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“STATUS OF WOMEN IN MISING SOCIETY”

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the status of Mising women in the field of socio-economic, religion, cultural and decision-making in Mising society. Mising tribe is one of the prominent indigenous communities of Assam in Northeast India. Traditionally, Mising women play a vital role in household management, agriculture, weaving, and the preservation of cultural practices. Despite their significant economic contributions, their participation in formal decision-making processes often remains limited due to prevailing patriarchal norms and customary practices. The research explores the intersection of economic participation and autonomy, focusing on women's access to education, income-generating activities, and property rights. It highlights how engagement in traditional occupations such as weaving and agriculture enhances women's financial contribution to the household, thereby influencing their bargaining power within the family. However, disparities persist in areas such as ownership of resources, control over income, and involvement in community-level decision-making institutions.

This paper thus attempt to study the role and socio-economic status of the women in Mising tribe of Assam with an aim to see how far the women of this particular tribe is bounded by different socio-cultural and religious beliefs of the community. This paper has been also designed to highlight how far Mising women are free to participate in the decision making process with other male members of the family and society as a whole.

Key words: Socio-economic, status, Role, Decision making, Discrimination.

1. Introduction:

Mising is one of the ethnic groups inhabiting in Assam. They belong to the Tani group of language. Tani refers to a cluster of Tibeto-Burman language situated at the eastern end of Himalayas, in an area spread on four sides by Tibet, Bhutan, Assam and Burma. The Mising community is recognized as a schedule tribe by the constitution of India in 1950 as 'Miri'. The Mising were earlier called 'Miri'. There are different views and opinions regarding the origin of the word 'Miri'. According to Dr. Numal Chandra Pegu, the word first appeared in the 'Dainik Asomiya' an Assamese daily, where he stated that the word 'Miri' derived from the word 'Mirgo' (Hunter). It is believed that *Miri* were expert hunters. Another philosopher, E.A Gait, a noted British historian suggested that 'Miri' means 'go between'. In the linguistic survey of India, reference has been made on the word 'Muru' which is akin to the word 'Muru' phonetically but there is no further studies and references to form a basis for conclusion opinion that the word 'Miri' is derived from 'Muru'. The word 'Miri' has got a mentioned in the work of Mamang Dai, 'Legend of Pensam' in which she referred as 'Miri'. According to her reference, 'Miri' is referred to as 'Priest' who perform all sort of religious rituals among the Adi community. When the 'Miris' migrated to the plains of Assam they were still referred to as 'Miris' and it is only in the plains of Assam the so called 'Miris' have been tagged with the name 'Mising'. It is considered that the word 'Miri' could not be pronounced with the correct prophetic tone by the non-Mising people of Assam. The phoneme /i/ cannot be pronounced by the non-Mising people of the plain thereby calling them as 'Miri'. There are many others who put forward different views regarding the formation of the word 'Miri'. According to some, they say that the word 'Miri' is derived from the word 'Mi' (man) and iri (virtue) means Mising people are 'man of virtue'. Thus, the formation of the word 'Miri' still remain mystery till date but it is clear from the folk tales that they belong to the greater Tani group of language.

Colonial writers, including Sir Eward Gait, the author of *A History of Assam*, (first published in 1905) believed that the word *MIRI* meant a 'go-between' and that the Misings were called *MIRI* because they had been acting as go-between for the administration as well as the people of the valley and the Adis since the days of the Ahoms, the languages of Adis and the Misings being close cognates and being almost the same in places like Sadiya. However, there is probably no language in and around Assam in which *MIRI* 'go-between' and so the meaning attributed appears to have been a mix-up of the people with the work in which they were engaged.

In any society women's role in the production process is crucial especially in a society where agriculture is predominant. Women's role in household and reproductive activities played an important part in economic activity and it provides the basis for the productive activities in the society. To maintain the system of production process, women's role in terms of subsistence activity and reproduction of children is crucial. In society where women are mostly illiterate and belong to the lower castes or tribes, they are economically, socially and politically marginalized and subject to discrimination in almost all field and unrepresented in decision-making bodies. Their contribution to the

economy of society and household goes unrecognized. This is typical characteristic of patriarchal Indian society and caste system that placed women in inferior position in the society.

