



Reflections on *Burte-Dobur*: A traditional practice among the Mishings of Sadiya, Assam

Dibyajyoti Das

Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract

The Mishings of Assam were an animist tribe when they came to the plains of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam from the hills of the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh. The Misings has their own belief system and practices; but in due course of time and space they have changed a lot and have been enculturated into Hinduism; and also converted to Christianity, but to some extent they have preserved certain belief and practices till today which they still follow. These believe and practices are an integral part of their culture and society; they do not want to lose these practices. One of the important practices is the practice of *Dobur*; a religious belief and practice; *Dobur* are of different types observed for different purpose at different times, it is related to their identity as it is only practiced among the Mishing community of Assam. In this paper a particular form of *Dobur* known as "*Burte Dobur*" is being tried to understand. "*Burte Dobur*" is one of the *Doburs* that is performed by individuals or by families when some offence outbreaks among individuals or among families.

Keywords: *Dobur*, *Burte Dobur*, Assam, Mishings

Introduction

Assam is a land of numerous tribal and, non-tribal community having different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Since time immemorial many tribes have migrated to the plains of the Brahmaputra valley and settled down permanently in this region (Das, 2017, pp 83-86). The Mishings officially recorded as "Miri" in the list of scheduled Tribe of India under the Constitution order 1950 are originally a hill tribe of the Himalayan region of North East India (Pegu 2012). It is believed that the first group of Misings landed in the upper region of the valley of Assam sometimes between 13th and 14th century A.D. At present the tribe is regarded as the second largest tribal community of the state of Assam with a population of 8, 20,250 people according to the census of India 2011. They are concentrated in various eco-situations mostly in the riverine areas of North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, and Tinsukia Districts of Upper Assam. Ethnically they are mongoloid and belong to Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. The name 'Miri' was given to them by the people of the plains which according to E.A.Gait a British historian means 'go-between' or 'middleman' (Gait 1907, pp). As they have come down from the hills to the plains therefore they became a middleman between the plain people and the hill people. The Mishings find the word 'Miri' derogatory and they prefer to call themselves as Misings/Mishings rather than Miris. The Mishings have an ethno-linguistic affinity with the Adis and the Nishis of Arunachal Pradesh (Payengkakati 1935, Pegu 1956) [4]. They show much ethnic resemblances with the Padom-Minyong, Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. According to Bhandari (1992) the Padom- Minyong and the Mishing cosmology shares the same myth of origin. They both believe in *Doni-Polo* as their supreme God. *Doni* refers to the Sun and *Polo* refers to the Moon. Apart from this beliefs they have many similarities in

their lifestyle like their house type, food habits, mode of food preparation, fishing, hunting, agricultural practices, the home made rice-beer called as *Apong* etc. therefore this clearly indicates that they have a very close affinity and at the same time it proves that they have come down from the hills to the plains of Brahmaputra valley.

The Mishings depend mainly on agriculture and are also known for fishing and hunting. They also domesticate animals like pig, cow, hen, goat, duck etc. and other poultries. The Mishing women are popularly known for their weaving skills, they weave various designs of dresses for them as well as for the men folks of the community, among them the *Mishing chador-mekhela* of different colours and designs are always accepted with great admiration among the non Mising communities of Assam.

Objectives

The main concern of the paper is to understand the practice of *Burte-Dobur* of the Mishings; why do they have such a practice and how do they solve certain problems of the society with the help of this practice. It is worth mentioning that with the changing time and space certain ancestral practices are getting extinct among the people and this practice is one of such kind; the practice of *Burte-Dobur* among the Mishings of the present study area can be said to be very minimal for last few years no such practice took place among the community, it is becoming an oral history at present and the young generation hardly know much about it. It is basically a kind of community law or a kind of customary law which is headed by the village council called as *Kebang* or the village head called as the *Gam* or *Gambura/gaonbura*.

Area of study

The study was carried out among the Mishings of Sadiya sub-

division of Tinsukia District in Assam, India. Sadiya is also considered as the starting point of Assam; it is the bordering area of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh surrounded by Arunachal Pradesh from three sides and the Mighty Brahmaputra (Lohit) from the other. The river makes this place somewhat isolated from the mainland of the state of Assam. As of now the area is connected with the India's longest river bridge namely Dr Bhupen Hazarika Setu also called as Dholla-Sadiya bridge; it is named after the legend of Assam. The area is populated with various tribal and non-tribal communities like the other parts of Assam; Ahoms, Deoris, Kacharis, Misings, Nepalese, Bengalis, Other cast communities of Assam and nearby states etc. At first we should understand what *Dobur* is to the Mishing society.

