

Cow as a Sacred Symbol among the Mishing Tribe of Assam

(With special references to Dhemaji Dist.)

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Abstract

Religion is universal and it is prevailing in every society throughout. Moreover, it may not be same in every society but it is an inseparable part of any social system. The Hindus recognises the rights of animals and believes to be co-exist with human being therefore people taught their generations from the ancient periods of time to love, take care, nurture and worship the animals. Cows are still considered holy to the people of the Hindu faith across the Indian and its subcontinent countries. In this paper, the modest aim and objectives is to discuss in details about cow, how it is associated with Mishing tribes, how the Mishing perform the purification after killing a cow accidentally and how the changes have seen among the Mishing tribes who have embraced into other religion like Donyipolo, Christainity and Krishna guru. Interview and observation methods are used to collect the date from four villages of Silapathar area of Dhemaji Dist. of Assam to get primary data. Other secondary sources are used.

Key Words: Assam, Mishing, religion, society, cow

Introduction

India is a country of diversity with various race and tribal community. There are approximately 400 tribal communities in India as per the report. North eastern states of India are mostly inhabited by tribal communities. One of the major states of north east India is Assam and also called as a gate way to other north eastern state. Assam is the homeland of large number of communities including both tribal and non-tribal communities. There are various tribal group inhabited in Assam namely, Bodo, Lalung, Deori, Karbi, Sonowal Kachari, Mishing, Dimasa, Tiwa, Rabha, Garo, etc. All these tribes are bounded with their own rituals and customs. Among them, the Mishing tribe is major tribes, most advance group and highly populated in various region in

Assam. The tribals have different ethnic origins, migrations, linguistic, culture and having varied socio-cultural tradition. The Mishing are an aboriginal inhabitant of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and the second large and advance tribal group in the state. Medhi (1995) opines that "The Mishings have migrated from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh to the plains of Assam in the remote past and socio-culturally they are akin to the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh". Originally, they were hill dwellers. On the basis of legends of the tribe and available historical records, they moved to the plains of Assam around the 13th Century A.D. Still, they retain their mythological, linguistic and institutional affinity with the Tani group of Arunachal Pradesh. The Tani group are descendent from the same forefather Abu Tani. Bordoloi et.al. (1987), writes "They are

mongoloid stock settled in the plains of Assam in Brahmaputra valley". The Mishing tribe settled mostly in 10 districts of Assam. These districts are Darang, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Gopur, Goalpara, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and Sibsagar. The Mishing also live in East Siang, Dibang valley, Lohit valley and Subansiri dist. of Arunachal Pradesh. The Mishing were previously known as the 'Miris' in the plains of Assam. The name Miri was given to them by the people of Assam who were non-tribal.

Mishing are recognised by government of India as a Scheduled (plain) Tribe by the constitution of India under the name 'Miri'. The Mishing are patrilineal tribe. After marriage their descent, authority, inheritance, succession and residence are traced in male line. The Mishing speak Mishing dialect, which is part of Sino Tibeto family and this linguistic group comprise many tribals dialect of Arunachal Pradesh in India. All Tani group share common linguistic, cultural and genetic similarities with slight variations. Bordoloi et.al. (1987), writes, "*Kebang* (village social council) is a social organization which can be compared with Village Panchayat". As per historians, the Mishing migrate down to the plains of Assam in two groups, broadly divided into Dohgam and Barogam. Mishing people celebrate various socio-cultural festivals. The main traditional festival of the Mishing is the *Ali-Aye-Ligang*, their agricultural festival. According to Narimattam (1988), "*Ali-Aye-Ligang* is agricultural festival which indicates the beginning of the sowing season, and it also indicates the start of a new agricultural calendar. 'Ali-Ayi' means 'seeds in a row', and 'Ligang' means 'sowing of seed'. *Ali-Ayi-Ligang* starts on the second Wednesday of Fagun (February) month

and lasts for five days and folk pray for crop abundance to Donyipolo". Weaving is a very important aspect and part and parcel of Mishing culture. The Mishing woman have preserved the weaving tradition till date and the Mishing girl starts weaving even before she reaches her teen ages. various clothes are woven by the women folk in their household like *mibu galuk* (jacket), *agge* (lower gament), *ribi Gaseng* (above draped), *gadu* (blanket). The Mishing have also learnt the use of *muga* and *paat* from neighbouring Assamese communities in the valley. The Mishing are surrounded by the caste communities of Assam, due to which some traits of the Assamese culture have percolated into their norms and pattern of life (Medhi, 1995). Animism is the pristine religion of the Mishing. The Mishing are agrarian tribe and agriculture is their main occupations. The staple food of the Mishing is rice. *Apong* (rice beer) is the traditional local drink of the Mishing and they served it to the guests.

