



# Cow as a sacred animal among the Mishing tribe of Assam

## (With special references of 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 recognise the rights of animals and believe to co-exist with human beings; 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 are to discuss in detail about cow, how it is associated with Mishing tribes, how the Mishings perform the purification after killing a cow accidentally and how the changes have been seen among the Mishing tribes who have embraced other religions like Donyipolo, Christianity and Krishna guru. Interview and observation methods are used to collect the data from four villages of Silapathar area of Dhemaji Dist. of Assam to get primary data. Other secondary sources are used.

Keywords: Assam, Mishing, religion, society, cow

### Introduction

India is a country of diversity with various races and tribal communities. 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 gateway to other north eastern states. Assam is the homeland of a large number of communities including both tribal and non-tribal communities. There are various tribal groups inhabited in Assam namely, Bodo, Lalung, Deori, Karbi, Sonowal Kachari, Mishing, Dimas, Tiwa, Rabha, Garo, etc. All these tribes are bounded with their own rituals and customs. Among them, the Mishing tribe is a major tribe, most advanced group and highly populated in various regions in Assam. The tribals have different ethnic origins, migrations, linguistic, culture and varied socio-cultural traditions. The Mishings are an aboriginal inhabitant of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and the second largest and advanced 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 descended 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 Mishings also live in East Siang, Dibang valley, Lohit valley and Subansiri dist. of Arunachal Pradesh. The Mishings 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.

Mishings are recognised by government of India as a Scheduled (plain) Tribe by the constitution of India under the name 'Miri'. The Mishings are patrilineal tribe. After marriage their descent, authority, inheritance, succession and residence are traced in male line. The Mishings 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 Mishings migrate down to the plains of Assam in two groups, broadly divided into Dohgam and Barogam. Mishings people celebrate various socio-cultural festivals. The main traditional festival of the Mishings 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 Fagan (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 Mishings culture. The Mishings women have preserved the weaving tradition till date and the Mishings 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 garment), *ribi Gaseng* (above draped), *gadu* (blanket). The Mishings have also learnt the use of *muga* and *paat* from neighbouring Assamese communities in the valley. The Mishings 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 Mishings. The Mishings are agrarian tribe and agriculture is their main occupations. The staple food of the Mishings is rice. *Apong* (rice beer) is the traditional local drink of the Mishings 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 Mishings 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 they do they observed taboo. Through this study it is understood that the Mishings 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 Mishings
- To find how the neo vaishnavism influenced the Mishings
- To analyse when a cow's death makes a person sin and how the Mishings perform purification

### Review of Literature

In Hinduism there are various animals which are regarded as sacred but among them cow is consider 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 Agoramorthy & 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 appreciates 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 it 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 Mishing are ancestor worshipper. They have their own indigenous faith. With connection with the Assamese, the Mishing came under the influence of Kala Samhati. Kala Samhati is a sect of neo-Vaishnavism in the late 18th century. The Mishing have embraced the teaching of Shankardeva and Madhav deva. The neo vaishnavism reform movement has come up in Assam in 18<sup>th</sup> century so the Mishing of the Brahmaputra valley has converted to vaishnavism and has become disciples of the Satras. As a result, a new system of worship emerged vis-a- vis to decline of their traditional animistic system. The vaishnav Gohai (barhmin) goes to every Mishing village and give them horon bhogon (converted to Hindu in presence of the Gohai) in their respective Namgarh (worship place in village). As per the neo-vaishnavism preaching they discard idol worship instead teach them to worship the sacred book, Nam Ghosha. 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 Horon Bhogon from other Assamese Gohai whoever comes to the Mishing villages for preaching. Later on, the Mishing 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 Mishing slowly start 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. They Vaishnav Gohai from the satra did not stop the Mishing from drinking rice beer, non-vegetarian, etc., thus from the above discussion it is found that how the Mishing have entered into the greater Hindusim.

With the above concept of Hindusim, the Mishing have started to think cow to be a sacred symbol. Even though the Mishing do not worship cow in their daily life as far the tradition, they regard cow as a sacred animal. The Gohai also preach 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 gazing and even by mistaken if someone hurt the cow for which the cow bleeds, it is consider as sin. When a person killed 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 perform purification at home with the help of family members and relatives and in the presences 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 is less and if the cow is black then the taboo periods is 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 Mishing 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 Mishing custom and the Mishing 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 Mishing tribes who ever have converted to other religion like Donyipolo, Christianity and Krishna guru also have to follow this rituals purification. A Donyipolo follower will perform *boria dobur* (household *dobur*) in outskirts area of the village along with family members and the *mibu*. If any person who do not follow as per the custom which already accultured to the Mishing 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 Mishing tribes now a days. As the Gohai from the Assamese community do not come to the Mishing villages anymore. More over the Mishing 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 Mishing society with some changes.

## Conclusion

Thus, from the foregoing discussion it is found that the Mishing 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 Mishing culture even though the cow is not worshipped in daily life or any other occasions among the Mishing. 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 Mishing is not seen in any of their folklore.

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