Methodology

The study is an outcome of ethnographic fieldwork that was carried out among the Mishings of Sadiya in Assam. The information gathered is a firsthand empirical data gathered with the help of two major methods; observation and interview. Both semi-structured and un-structured repetitive in-depth interviews were conducted to gather information from the key informants. The sampling method that was taken into consideration for the collection of data was basically purposive sampling to choose the first informant and was followed by snowball sampling technique to choose the other key informants. The paper is basically a descriptive research that tries to understand and lay a reflection on the phenomena from the researcher's point of view. Other than these two major techniques of collecting the first hand information, the secondary sources like journal articles, books and the internet were taken into consideration for collection of the secondary information.

Dobur

The Mishings were animistic in nature when they first settled in the plains of Assam from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh. They believe a host of good and evil spirits which they refer to as '*Uie*'. This animist tribe that has now encultured into the religion of the plain people and encultured into the larger domain of Hinduism and to some extent converted to Christianity also. Though there is a mixture and changes in beliefs and practices many still practice their traditional spirit (*Uie*) worshipping. There are various spirits that the Mishings worship of which the most important are *Dobur Uie*, *Taleng Uie* and *Urom Uie*. They have a belief that spirits are everywhere especially it is always around them, the spirits have the same desire as that of human beings because the spirits are not other than their close ones who are deceased. The spirits possess supernatural powers, they can do anything and they believe that the spirits are responsible for any kind of misfortune that befalls the society and therefore it is the duty of the community to keep them happy by offering prayers, food and drinks at a regular interval of time. In this paper we will be going through the *Dobur Uie* in particular vis-e-vis an attempt have been made to see the *Dobur* as a belief and practices among the Mishing tribe.

Dobur is one of the most important spirits worshipping festival of the Mishings. The name *Dobur* is the name of the spirit which is responsible for the causes of famine, flood, sudden

death, natural calamities, crop destruction, illness, conflict in the society etc. If there is too much of pollution in the society which is a result of all the bad deeds done by the community members knowingly or unknowingly like killing, harming others etc. which they refer to as *Gena*, then the spirit is dissatisfied and may cause problem in the society. Therefore to please and satisfy the spirit of *Dobur* the community performs rites and rituals for purification to get rid of the *Gena*. And the belief is that if the community has the blessings of the *Dobur Uie* then they will be at peace and will not suffer from any unforeseen situations; for this they pay their fines, taxes and penalties to the *Dobur*. There are different types of *Dobur*, among them, however *Dolung-Dobur*, *Mopun-Dobur* and *Burte-Dobur* are observed and others are no more acknowledged by the Mishings of Sadiya. *Mopun-Dobur* is observed in family level, it is performed to protect the agricultural land from spirits and on the other hand *Dolung-Dobur* is the main ritual practiced by the community every year it is a calendric ritual and is a must to be observed for the well-being of the community. *Dolung-Dobur* is observed on Tuesdays and Sundays during the month of *Jeth* (May-June) or *Ahin* (September-October) every year according to the Assamese calendar. However these days for the purpose of uniformity, time management and convenience for the community a proper date has been fixed i.e. fifteenth of *Jeth* (May-June) according to Assamese calendar and a state holiday is also observed for this festival. *Dolung* means village and it is observed in a village level. *Dolung Dobur* is always observed in an outskirts area of the village in isolation where there is very less human interference, generally a place near river or stream is preferred, and this is because they do not want the spirits to come near the village, every year the place keeps on changing. One of the most observable and concerning feature of this festival is that women are strictly prohibited to participate in this ceremony; they are limited to their house however they participate in *Mopun-Dobur* and *Burte-Dobur*. During the celebration of *Dolung-Dobur* outsiders are not allowed into the village and villagers are not allowed to go out of the village till it gets over.

Burte-Dobur; regarding which the paper is, is observed among families or individuals upon occurrence of serious crimes within the community, here both the individual and the families involved in the crime are summoned by the community for arbitration and upon conviction punishment in the form of tax called *Ajeng* is imposed which is to be paid to the victim. It is a purification ceremony performed to overcome the sins committed.

