Chapter 3
THE MISHING

The Mishing tribe of Assam forms a fragment of the greater Mongoloid horde occupying the hills and vales of North-Eastern India. Sir George Grierson (1927) has categorically divided these Mongoloids into (a) primitive long headed, (b) less primitive short headed and (c) Tibeto-Mongoloids. Linguistic researches reveal that the Mongoloids of India, excluding only the Khasis and Jayantias, speak Sino-Tibetan languages; and the Mishings who form a fraction of this race, fall in the category of Tibeto-Burman speakers of the greater Sino-Tibetan groups (Chatterji 1974). The original habitat of these people appears to have been north-western China, covering the courses of the Yang-tsze Keang and the Huang-Ho river. Migrations of these Sino-Tibetan speakers of central Chinese region towards south and west possibly had started since pre-historic times but, as asserted by S.K Chatterji, certain large scale influx seemed to have begun in the early part of the first millennium B.C. Following the course of the Brahmaputra, Sindwin, Irrawadi, Salwin, Mekong and Menam and the mountain passes of Assam and Burma (Myanmar) these people entered Assam and drove away its original Mon Khmers into different regions (Grierson 1927). Besides some parts in Nepal and Tibet, the newcomers occupied regions of the Himalayan foothills of Assam and gradually scattered even to the plains along the banks of the Brahmaputra. It is a fact that their migration took place at different periods of history, but his contention that 'most of them', if not all, came after the intrusion of the Aryans from the west (Chaudhury 1987). This chapter introduces the tradition of the Mishing in North-East India.

Historical Background

Distinctly isolated in their own spheres of activities, the Mongoloids of North East India had escaped the eyes of early chroniclers and as such 'their early history was already obscure at that time, and still remains obscure (Chatterji 1974). The Mishing, as such, have only recently come to the limelight of history. No detailed records about this

tribe recording their early habits and culture have been available. None of the epigraphs so far discovered in this region and those discovered outside, but containing reference to the history of ancient and medieval Assam, possess any information of this tribe. This is because of the fact that the Mishing, as a tribe, till very recent times, used to live in hills in isolation having no contact with the plain regions where states of other tribes had already been formed. This habit of living in isolation is a legitimate heritage of the tribe from China which was possibly their original habitat and this can be demonstrated by the fact that the Chinese till the beginning of the 17th century believed in isolation and contact with any outsider was not only prohibited, but also hated (Sarma 1978).

The *Puranas* and *Tantras* make frequent references to the people having Mongoloid countenance. Here, such literary records are taken into consideration to make a general idea of the early history of the Mishings in Assam (Nath 1998). Moreover, literary works of medieval period, particularly those of the Vaishnavite period, and the Ahom chronicles make frequent mention of the Mishings in connection with their relations with the Vaishnava saints and the Ahom kings. As such authentic record about this tribe can be found in those literary works. Contemporary Persian Chronicles containing reference to the North-Eastern region sometimes mention different tribes including the Mishing (Sadaramin & Baruah 1962). Thus, it may be surmised that the Mishings once formed a trading class between China and India through the North-Eastern hill routes. With the same racial affinity, they found it easy not only to carry on trade but also ideas. But it was they who used to live on the hills till, at least, the time of Huen-Tsang (630-632 A.D) in whose account Kamarupa did not included the hilly region bordering China (Pegu 1981).

The Mishing as a distinct tribe of the North-East have been mentioned not only in the Vaishnava literature, but also in contemporary records of foreign chroniclers and those of the Ahom courts. Sankaradeva's *Kirtan Ghosha*, composed sometime between 1516-1568 A D, mentions, among other non-Aryan tribes of the region, the Mishings (Miris). References to the Miris have also been found in Madhavadeva's *Nam Ghosha*. Hence, it appears that since at least the 16th century the Mishing came to be known as a distinct tribe attracting the attention of the Vaishnava reformers of medieval Assam. It is

possible that a section of the Mishings, called as the Chutiya-Miri, were dwelling in the Chutiya Kingdom (in the extreme North-East) which was devastated and annexed to his own dominion by the Ahom King Suhungmung Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) in 1523 A.D. (Nath 1998).

