

Understanding the phenomena of religious conversion: A study among the Mishings of Assam, India

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Abstract

Mishings are the second largest tribal community in the state having a population of 8, 20,250 (Census of India 2011), they have migrated to the plains of Assam from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh about nine centuries ago. They are concentrated in various eco-situations mostly in the riverine areas of North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts etc. of Assam. Ethnically, they are Mongoloid and belong to Indo-Tibetan linguistic group. The Mishings were animistic in nature when they first settled down in the plains of Assam from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh. In due course of time and space they have converted to different religion for various reasons, we can term this as religious conversion. Religion is nothing but the belief in supernatural being as stated by (E.B. Tylor). Every society possesses beliefs that we can group under the term religion. These beliefs differ from society to society and community to community. According to the Neo-Evolutionist there is a theory of *Parabolic Curve* in the process of cultural evolution, the theory shows that any social institution is born in a specific form; it then develops in entirely different form in different direction. It again moves towards original form but in a new developed form. This theory can be applied in the field of religion and beliefs among the Mishings of Amarpur, Sadiya a sub-division of Tinsukia district of Assam, India. In this paper I have tried to show how the theory of *Parabolic Curve* is applicable in the religious beliefs among the Mising community of Amarpur, Sadiya of District Tinsukia, Assam, India.

Keywords: Mishing, Assam, Sadiya, Religion, conversion, enculturation

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 or we can say came down to the plains of the Brahmaputra valley and settled down permanently in the region. The Mishing tribe is one among such tribe who has migrated to the plains of the Brahmaputra valley; who were erstwhile a hill tribe of Arunachal Pradesh (Pegu 1956) [6]. Mishings are now the second largest tribal community in the state of Assam with a total population of 8, 20, 250 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 etc. of Assam. Ethnically, they are Mongoloid and belong to Indo-Tibetan linguistic group. The Mishings has an ethno-linguistic affinity with the Adis and the Nishis of Arunachal Pradesh (Payengkakati 1935, Pegu 1956) [6]. They show much ethnic resemblances with the Padom-Minyong Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. According to Bhandari (1992) [1] the Padom- Minyong and the Mising 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 preparation, fishing, hunting, agricultural practices, the home made rice-beer called as *apong* etc. and so and so 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 were animistic in nature when they first settled down in the

plains of Assam from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh. In due course of time and space they have converted to different religion for various reasons, which we can term in general as religious conversion.

Religious conversion implies accepting a set of beliefs and practices which is quite different from the system of truth and religious commitment previously experienced (Heirich, 1977) [3]. When an individual or a group of people adopts a new form of religion leaving the previous one this we can term in general as religious conversion rather we can say that the adoption of a new religion that differs from the convert's previous religion. But we should not be confused with; that changing from one denomination to another within the same religion which is usually called as re-affiliation rather than conversion. People convert to different religion for various reasons; it can be by free of choice due to change in beliefs, it can be conversion for convenience, it can be forced conversion where people are converted forcefully by another dominant group against the will of the people and there can also be secondary conversion which results from a relationship with another convert, rather than from any particular aspect of the new religion and so on and so forth. In this paper an attempt has been made to understand the phenomena how and to some extent why the Mishings of Amarpur Gaon Panchayat of Sadiya sub-division in Tinsukia district of Assam has converted from one religion to another in due course of time and along with it is also tried to show how the theory of *Parabolic curve* in culture is applicable in the religious beliefs among the Mishings of Amarpur, Sadiya, Assam.

Objectives

The main objective of the study is to understand the practice of religious conversion among the Mishing community of Amarapur area of Sadiya sub division in Tinsukia district of Assam.

Materials and Methods

The present paper is an outcome of a fieldwork that was being carried out among the Mishing community of an interior area called Amarapur in the Sadiya sub-division of Tinsukia district of Assam, India. Geographically Sadiya is located at 27.83°N latitude and 95.67°E longitude respectively. Sadiya was the kingdom of the *Chutiya's* during their rule, at present it is regarded to be the starting point of Assam which shares its boundary with Arunachal Pradesh in the north and east direction, in the south it has Lohit a major tributary of the mighty Brahmaputra river and towards the west it is surrounded by the river Dibang and Deopani. Amarapur where the fieldwork was conducted is a gaon panchayat in Sadiya sub-division having a cluster of more than thirty small villages though non cadastral. The area is surrounded by water bodies from all the direction towards the east it has the river Dibang, in the north and west it is surrounded by the Paglam River and in the south it has the meeting point of Dibang, Paglam and the Lohit. The area is under the threat of extinct because of the flood that occurs every year and the erosion of river bank every year after flood, many villages have already been disappeared from the map only their names exist. This area is dominated by the Mishing community, among whom the fieldwork was conducted. The methodology applied for the collection of firsthand data was basically observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. The sampling methods that were used were purposive sampling (used to identify the first informant) and snowball sampling (was used to identify other informants). Other than these methods informal talks with the people were also done and lastly data were also collected from secondary sources.