During the freedom struggle in India women participated in order to free India from the British yoke which was anti-imperialist and anti-feudal. Though India won freedom, women could not gain real freedom in the sense that women's equality and emancipation of women in India was not achieved. The Fundamental Rights Resolution passed by the Indian National Congress in 1931 stated that freedom, justice, dignity and equality for women were essential for nation-building. The founding fathers of our Constitution also included the ideas of the Fundamental Rights Resolution of 1931. But these ideas remained in paper only because till today women remained as the most oppressed and weaker section in the Indian society though her contribution is incomparable.

As mentioned above, in the 1930s, the Indian National Congress passed a resolution in which gender equality included as a fundamental right and after independence it is recognised as an important constitutional provision in Indian Constitution. But it failed to reach the women folk in India in general and Mising women in particular due to its backwardness. In Mising society women are still in the shadow of men and women's inequality is a dominant feature of the social landscape in Mising society. Ironically 75 years after Independence Mising women are still struggling to attain almost all the basic needs like security, health, employment, education, social and economic status which is vital for their progress and nation's progress as a whole. Various problems become obstacles in the way of their progress. Problems like illiteracy, poverty, powerlessness, and over-work together with the deeply entrenched hierarchical values of the family originating from customary and religious beliefs continue to create new imbalances and disparities in Mising society which often cut across all strata of society. Above all, social and cultural norms attribute greater worth to male members primarily as providers and heirs which acts as major obstacle in the way of women progress in Mising society.

2. Methods of the Study

The researcher applied both secondary and primary data. Primary sources include oral traditions, interviews, etc. Secondary sources are collected from books and journals, periodicals and websites. To prepare this paper, research work has been carried out in six Mising villages as sample i.e., Chekai Mukh, Borguli, Kochek, Belong Sumonia and Aborali under the jurisdiction of Ujoni Sissitongani Gaon Panchayat in Dhemaji district in Assam. The methodology adopted for the work is sub-altern approach to understanding the role and the socio-economic status of women in Mising society and it will be presented in the form of a descriptive narrative. Socio-economic status of Mising women analysis here implies an examination of their contributions, such as participation in economic activity and other productive activities, socio-cultural, religious and political activity, participation in the decision making etc. and its impact in the society as a whole.

3. Aims and Objectives

The following are the objectives of this study-

- To understanding about the role of Misings women in Mising society.
- To analyzed the Misings women participation in Economic and Productive activities.
- To understand about the women participation in religious and decision making practices in their society.

4. Analysis and Discussions

The role of women in Mising society is central to the social, cultural, and economic life of the community. The Mising tribe, one of the major indigenous groups of Assam, recognizes women as active contributors to both household and community life, although certain patriarchal norms still influence their status. The Mising women are the backbone of the family structure. They manage domestic responsibilities such as cooking, childcare, and maintaining the household. Beyond these, they actively participate in agricultural work, making them key contributors to family sustenance and survival. The Missing women play a significant economic role through like agriculture (sowing, harvesting, post-harvest activities), weaving (production of traditional garments like *ege*, *gasor*) and handicrafts and local trade. Weaving, in particular, is not just a cultural activity but also a source of income, enhancing women's economic independence and social value within the family. Mising women are also seen as the primary preservers of cultural heritage. They transmit oral traditions, folklore, and songs, prepare traditional food and beverages like *apong* (rice beer) and play an important role in festivals such as *Ali-Aye-Ligang*. Through these roles, women ensure the continuity of Mising identity and traditions across generations. It is also seen that Mising women actively participate in social ceremonies, rituals, and community gatherings. Although certain ritual roles may be male-dominated, women's presence is essential in organizing and sustaining these events. It is also observed that within the household, Mising women often influence decisions related to family welfare, children's education and economic activities. However, their participation in formal village councils or traditional political institutions is generally seen to be limited.

Rituals and festivals:

The Mising women played an important role in every sphere in the Mising society. In the field of social, cultural, religious and economic the women has an important role to play and in fact they are more hard working than the men in some cases.

Rituals

In the religious field, the role of the womenfolk is immense in the sense that in every religious ceremony the presence of the women is necessary in one form or the other. Though they are not allowed to be priest yet their participation is highly required for the successful of the ceremonies. They are usually acts as helpers to the priest in performing rituals and prayers. Their main duty in the religious ceremonies is to cook food, prepare *Apong* (rice beer) and serve the priests and others who are presence in the religious ceremony. Thus, even the religious ceremonies in Mising society are not complete without the helping hands or presence of the womenfolk. But there are rites and rituals where women folk are completely restricted during the ceremonies. The rites like *Do:bur*. This is a rite performed in every Mising village. The purpose of performing this rite is for the well-being of the village people, to chase away the evil spirits causing troubles and sickness in the village and for the protection of crops and others. The sacrifice is given in the name of 'mother Earth' known as *KinéNané*. In this rite, it is observed that women folk are completely restricted from participation. Otherwise, other rites and rituals are incomplete without the participation of women folk.