The Ahom rulers (1228-1826) beginning from the 17th century came into contact with the Mishing of North-Eastern region in connection with trade and politico-economic relations. The *Buranjis* (Ahom chronicles) contain reference to this fact (Barua 1962). By the beginning of the 18th century, the Mishing tribe came to terms with the Ahoms. It is a fact that by the 16th-17th centuries the Mishing were recognized as citizens of the Ahom Kingdom. It is thus the Mishing who were originally hill dwellers, came down gradually to the plains and extended their hold as far as the Brahmaputra. John M Cosh (1837), recording in 1837, states that the "Miris (Mishings) occupy that strip of alluvial land along the north bank of the Brahmaputra, from the large island Majuli to the river Dihong, the northern branch of the Brahmaputra and bounded on the north by the hill country of Abors. Alexander Mackenzie (1884) records that the Mishings had extensively cultivated the tracts of Bardalani, Sisi and Dhemaji."

Unlike other Mongoloid tribes of the plains like the Chutiya, Kachari, Koch, Ahom, etc. the Mishing as a tribe could not form a state in the region. Character of their culture and delay in coming down to the plains must be accounted for this. As pointed out by Chatterji (1974), they have always remained in a very primitive state and never had any occasion to make any advancement in civilization like some of their cousins and brothers in the plains and in Nepal (Chatterji 1974). Lack of settled agriculture in the tribe, which is the most important factor of state formation among the tribes, further contributed to their failure to form their own separate states (Singh 1974). Even in recent times the tribe was adapted to shifting method of agriculture. Robinson (1975) observed that the "Mishings are a laborious and highly industrious people, and seen partial to living on the skirts of the forests, cleaning new grounds which they cultivate for a year or two, and recovering elsewhere when the soil is adjusted". The Mishings till medieval times lived in the hills and hence had little scope to come into cultural contact with the more advanced sanskritised culture of the plains. The process of Hinduization is quite

late and very limited in the tribe. Although on the basis of a tradition mentioned elsewhere, the Mishings are said to have come into contact with the Aryans as early as the days of Parasurama, and thus became Hinduised (Nath 1998). Sankaradeva and his apostle Madhavdeva indicate that till their time, the Mishing at large remained outside the spell of Hinduism. The Vaishnavite reforms started, in fact, the process of Hinduization of all the tribes of the North East. The process is still continuing among the tribes of Assam (Nath 1998).

The Mishing had a distinct role to play in the economic history of the land. The methods they applied in cultivation are less productive and as such their basic force of economy remained always weak. This riverine tribe living amidst the Assamese people for the last seven centuries through many changes in the political and socio-religious life of Assam has been able to keep its own dialect. Those Mishings who have no dialect of their own might have forgotten their dialect as they have mixed with the non-Mishing people since time immemorial; or it might so happen because a large number of non-Mishing people have come to the fold of the Mishing. Such people are mostly found in the Golaghat district of Assam. Although their cultural-religious life has been influenced by that of the neighbouring people during all those periods, this tribe still maintains many of its fundamental social customs, traditions and religious beliefs (Encyclopedia of Indian Tribes: Assam and Manipur 2000).

Bordoloi, Sharmathakur and Saikia (1987) describe that originally there was no tribe such as Miri or Mishing. The plain tribe people known as Miri or Mishing now inhabiting the riverine area of Upper Assam Valley are blood relations of the tribal people living in the Abor Hills of Arunachal Pradesh. The history of the Miris is essentially the history of the Mishings, Minyongs, Pasi Padams and other hill tribes, who profess the cult of 'Mirui', worship 'Donyi' (Sun) and 'Polo' (Moon) as their principal deities and called themselves "Ami' or 'Tani', meaning man (Pegu 1981).