Understanding Conversion

The Misings were traditionally animistic they believed in their supreme God *Doni-Polo* (the Sun and the Moon) along with the worshiping of their supreme God they were also the worshiper of *Uii/Uyu* or spirit. The entire life of a person, his health and happiness, prosperity and well being, his ills and misfortunes, are attributed to some spirits or *Uii/Uyu*. The cosmic phenomena like thunder and lightning, water and fire, earth and air are all abodes of the various spirits which are powerful and benevolent to man and have to be propitiated periodically. *Taleng-Uii* is one such important ritual for every household in which the cosmic forces are propitiated. They also have a very large number of malevolent spirits, and any misfortune is believed to be caused by such spirits. Such misfortune may be in the form of personal illness or in the form of a bad harvest but it is believed to have been afflicted by some *Uii*, which must be identified by the *Miboo*, the 'diviner, who also suggest the remedial sacrifice to ward off the evil spirits (Bhandari: 1992)^[1].

Urom Apin; is one of the most important belief of ancestral worship; they remember their beloved ancestors and are worshipped periodically. They have a strong belief that their

ancestors are their guardians, they always keep an eye over them, they look after them, protect them, stop them from doing bad deeds in their day to day livelihood. They love their ancestors at the same time they are also afraid of them as they have full control over the family or the entire community. The prosperity and welfare of the family is dependent upon the ancestor's satisfaction and hence it is very important to keep them satisfactory which is possible by worshipping them at a regular interval of time.

Ever since the Misings have settled down into the plains of Brahmaputra valley they have come in contact with the Assamese people of the plains, who are Hindus. With that started the process of religious contact which made the Misings a part of the regional culture and of the great tradition of Hinduism. The Misings were greatly influenced by their contact with the native Assamese people. They started dealing with the Assamese people for various reasons. According to Bhandari this process of contact made them bilingual, as the Misings now use the Assamese language for communication.

As they have encultured into Hinduism they have got new group of priests and clergy called as *Bhakats* and the *Hatullas* instead of their *Miboo*, the *Bhakats* and the *Hatullas* play a major role within the community. The *Nam Ghars* (the place of worship of the Assamese community) were established within the Mishing villages. Therefore we can say that Hinduism has led to the emergence of new religious institutions and functions among the Misings. Though they have accepted Hinduism it is seen that they have not left their traditional beliefs and practices, they do not strictly follow the rule of Hinduism.

The religion of the Misings of Amarapur is of different types it was seen that majority of the people were the follower of *Kewalia Dharma* (a form of Hinduism), followed by Christianity and then *Vaishnavism* (another form of Hinduism). Unlike all other Misings of Assam, the Misings of Amarapur, Sadiya were also animist in the beginning but later they have also encultured into Hinduism. Most of the people of Amarapur, Sadiya follow the *Kewalia Dharma* they regard themselves as the follower of *Mahapurush Sri Sri Madhabdev*. They also celebrate the other Hindu pujas like *Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja*, *Lakshmi Puja* and so on. We have already known the reason behind the enculturation into Hinduism. As we have come across that the area under study is a flood affected and a remote area it is obvious that this area lacks development, there is neither proper communication facility nor electricity facility. The people here face a lot of problem. Every year they cultivate their land; if they are blessed they may get the harvest but if not everything is taken away by the flood. In recent times it was seen that most of the people have given up the practice of agriculture instead they prefer earning money through other modes like small business, working as a wage earner, going to the nearby state of Arunachal Pradesh to work as a seasonal worker etc. The people are not very rigid instead they are very flexible they will turn towards any direction at any point of time and the only reason is that they need a better and static livelihood they have always been facing a lot of problem and they knew that they are still lacking behind and therefore they will turn towards any direction for their betterment and development.

The Christian missionaries had played a vital role in this field they had spread education among the people, the reasons for the ease with which the tribal populations embraced Christianity can perhaps be found in the nature of the indigenous religion. It is true that the missionaries opposed animal sacrifice; they inveighed against local morality and encouraged the natives to adopt Western family structure, dress, music and dance, they helped the poor to educate their children and they have also started giving a kind of compensation to those who have converted to Christianity. Their children were taught free of cost, bullocks were provided for agriculture and so on. On the other hand the other Hindus do not have any such compensation, they were never helped or looked after by the greater Hindu community therefore many poor families in the villages were attracted towards Christianity and finally they converted. And according to Bhandari it was seen that the local Hindu caste groups treated the Misings almost like the untouchables. After conversion it was like a kind of relief for them as now they can educate their children, cultivate their land with the compensation they get and have a civilized (as they called) society where everybody was considered equal in the eyes of God. But at the same time they have not given up their traditional and indigenous beliefs and practices though some have almost given up. Conversion to Christianity began after Christian missionaries established themselves in the tribal areas in north-east India in 1894 (Weil 2003) [8].