Festivals

Ali-A:yeLígang:

The most important festival of the Mising society is the *Ali A:ye Ligang* or the sowing festival. This is a festival of merry making and enjoyment where both the male and female members of the society participate irrespective of age. In the early morning, the women are busy in preparing food and rice beer from the guest during this festival. After the feasting, the adult boys and girls starts their merry making in the form of *Gumragso:man*, a combination of dance and beating of drums and cymbals. The womenfolk with their beautiful dresses dance following the rhythmical tunes of the drum beats and cymbals and express paddy transplanting, harvesting, fetching of water, bathing, fishing etc. in their dance. Thus, this festival is incomplete without the participation of the women.

Po:rag:

Another important festival of the Mising where the men and the women play an important role is the *Po:rag*. This festival is basically a socio-religious festival. This festival is organised after every two or three years by a village and the village which organised this festival invites the youth of both the sex of the village and the neighbouring villages to participate in the festival. In this festival the role of women is very important for they perform the task of welcoming of guests and dignitaries by performing dance, preparing and serving of food and drink to the guests and the villagers. Thus, this festival also is incomplete without the active participation and co-operation of the womenfolk.

Economic Sphere

The most important role in which the Mising women plays in the Mising society is in the economic field. The contribution of the Mising women can be best understood from the kind of economic activities that the Mising society performs or practices for their livelihood. Agriculture is the main economic activities of the Mising community of Assam. Majority of the Mising people live in villages and depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Right from their daily needs like food, shelter, cloths to education and other activities they depend on agriculture. The Mising community cultivates and produces rice, potato, sweet potato, mustard seeds, black pulse and other vegetables. The produces from agriculture are used for domestic consumption and for commercial purposes. Both the Mising men and women are hard working. All the members of the family join hands in times of need and provide work team and labour power for agricultural and other economic activities which are geared mainly towards production of food and other basic consumption needs of the family. Animal husbandry is another economic activity of the Mising people which supplement the agriculture. They rear various types of animals both for agriculture and consumption purpose. Other animals and poultry are pigs, chicken, goats, and ducks etc., which are sole responsibility of the womenfolk. Earnings from the animals go into the hands of the women which they utilize for purchasing necessary items for the family and for themselves. These animals are also use for food, rituals and for economic purposes.

The Mising people are river people in the sense that Mising people usually resides near the river banks. Since their migration from hills of present day Arunachal Pradesh to the plains of Assam they are identified as river people. They mostly settled in the bank of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries and one of the important economic activities is fishing. Apart from individual fishing by the men and women, in many rural areas collective fishing is common among the Mising community. Both the men and women folk use different kinds of fishing tools which indicates that different techniques and skills are used by both men and women. Simple and locally available material such as bamboos and cane are used in making the fishing tools. The fishing tools use by the Mising women are Jurki, saloni, jakoi, etc. S. Endle in his work *The Kacharis* very beautifully describes the fishing methods and activities of the Misings as follows:-

“The whole scene is a very merry one, accompanied with much laughter and pleasing excitement and more particularly as the two parties of the fish catchers approach each other and the fish make frantic effort to escape their doom, the fun becomes fast and furious.”

The women either dry the surplus fish or prepare *namsing*, which is a grinded mixture of dry fish and herbs usually vegetables and keep inside a bamboo tube for fermentation and which takes two to three months.

The popular economic activity where the Mising women works without the help of the male member of the family is the cult of weaving. According to Dalton, in the Miri-Mishimi countries, textile making was almost non-existence at a noticeable scale during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The