Though there is no recorded historical evidence to show the exact data and cause of the Miris living in the hills coming down to the plain of Assam, here is no dearth of folk tales among the Mishings tracing their origin to the Abors and the people now living here. The Abors and the Miris undoubtedly coming originally from the same

habitat, are still so alike in all material respects as to warrant us in calling them earlier and late migrations of the same tribe, the Abors as the late comers retaining more of their pristine savagery and hardihood, while the Miris have been to some extent influenced by free association with the plains are here claimed by the Abors as their dependents and runaway slaves and under the Assam Government the Miris acted as 'Go-between' of the Abors and the traders of Assam (Bordoloi, Sharmathakur & Saikia 1987).

Dalton (1855), the then Principal Assistant to the Governor General's Agent in Assam, wrote, "The Miris of the plains are off-shoots from the Abors and claimed by people as runaway slaves, but there are various clans of them differing in external appearance, and some of these clans have been settled in Assam for ages. They, however, keep much to themselves, leading rather a nomadic life, living in houses on stilts built on the precarious banks of the Brahmaputra and its estuaries or effluents, and cultivating the alluvial flats of that river. With exception to the clan called Chutia Miris, the traditions of all of them back to the valley of the Dihong. It is probable that they had advanced from the north, made settlement in the country now occupied by the Abors, and the later people of the same race but more powerful, following on their footsteps, pushed them on into the plains". Dalton also noticed that the plain Miris were divided into such clans as the 'Saiengya' and the 'Ayiengya'. He noted that members of these clans got their hairs cropped like the Abors. Dalton also conjectured about the origin of the name Miri. He pointed out that, from a very long time, the Miris monopolized the entire trade between the plains of Assam and Abors who lived in high mountains to the North. Dalton wrote: "As being thus the only medium of communication between the two peoples they obtained this name Miri, which means mediator or go-between, and is the same word as 'Miria' or 'Milia' used with the same signification in Orissa" (Das & Doley 1995).

According to Allen (1906), the Miris or as they call themselves Mishings, were originally settled in the hills to the North of Lakhimpur (a district of upper Assam) between the Dafla and the Abor territory. They are thought to be members of the Tibeto-Burman family and the Chutia Miris claim kinship with the Chutias (Allen 1906, Assam

District Gazetteers, Vol. III, Lakhimpur, Chapter IV, p.118). On the other hand, according to their own account they descended from the hills with the Chutias when they first conquered Lakhimpur and retired again with them into their mountain fastnesses, when they were finally defeated by the Ahoms in the 16th century. On the advent of the British the Miris again began to settle in the plains, a process which has been in steady progress ever since (Bordoloi, Sharmathakur & Saikia 1987).

The Miris are the second largest group of Scheduled Tribes (plains) of Assam and is found mainly in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur in Assam. The Mishings, as stated already, were originally a hill tribe within the ranges of the Abor, Miri and Mishimi hills in the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), presently Arunachal Pradesh, who came down to the plains before the reign of the Ahom kings and since then began settling in the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri rivers of Assam (Bordoloi 1987).

This colourful ethnic group living amidst the fellow Assamese people for many centuries has been able to maintain its traditional socio-cultural traits unimpaired in spite of the changes that have taken place in the socio-political-religious life of Assam. When and why the Miris migrated to the plains of Assam are the questions still baffling the minds of researchers and scholars. As the Miris have no authentic written records it is difficult to ascertain the exact date of their influx into the plains of different districts of Upper Assam. These Mishings who have no dialect of their own might have forgotten their dialect as they have mixed with the non-Mishing people since time immemorial or it might so happen because a large number of non-Mishing people have come to the fold of the Mishings. Such people are found in some places or villages in the district of Golaghat (Encyclopedia of Indian Tribes: Assam and Manipur 2000).