As most of them have converted to Christianity there arose a division within the community, the people were divided unknowingly into two groups the Hindus and the Christians. Now the same family is divided into two; earlier they use to celebrate their traditional customs together but not now. We can say that somewhere the feeling of oneness or togetherness started missing among the people of the same community. Although they have family ties but not like earlier, whenever they meet each other they both try to convince each other to convert as both wants not to lose their family ties. On the other hand as the converted Misings have ceased to observe their traditional beliefs and customs and if any misfortune occurs in the family the other community members use to blame the family that, this is nothing but the result of the deeds they have done; as they have given up their traditional beliefs and customs.

If we turn back to last five decade we can see that many of the families that had converted to Christianity few years back now have encultured into Hinduism once again but in a different form. In the area under study more than thirty households have converted to *Vaishnavism* (Hinduism) and a few households have gone through re-affiliation from *KewaliaDharma* to *Vaishnav Dharma* or *Vashnavism*. Although they have converted to *Vaishnavism*; but it is again under the larger domain of Hinduism. On the other hand it will not be appropriate to comment that all the converts have once again come back to Hinduism because there are still many families who are following Christianity; they have accepted Christianity with heart and soul. They say that Christianity have given them many things they now have an identity of their own in the society which they did not had earlier, and if after getting many thing now if they turn back towards Christianity there will not be any bigger sin than this.

They say that misfortune occurs to all it is just the belief of their kinsmen that misfortunes are occurring just because they had converted to Christianity leaving their traditional customs and beliefs; they say that they were not free of misfortunes even earlier before they had converted.

There are various reasons behind conversion from Christianity to *Vaishnavism*; mostly it is the result of the influence of the teachings of *Mahapurush Sri Sri Sankar Dev* the profounder of *Eksaran Harinaam Dharma* in the entire Brahmaputra valley, *Sankar Dev* was a saint-scholar, poet, play-writer, social religious reformer and a figure of importance in the cultural and religious history of Assam. As a part of great *Bhakti* movement in the country; *Eksaran Dharma* is against the practice of polytheism and sacrifices instead they follow monotheism and they say that only uttering the name (*naam*) of God one can attain salvation. *Eksaran Harinaam Dharma* where *Eksaran* means under the shelter of one, *Hari* means God and *naam* means name and *Dharma* meaning religion which means taking shelter under one God and that is by uttering the name of the God. Hence the concept of monotheism came up as implied in the principle of *Eksaran Dharma*; the worshiping of one God, the supreme entity i.e. Lord Sri Krishna.

There are many more reasons for coming back into *Vaishnavism*; some of the reasons are; according to the people though they were practicing Christianity, it was not their religion it was a religion from outside whereas *Vaishnavism* is the religion of their own. After coming to *Vaishnavism* they felt that there is equality among the people there is no discrimination, though in Christianity too there was equality but at some point of time they felt that they were deprived especially at times of decision making. There were also cases where people who use to take lead use to misguide the poor. According to some; Christianity is very expensive because they need money in every field like for marriage they need to go through a long process which needs money. Other than these there are also many factors behind this change because many people within the community are against conversion to Christianity. On the other hand people are happy after taking up the practice of *Vaishnavism* (Hinduism) because the sense of oneness and togetherness has started building among the people once again which at one point of time was missing. It is true that they have not taken up *Kewalia Dharma* but to *Vaishnavism*, but both of this comes under the larger domain of Hinduism instead they have come across re-affiliation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Mising community of Amarapur, Sadiya has come across a change in the field of religion from time to time; animism to monotheism. According to Tylor's classified theory of religion; religion at the most simplest form was called as animism (worshiping of soul) anima means soul which implies to worship of dead ancestors. Then came spiritism; worshiping of spirits. According to Tylor those soul which do not find anybody to exhibit after they become free such soul becomes spirit. Special power of spirit attributes to amulates and charms because they can also have property of anima. It gives rise to Idolatory; worshiping of idols because gradually these souls were suppose to have bodily forms which were

considered as Idols; it is not a God or Goddess until its invocation is done. Idolatory gave rise to worshiping of many Gods and Goddesses; to the concept called Polytheism finally to Monotheism; worshiping of the Supreme God. This theory easily fits in the case of the people under study as they have followed this trend. Then the concept of culture in a *Parabolic Curve* according to Neo-Evolutionist also fits here to some extent. They were animist they encultured into Hinduism after coming in contact with the Assamese people, then they converted to Christianity for their convenience, due to change in beliefs and to some extent because of the influence of their kin members, they once again encultured back into Hinduism but in a different form. But we should not forget that even now they tend to practice their traditional customs and beliefs, they have not completely given up and the younger generation and social organizations of the Mishings like MMK (Mishing Mimak Kebang) it is the organization of the Mishing Action Committee and TMPK (Takan Mishing Porin Kebang) it is the organization of the All Mishing Students Union both are trying to spread awareness to preserve and follow their traditional customs. We have seen how the theory of *the Parabolic Curve* in cultural evolution fits here, the question arises out of this is: Will the people cease to convert any more or will they go back to their original beliefs and customs? We cannot deny this because we have seen how they have changed from time to time, but in the meantime they have not left their traditional beliefs.

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