are mixed with the elements of the indigenous culture as well as the contact culture. For example, when a person dies, the "puja" or prayer ritual is performed as per the Hindu religious beliefs, but the body is buried and not cremated as practiced the Hindus. Therefore, this cultural crossing is represented by the symbol "+F+C" which means that the concerned tribe continues their first culture and also favours the contact culture.

The other two stages of the aforementioned generic theoretical framework, viz., "-F+C" and "-F-C" are not very relevant to the Misings' acculturation process except that one clan of the Misings 'Samuguria' went too far from their original language and adopted Assamese as their dialect. This again is not a full-fledged Assamese language but a broken Assamese dialect with a number of Mising words in it. It is not known when and under what circumstances, they departed from the Mising language and accepted Assamese as their language. But it is important to note that this linguistic departure did not carry the cultural traits along. The Samugurias still follow all the cultural and religious practices of the mainstream Misings. This can be regarded as a linguistic cross-over without cultural involvement.

A Note in Conclusion

The massive acculturation of the Misings 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 traits of the Misings and that of the plains of Assam has taken shape. However, the group has not altogether shunned their original culture also. A great deal of cultural, linguistic and religious elements still actively prevails in the Mising society, particularly, in the rural areas. Although there appears a remote threat to its cultural prosperity with more and more people settling in the urban areas and their children, in most cases, not taking interest in their indigenous culture, the number is insignificant (less than 0.1 percent) and will not bear much impact in the next five decades. Further, the existence of a strong ethno-linguistic loyalty among the Misings and the various measures taken up by socio-cultural organizations like the Mising Bane Kebang (Mising National Organization), Mising Agom Kebang (Mising Literary Society) and the (Mising Dirbi Kebang (Mising Cultural Organization) are continuously making efforts to protect, preserve and popularize the socio-cultural heritage of the Misings.

REFERENCES

- Berry, John W. 1980. "Acculturation as varieties of adaptation". *Acculturation : Theory, models, and some new findings*, ed. A. M. Padilla, 9–25. Westview : Boulder Co. Bhuyan, S.K. 1930. Kamrupa Buranji. Guwahati. 94 Bhuyan, S.K. 1930. Kamrupa Buranji. Guwahati. 94. Kroeber, A. L. 1948. *Anthropology : Race, Language, Culture, Psychology, Prehistory*. New York/Burlingame : Harcourt, Brace & World Inc. Kroeber, A. L. 1948. *Anthropology : Race, Language, Culture, Psychology, Prehistory*. New York and Burlingame : Harcourt, Brace & World Inc. Mipun, Dr. Jatin. 2000. *The Mishings (Miris) of Assam : Development of a New Lifestyle*. New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House. 55. Mipun, Dr. Jatin. 2000. *The Mishings (Miris) of Assam : Development of a New Lifestyle*. New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House. 55. Nath, Dr. Dambarudhar. 1998. "The Misings in the Social System of Assam in the Middle Ages." *The Misings : Their History and Culture*, ed. Dr. J. J. Kuli, 46–49. Guwahati : Ayir Publications. O'Neil, Dennis (2006) *Acculturation : Part I*. http://anthro.palomar.edu/change/change_3.htm Accessed on February 25, 2013. Pegu, Nomal Chandra. 1998. "The Mishings, a colourful tribe of the Brahmaputra Valley". In *The Mishings : Their History and Culture*, ed. Dr. J. J. Kuli, Guwahati : Ayir Publications. 34. Pegu, Peter. 1998. *A History of the Mishing of Eastern India*. Mumbai : Mishing Society of Mumbai. Redfield, R., R. Linton, and M. Herskovits. 1936. "Memorandum on the study of acculturation." In *American Anthropologist* 38, 149–152. Taid, TR. 2010. *Mising Gompir Kumsung (A Dictionary of the Mising Language)*. Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art & Culture. Guwahati : Bhabani Offset. P. 4. Winthrop, Robert H. 1991. *Dictionary of Concepts in Cultural Anthropology*. New York : Greenwood. 3, 82–83.