THE PEOPLE

Ethnically the Mishing people are Mongoloid and belong to the Indo-Tibetan group. Though a people of the Tibeto-Burman origin, the Mishings are not short stature like the neighbouring Dafla tribe. They are tall with well-developed body and have charming features, characteristic of the Mongoloid type of people. They possess wide chests, broad shoulders and strong muscles. Their lips are thick and noses flat. They

possess straight hair, beards and moustaches are practically absent. Outsiders are charmed of their hospitality. They are simple, straightforward and firm. Their free candid nature is revealed upon the cups of Apong and the delightful laugh, with which they welcome their guests readily (Das & Doley 1995).

The Mishing people are found to be sturdy with jovial and friendly disposition. However, they are firm in their decision and stick to it with much tenancy. They are an optimist set of people (Das 1984).

Mishing women have independent spirit and do not depend upon much on men-folk for their maintenance. This is mostly because they are industrious and work side by side with their men-folk in the field. They not only try to augment family income but also develop their independent spirit. It is mostly due to their hard labour that the family bread is earned. By nature, Mishing women are carefree and bold. By and large, they are hospitable. The Mishing women have their typical cloth design. It consists of two pieces. The striking affinity to the dress of the Assamese people - the 'Mekhela' and the 'Chaddar' in the Assam Valley. All the Mishing women are good weavers (Das 1984).

SOCIAL LIFE

The Mishings are peace loving people. Both men and women are hard workers. The women are comparatively more hard working than men. In rural areas, generally, they remain engaged in household and agricultural activities and look after cattle breeding (pig and fowl), for extra income, from morning to evening. Cooperation among the villagers is an important feature of the Mishings. *Rikbo-ge 'nam* and *dagle 'kaalek* are some of their co-operative activities organized by a family whenever there is a need. For instance, when a person is unable to cultivate his fields due to some reasons, he may request the villagers for co-operation (*rigbo goknam*). To keep his request, the villagers will help him according to their capacity and time. For the construction of a new house the owner may inform the villagers in advance and accordingly the villagers will help him (Bordoloi 1987).

The Mishings are divided into various groups though they do not strictly follow them. First, they are divided into two broad divisions; viz., *Barogam* and *Dahgam.* These two are further subdivided into *Pagro, Chayengia, Ayengia, Dambukial,*

Samuguria and so on (Mipun 1993). These two divisions can also be subdivided into a number of clans.

Matrimonial alliances are usually preferred within a sub-group. For instance, a man of Doley clan usually prefers to marry a woman of Pegu clan as both the clans belong to Pagro sub-group. Clan exogamy and sub-group and tribal endogamy is practiced by them (Mipun 1993).