Statement of the Problem

The aim of this paper is an attempt to understand how the cow is a sacred symbol among the Mishing tribes of Assam. Cow is not worship daily or in any occasion among them. The study has made a primary investigation to understand how a person if killed a cow commit sin and why the do they observed taboo. Through this study it is understood that the Mishing after embracing vaishnavism took cow to be a sacred symbol and perform purification with the help of the Gohai.

Objectives of the Study

To find how cow is a sacred symbol among the Mishing

To find how the neo vaishnavism influenced the Mishing

To analyse when a cow's death makes a person sin and how the Mishing perform purification

Review of Literature

In Hinduism there are various animals which are regarded as sacred but among them cow is considered as most sacred animals. The divine cow is also known as kamadhenu. According to Hsu (2012), "Legends also state that Brahma gave life to priests and cows same time so that the priests could recite religious scriptures while cows could afford ghee (clarified butter) as offering in rituals. Anyone who kills cows or allows others to kill them is deemed to rot in hell as many years as there are hairs upon his body. Likewise, the bull is depicted as a vehicle of Lord Shiva: a symbol of respect for the male cattle". The Hindu religion promotes in the belief that various gods and goddesses incarnate in various animal forms. According to Agoramoorthy & Hsu (2006) writes that, "In the past, kings and emperors used various species of animals in their emblems to show their respect. Many festivals in India are still being celebrated to honour different animals". According to Gandhi (1927) India's legendary leader, father of the nation and leader of the non-violence movement in India said, "If someone asks me what the most important outward manifestation of Hinduism was, I would suggest that it was the idea of cow protection".

In Assam among the Mishing tribes who embraced Hinduism, the cow remains as a protected animal till date and the Hindu believers refrain from eating beef. The cow despite being sacred status, the Mishing tribe do not take care and much appreciate in the day to day lives of the cows. Cows are honoured across district Dhemaji of Assam and they are washed on

the occasion of Mag Bihu and offer Pita to eat.

Research Methodology

Both the primary data and secondary data is used to conduct the investigation. For primary data interview and observation method is used. For the present study have been collected from four villages of Silapathar area in the Dist. Dhemaji. These villages names are Kulajan, Tantari, Khanduli and Bormuria. While various books, journal, research articles have been intensively read and libraries are used for gathering secondary data.

Religious life of the Mishing

In the religion context, the Mishing worshipped their ancestor, the Sun and Moon. Therefore, they call the Sun as mother (Ane Donyi) and the Moon (Abu Polo) as their father. They believe that 'Sedi babu' (father) and 'Melo Nane' (mother) are the descendent of the 'Donyi-Polo'. On various religious and social function of the Mishing, they invoke the names of different deities and sacrifices are given to those deities. According to them, the benevolent deities are always generous to them and did not need appeasement frequently. *Dobur* puja is the only socio religious function among the Mishing. The Mishing called the priest as 'Mibu'. *Mibu Dagnam* is performed by the *Mibu* (priest) with some young boys and girls to see what are the cause of misery to house and village.

The Mishing believe in different supernatural being. These supernatural beings are both the benevolent and malevolent and fall into four categories:

1. *Gumeen Soying*

Gumen soying is benevolent ancestral spirits. Mostly found in homestead. It does not harm human.

2. *Uyu*

Uyu is a malevolent spirit. It inhabits in waters, woods, jungle, etc., *Uyu* is capable of causing great harm to human life including physical devastation

3. *Urom Posum*

Urom is also a malevolent spirit. It is found in jungle, graveyard, etc.; it is hovering spirits of the dead man, who may cause illness, stomach ache and other adverse conditions.

4. *Epom*

Epom is a malevolent spirit who inhabiting forest, mountain, tall and big trees. Generally, *epom* do not harm people, but sometimes they may abduct human beings occasionally and cause them some physical or mental impairment. Later they release them later.

All the spirits need to be appeasements with animal sacrifices. Offerings usually domestic fowl, pig, etc., on specific occasions like illness, disaster, etc. caused at home. Benevolent guardian spirit *Gumen soying* is propitiated in individual home from time to time for the all-round wellbeing of family members and household. Although *Donyipolo* is not worshipped in their daily life among the Mishing the Sun 'Ane-Donyi' and the Moon 'Abu Polo' are invoked on all auspicious occasions. The priest of their traditional faith is called a *mibu* (also called *miri*). The *mibu* is inborn. He/she have special powers of communication with spirits. Now a days the role of *mibu* is declining out amongst the Mishing owing to the introduction of modernization,

education and improvement healthcare facilities amongst them, appeasing of spirits continues to mark the religious life of the Mishing.