men wore a girdle made of cane painted red which hangs down behind in a long bushy tail. But this observations and descriptions of Dalton cannot be accepted as totally correct. Of course textile making as an industry did not flourished at that time but weaving culture among the people was very much existence for climatically people of the Miri-Mishmi countries could not afford to live without cloths and warm blankets during winter. The women are expert in weaving and weave variety of beautiful cloths for both men and women. In fact weaving of colourful traditional dress is the sole identity of the Mising community. Mising women usually use two types of looms i.e., mini loom and common ordinary loom. The mini loom is used for weaving *Gadu* or *Mirijim*, *Mibugalug* or Mising *galug* etc. This mini loom can be used even during leisure hour because of its simple and portable features. The Mising women weave cloths like *gadugasar*, *tapumgasar*, *mibugaluk*, *ri:bigasar*, *egagasar*, *dumergasar*, etc. Mising women usually grow small amount of local variety of cotton for their loom. This cotton is especially for weaving and making *gadug* or *Miri-jim*(thick cotton blankets), a unique product of Mising loom using purely local variety of cotton. This *gadug* or *Miri-jim* is precise and usually offers as gift to newly married son by his mother. The preparation of *Gadug* or *Miri-jim* is extremely labourious and expensive and needed lots of time and money. Yet a Mising family cannot think without *Gadug*. The tradition of weaving *Gadug* is maintained not only for the sake of tradition but also for economic reason and it is because the *Gadug* last for many years. The unique and striking feature of Mising women is that their weaving products are with proper pattern and colour of perfect taste which is incomparable.

Apart from common cultivation, the Mising community practices a system of private cultivation among the female members of the same family which is popularly known as *Ríkséngaríg*. This is a system where young Mising women cultivates crops like mustard and other pulses in a small and separate plot of free land. The earnings from *Ríkséngaríg* solely belong to the female members of the family and they generally buy ornaments and other valuables things to be use in times of marriage and other special occasions. Thus, they reduce the burden of the family to a great extent by earnings by themselves with their hard labour.

Cultural Sphere:

The cultural tradition of the Misings is the preparation of Rice beer which is locally popular as '*Apong*'. *Apong* is widely popular drink in the society prepared and consumed by the Mising people as a part of their culture. *Apong* stands for wine or liquor in Mising dialect. Mising women usually prepare two types of *apong*, i.e, *Po:roapong*, mixture of *apin* (cooked rice), *épob*(a type of medicine made of locally available medicinal herbs) and *am:paé* (burnt husk) and *Noginapong* made of mixing *apin* and *épob*. In fact, *apong* is one reason which the Mising identity is preserve in Assamese society. Almost every Mising family in rural areas uses *apong* as a means of welcoming guests. Another type of wine that is popular today in the rural Mising society is the *Potikang* which is usually bi-product of *apong*(*Rice beer*).

Threshing of paddy is mostly done by the female member of the family in front porch of the granary with legs or by beating with wooden stick. However, threshing of paddy with the help of cattle

is usually done by male member of the family. But if male member is not present at home or busy in other work, female member of the family gives helping hand. The most striking features of Mising society is that the organization of work among the women is based on age and generation by which they are positioned in the kinship structure. Threshing end the work of male member in the family in terms of food processing, but the work of female actually begins. Early morning, female members had to husked paddy for daily consumption. This work is usually done by the married women although unmarried girls also give helping hands. Kitchen works like fetching water, collecting and bringing fire wood cooking, washing utensils and dishes used by male members and by themselves are exclusively done by the women.

Political Sphere:

In the political sphere, the role of the Mising women is not less important. The most important political organisation in the Mising society is the *Do:lungKébang* which is an association or an organisation for discussion of various problems or important issues of a village or more. The various issues and problems which are discuss in the *Kébang* are related to developmental activities, settling disputes between two or more persons, between members of family or between two or more families or inter-village disputes etc. In this *Kébang* both the male and female members of the society takes part in arriving suitable solution.

But the most important political organisation in which women have equal rights along with the men folk is the *MimbiYa:me*. This organisation is a benevolent organisation and the young unmarried men and women of the village are its member. In this organisation welfare activities are discusses and performs by the youth of the village. Through this organisation the youth perform various developmental activities and other social works in the village. For instance, whenever a family is in difficulty and want of manpower for sowing or harvesting of paddy, construction of house or any occasions like marriage or death ceremony, the young men and the young women of the village come together and finished the task free of cost. However, sometime they are paid for their service which they deposit and uses for welfare activities and feasting. This type of rendering physical labour is called *AbírGínam*. Thus, this is the most important and powerful socio-political organisation where the Mising women enjoy equal power and rights along with the men folk.