During the fieldwork it was observed that *Burte-Dobur* was not being performed or practiced for a long time in the entire area under study. *Burte-Dobur* is a practice performed to solve certain problems or we can say that it is performed to come to a solution of certain crimes created by the community members through purification for next twenty one generations. To understand the phenomena we can take an example as told to me by my informant.

Suppose an incident occurs in the village in which one person was seriously injured by another, the person injured was wound by some sharp equipment; it was an attempt to murder rather it was a crime scene which would end up in killing. The person injured, along with his family will make a complaint

before the village council to get justice seeking punishment for the person who committed the crime. The village council along with both the families involved in the case sits together to make a solution to the problem in the process the entire case will be heard from both the parties and the guilty will be imposed with a lot of taxes called as *Ajeng*. And if both the parties are found to be guilty the tax is imposed on both the parties. The unit of the tax is called as *Barkit*; one *Barkit* is equivalent to seven and half rupees multiplied by seven hundred times.

It is said that depending upon the number of cut marks the tax is being imposed; tax may be of any form it may be money, land, poultry etc. for one cut mark one *Barkit* is imposed, why only "cut marks"; because the Mishings uses Machetes locally called as *Dau* in their day to day livelihood and it is a basic tool; they generally use it for various purposes like killing and cutting. In this way the number of *Barkit* increases the tax also increases which reaches to a very high level to which the victims cannot think of paying, even after selling all their properties it is not possible to pay the taxes that is being imposed. The victims make a request to the village council to relax the tax levied on them and makes a promise to never commit such a crime and the other family who is being injured also makes a promise not to have any grudge and will never try to take any sort of revenge; the promises are made in the name of *Doni: Polo, Karsin-Kartang*, in the name of nature etc. On the other hand the village council in the name of *Doni: Polo*, land, water, air, fire etc. reduces the taxes and a minimum tax is being levied which is paid by the victims for their purification. It depends upon the village council whether they want to relax the tax or not they generally does the favour depending upon the crime. The purification ceremony of *Burte-Dobur* is performed and the entire village witnesses and attends the phenomena and a decision is taken which is accepted and a promise is made in the name of *Doni: Polo, Karsin-Kartang*, etc. that none of the families will indulge in any sort of disputes in near future and if such a situation occurs the victims will go through severe punishments like debarring from the village and the society.

Discussion and conclusion

Though such a belief system is very rarely seen or overcome in the Mishing society of the area under study but it is understood that it has a very significant role to play in the social structure. The form of taxes and the severe punishment creates a fear in the minds of the people, before indulging in such crimes they will think twice as they are aware of the consequences later. To be very precise it is not a customary law depending upon which punishment will be decided. If such a crime occurs they will obviously go to the law courts and the decision will be given by the law courts and accordingly the victim will be convicted and will be sentenced. The practice of *Burte-Dobur* is rather a purification ceremony for the victims those who have been indulged in the sin, it may take place after the completion of the imprisonment, the basic idea behind the purification ceremony is to keep the victims away from committing future crimes as they believe that it is in human nature that once someone is harmed or killed the family of the victim will try to harm or kill rather take revenge by harming the family who have

committed the crime, and it will keep on continuing for generations and may become a never ending process. Therefore to overcome such a situation this belief system of purification is observed in the name of their ancestors *Doni: Polo*. They are purified for the next twenty one generation and are made to take oath that they will never indulge in any form of disputes and taxes are also imposed which are later minimised though and they are given a last chance. This shows the consequences of future deeds and in this way the idea of revenge and the continuity of any sort of crime are controlled from being taking place in future. It is done in-front of the village council and the villagers who also learns a lesson of being indulging in such situation which helps to maintain a peaceful society.

Acknowledgement

I would like to convey my thanks to all my key informants without their information this paper would have not been able to come up. I thank all the villagers of my field and my friends and family for their support.

References

1. Census of India. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commission, India, Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011.
2. Das D. Understanding the phenomena of religious conversion: A study among the Mishings of Assam, India, National Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development. 2017; 2(3):83-86.
3. Gait E. A History of Assam, New Book Stall, Panbazar, Guwahati-1, Assam, 2013.
4. Pegu NC. The Miris or the Mishings of the Brahmaputra Valley, Kumarbari Majuli, Assam, 1956.
5. Pegu I. Mising Samaj Aru Sanskriti, Published by Director, Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, Jawahar Nagar, Guwahati 781 002, 2003.
6. Kuli J. (Ed.) the Mishings Their History and Culture, Kaustubh Prakashan, New Market, Dibrugarh-1, 2012.