The Mishing follow their own traditions of worshipping their ancestors. They are still animists and while some of the Mishing have adopted some aspects of Vaishnavism, after the bhakti movement that was started by Srimanta Shankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva. The Mishing who are inhabiting in Assam in the Brahmaputra valley and bordering area of Arunachal Pradesh have embraced some kind of a monotheistic Hinduism as passed on to them by one of the sects of the Vaishnavism of Shankardeva (1449-1568 A.D.), the saint-poet of Assam. As a faith, the two forms of believe, animism and Vaishnavism are different from each other, but they have coexisted in the Mishing society till date without any conflict. Because of conversion to Vaishnavism the Mishing have practising its rules and regulation of Vaishnavism and mode of worship. The Mishing have completely change in regards of worshipping but along with this practise they have also traditional customary way of appeasing *uyi*, *gumen soying*, *urom possum*, etc., in their believe. Consuming rice beer, eating pork, etc., and also using them on various socio-religious occasions. Therefore, the religious life of the Mishing in the Brahmaputra valley has thus assumed a fully a different character. Now the According Medok (2019), "Mishing practise various Types of religions called Keoliya/Shankari, Bhagbhatiya and Donyipoloism. Keoliya is a mixture of animism and neo vaishnavism (Hinduism), Bhagbhatiya believes in one almighty and do not worship idols, whereas Donyipolo believers think Donyipolo is the Almighty".

Discussion and Result

The Mishings are ancestor worshippers. They have their own indigenous faith. With connection with the Assamese, the Mishings came under the influence of Kala Samhati. Kala Samhati is a sect of neo-Vaishnavism in the late 18th century. The Mishings have embraced the teaching of Shankardeva and Madhavdeva. The neo-Vaishnavism reform movement has come up in Assam in the 18th century so the Mishings of the Brahmaputra valley have converted to Vaishnavism and have become disciples of the Satras. As a result, a new system of worship emerged vis-a-vis to the decline of their traditional animistic system. The Vaishnav Gohai (barhmin) goes to every Mishing village and gives them honor bhogon (converted to Hindu in the presence of the Gohai) in their respective Namgarh (worship place in village). As per the neo-Vaishnavism preaching they discard idol worship and instead teach them to worship the sacred book, Nam Ghosa. All the villages who ever have embraced Vaishnavism construct Namgarh as per the direction of the Gohai in each village. The Nam Ghosa is kept in every Namgarh of the Mishing villages. Their people gather to take Honor Bhogon from other Assamese Gohai whoever comes to the Mishing villages for preaching. Later on, the Mishings themselves became Gohai of the Namgarh and they are also known as the Gohai in the Mishing villages. The reason for coming up of Mishing Gohai is known from the fact that the Mishings slowly started disobeying the Assamese Gohai so the neo-Vaishnavite Gohai from the Satra (prayer house) decided not to interfere much in the internal matter of the Mishing tribes and also in order to give liberty in the religion they let the Mishing people become Gohai and accustom their own tradition and

culture in the religion. The Vaishnav Gohai from the Satra did not stop the Mishings from drinking rice beer, non-vegetarian, etc., thus from the above discussion it is found that how the Mishings have entered into the greater Hinduisim.

With the above concept of Hinduisim, the Mishings have started to think cow to be a sacred symbol. Even though the Mishings do not worship cow in their daily life as far as the tradition, they regard cow as a sacred animal. The Gohai also preaches them, that cow is a sacred animal as it is taken care and associated by Lord Shri Krishna. So, whenever a cow is killed accidentally or when a cow dies while tying for grazing and even by mistake if someone hurt the cow for which the cow bleeds, it is considered as sin. When a person kills a cow intentionally or accidentally and while tying the rope to the cow goes for begging and observed taboo for days as per the advice of the Gohais. But if the cow bleeds, then the sin is considered as small. For small sin a person just performs purification at home with the help of family members and relatives and in the presence of the priest. When a cow is dead, the parents approach the Gohai seeking for help. As per the Gohai's advice the taboo periods are observed. It is also believed that whoever does not observe taboo becomes mad or unstable in life. Depending upon the age and colour of the cow the sin is measured. If the cow is young then the sin and taboo become more and if the cow is old then the sin and taboo become less. It is believed that the cow who died young died in short just like the human life whose life is supposed to be long as young life then the old who have short span of life. If the colour of the cow is white, red, brown, etc., the taboo periods are less and if the cow is black then the taboo periods are