In the contemporary period, it is observed that Mising women are increasingly active in grassroots politics, especially through the Panchayati Raj Institutions. It is found from the filed investigation that women community in the Missing society has occupied equal position in the panchayat level election. For instance, Smt. KamalawotiDoley, a Mising woman from ChekaiMukh village had been elected as the member of DhemajiZillaParishad in the year 2010 to 2015, Smt.BontiPegu, a woman from Chekai has been elected two times member of DhemajiZillaParishad from 2015 to present time. It is also found from the field investigation that in every gaonpanchayat

under Simen-Sissitongani Development Block, say ward members, councillors, presidents elected to the gaon panchayat have been occupied by the women folk. It is also found that the present GaonPanchayat Presidents (2026) such as Ujoni Sissitongani GaonPanchayat, MuktiarGaonPanchayat, DimowGaon Panchayat, Namoni GaonPanchayat, Madhya Sissitongani Gaon Panchayat under Simen-Sissitongani Development Block in the district of Dhemaji have been occupied by women folk that shows women empowerment in the said area. Smt.Sarmila Pegu Kutum is elected as the president of Ujoni Sissitongani gaon Panchayat, Smt. Niruprova Doley Pegu from Namoni Gaon Panchayat under Simen-Sisssitongani Development Block. This could be possible due to reservation policies for women that have enabled their entry into positions like ward members, Gaon Panchayat representatives, and Zilla Parishad members. It is also found that in the contemporary period in some Mising-dominated areas, women actively participate in decision-making related to development, health, and education.

Submerge of position due to traditional norms

There is a place in Mising society where women are restricted to occupy. A very important example of the lower position and status of the Mising womenfolk is the well defined and division of rooms especially in the kitchen in to two portions called *Rí:sing* and the *Koktog*.the former refers to the upper portion and is occupied by the male members of the family and the latter refers to the lower portion and is occupied by the female members of the family. In other words, the *Rí:sing* is considered to be honourable portion in the house and the *Koktog* is considered to be less prestigious. In the *Rí:sing*, the most valuable and important properties of the family are kept and the kitchen articles are kept in the *Koktog*. The dividing line of the *Rí:sing* and the *Koktog* is the *Méram* or the fireplace. Thus, privileges to sit in the *Rí:sing* is a status symbol in the Mising society but the women are deprived of the privileges which shows the lower position and status of the Mising women.

In the religious field, the role and position of the Mising womenfolk are lower than the men folk. For instance, the Mibu, the traditional Mising priest is always from the male section of the society. Moreover, the womenfolk are not allowed to sit in the same row with the men folk or with the Mibu during performing rituals and sacrifices. The womenfolk are always placed in secondary position and they have to perform the task of cooking and serving. There are some religious ceremonies which are performed only by the male member of the society.

5. Conclusion

Thus, in conclusion we can say that the Mising women plays an important role in all spheres of life i.e. social, religious, economic, political and other socio-cultural activities. In fact, from the study it has been found that the women are comparatively more involve in productive and unproductive activities than men. Thus, it can be said that the Mising women have a role to play and in fact have been playing since time immemorial in all socio-economic and religio-cultural activities in the family as well in the society. Almost all kinds of activities either socio-economic or religio-cultural and decision

making are incomplete with the active and sincere co-operation of the womenfolk. But the position of Mising women in the domestic and social life is not up to the expectation the way she contributed in all fields. Further, the women remain the most exploited and downtrodden sections of the Mising society although their contribution to the society in socio-economic and cultural development was/is great. It is found from the study that the Mising women are socially discriminated in the areas of education, occupations, religious and cultural practices. Generally she is given a lower status in the family and in society and her position is placed below her male counterpart. In decision-making also she is much lower than the menfolk both in family and in society and only a few among them have decision-making powers. This lower position and status of women is probably due to the gradual Aryanisation of Mising society after they migrated from the hills to the plains of Assam. However, with the advent of modern education and changing life style, the condition and standard of the Mising women have been increasing but still much to be done.

Therefore, if Government and social scientists are committed to social responsibility of upliftment and development in the society and to create awareness about the condition of women and promote social justice as laid out in the objectives of the Constitution then by addressing the all round problems of the women can become a more effective vehicle of bringing in progress and social change in the country. If the State and the Central Government can announced and implemented various development schemes and programmes in the Mising society then it also should reflect the development and upliftment of the Mising women in the society because without development and improvement of women, the community's half population, it will not be possible to bring development and progress in the society. Moreover, if Mising women are to find their rightful place in the society then along with the government, the NGOs, social scientists and policy makers can also emphasize on the condition and role of the Mising women and the need of equality in the society irrespective of caste, creed and class. However, it has not been done so to the extent due to deep seated monopoly of the male chauvinism policy in the society. Therefore, the study of role and socio-economic status of Mising women as discussed in this paper has not really come about because gender policy of the government have remained primarily unchanged due to the above mentioned problems in the Mising society.

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