longer. If a black cow is death, then the person has to beg more than 16 villages. The black colour is regarded as bad omen among the Mishing. The person who has killed a cow cannot speak till his/her taboo is over. His/her friend will tell his/her parents that she/he killed a cow from the time she/he realised that they killed cow they stop talking to any humans and also do not enter to his/her home directly. They have to remain outside the house in a small room, cooks for themselves, without bathing and eat only rice and salt, without oil for certain period of time. Depending upon the time and days given by the Gohai, how many villages he/she have to beg, how many house, etc., the person who has killed cow has to wear the rope with what they had tied the cow. They cannot remove the rope till the purification is performed by the Gohai. Whole day they have to walk bare foot and beg from house to house to village to village. While begging they cannot talk and cannot enter into another house and take rest in other house courtyard. They have to stand in front of the gate and wait for the owner to come and give them food grain or money. They cannot demand anything and take whatever they get. They have to show the rope if someone asked anything to them so that the other person automatically realise that she/he had killed a cow. In case in any house if nobody notices them, they have to cry like a cow to get attentions from the house so that they can hear them. Usually, the person who has killed a cow has to beg from villages and houses in an even number as per the Gohai. The begging may take months depending upon the number of villages. After begging whole day, the person comes back home in the evening, cooks for himself and eat whatever he/she got from begging. As soon as the begging is completed the person's parents and his

kin members gather in an area where the cow is killed or may be near the river along with the Gohai and performs the purification with Nam kirtan. The person brings all the food grains and money whatever she/he has got from begging to the kirtan. And the remaining are given to the Gohai after the puja along with the money.

This type of impact of Hinduism is also seen in the bordering areas of the Arunachal Pradesh among the Adis in the villages like Raani, Oyan and Sile. The Adis do not observe any taboo or go for begging instead they perform *agam Kepel* in their *Gohali* (cow shed). Some amount of ginger and egg is put in a leaf and it is wrapped and tied in the main post of the cowshed. The family member and the relatives of the person gather in the cowshed to perform this *Agam kepel*. *Agamkepel* means the god of domesticated animal. The researcher in her field investigation found that the Adi do not keep cow as per their tradition. But informant told that Mr. Banom Permay was the first Adi person to buy cow. When Mr Permay has come down to Assam, the neighbouring state to see the wet land cultivation and saw how the cow/ox is used to plough the land. Then he bought the cow to the Damro area in Mariyan upper Siang district and thus cow become a part of the Adi culture. The Adis keep the labour in their paddy land for cultivation purpose and has seen them (Nepalis who are Hindus) performing puja after cow is killed accidentally.

Change in Performing Purification

With the passage of time the begging in even number of house and villages is still continuing but some changes have seen. With increase in educations and modernisation, the people

stop believing that whoever killed a cow has committed a sin. They just do the formality to stop people and the society from judging them. Moreover, it is believed that the person who do not beg and observed taboo, becomes mad or unstable in their life and also believe that the person do not have peace of mind after killing a cow because the Mishig now a day's gets converted to various other religion like Christianity, Krishna guru and Donyipolo. Even though they get converted to other religion, they also have to follow the same process of begging from house to house as per the Mishig custom and the Mishig inhabited villages. The person also now a day's beg only in one village and 5 to 7 houses and perform it as a kind of formality and performs the purifications. Any Mishig tribes who ever have converted to other religion like Donyipolo, Christainity and Krishna guru also have to follow this rituals purification. A Donyipolo follower will perform *boria dobur* (household *dobur*) in outskirt area of the village along with family members and the *mibu*. If any person who do not follow as per the custom which already acculture to the Mishig society for more than 400 years then the villager will isolate the particular house and also boycott the family from any social functions and gathering at present and in the future also. The Gohai are from own Mishig tribes

now a days. As the Gohai from the Assamese community do not come to the Mishig villages anymore. More over the Mishig themselves after embracing Vaishnavism, perform Nam kirtan themselves. The Gohai takes money which is regarded as cow's value and performs the puja. At present this type of puja are not conducted in the spot where the cow was killed accidentally. The practise is still continuing and found among the Mishig society with some changes.

Conclusion

Thus, from the foregoing discussion it is found that the Mishig tribes previously were hill dwellers who have migrated down to Assam in search of fertile land in the Brahmaputra valley and embraced neo vaishnavism and accustomed to some of the Hindu culture. The cow becomes as the sacred animal in the Mishig culture even though the cow is not worshipped in daily life or any other occasions among the Mishig. Till date with the impact of education, modernisation, globalization and more up gradation in health care facilities, they still observe certain custom which is recognized as a part their culture. The cow as a sacred symbol and its religious role among the Mishig is not seen in any of their folklore.

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