HOUSEHOLDS

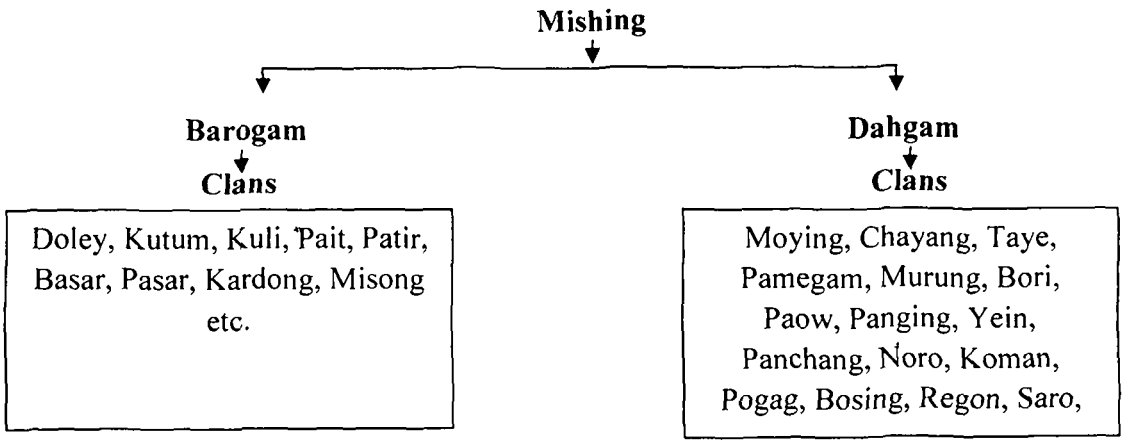
Generally, the Mishing villages are always established on the bank of a river. No Mishing village is therefore seen far away from any river and because of this the Mishings have to face the furies of the river every year. Besides, they have to lead a nomadic life. The Mishing houses are built on platforms raised about five feet above the ground. Previously the houses were built temporarily because the Mishings had to face the ravages of floods every year. But today this position has changed to a considerable extent due to the construction of the embankments by the Government. A typical Mishing house is sometimes as big as forty yards in length and provides accommodation to thirty to forty persons, living in one great hall without any compartments. The length and breadth of an average house is about sixty feet and twenty feet respectively. The roof is thatched and the walls are made of bamboo or reeds. There may be a separate place in the front portion of the house where guests are entertained. This is a covered portico and forms the main entrance. Access to the portico can be made with the help of a ladder. There is only one house for one family. If the members of the family increase, the house is extended to accommodate the increased number of persons. Houses are constructed facing the East, the South and the North but not the West. There is no separate accommodation for the pigs but a certain place is kept apart for them under the *Chang*. A shade is erected for the cattle adjacent to the house. At few yards from the main house a small house is constructed for the fowls. Well-to-do Mishings keep a granary to keep paddies. The most important feature within a Mishing house is the fire place, *Merun,* which is looked at with much respect. Besides cooking their daily meals, certain offerings are also performed in the fire place (Mipun 1993).

FAMILY

Among the Mishings many families peacefully live together in a single house. All the members abide by the orders of the head of the family. Both, men and women, are equally hard working. Besides helping their menfolk in the fields, the women weave clothes, cook meals and collect edible roots and vegetables from the forest. There is mutual cooperation between men and women, and women are not treated subordinates. The oldest man is highly respected in the family and the village. Production of food is the responsibility of the individual family. Similarly, each family has to arrange for the education of the members of the family. Illness in the family is also a private matter. The worship of gods and spirits is, however, done on a communal basis (Bordoloi, Sarmathakur & Saikia 1987).

CLAN AND KINSHIP

The Mishings are broadly known by two divisions; namely, Barogam and Dahgam. But such a division is not found among the hills' Miris. The Assam Census Report of 1881 reported, "The Miris are divided into two sections, which are respectively known as Barogam and Dahgam. But the division is not watertight, and there is no disharmony on the basis of these divisions. The clans may be charted as follows:



Kinship system of the Mishings is broadly descriptive. Under descriptive system one term refers to only one relation. It describes the exact relation of a person towards another. For example, father is descriptive term. The main feature of this system is the

application of those relationship terms which refer to one type of relationship only. For example, father '*Abu*', mother '*Nane*' or '*Ane*', father's elder brother '*Abatta*' and so on. The Mishings use the same relationship term '*Baboi*' for his father's younger brother and mother's sister's husband. There are many kinship terms which indicate 'antecedent social function'. For example, the term '*Aota*' is used for father's father, mother's father and father-in-law (Mipun 1993).

MARRIAGE

With regards to clan the Mishings are endogamous but they are exogamous with regards to sub-clan. Marriage within a sub-clan, i.e., families of identical surname cannot be made effective under any circumstance. Similarly, marriage cannot take place between allied groups of families such as Pegu, Patir etc. As a rule, the Mishings are monogamous but polygyny is not unknown to the well-to-do Mishings. The Mishing girls do not like to be second wives which they consider to be a misfortune. As the Mishing families are patrilocal and patriarchal, after marriage a girl goes to live with her husband's family and the children born of their marriage bear their father's surname (Bordoloi 1987).

Forms of Marriage

Broadly speaking, the Mishings have two forms of marriage; namely, *Midang* and *Duglalanam*. Both the forms are equally binding. The former is an expensive affair usually planned and arranged by the parents. In arranged marriage the parents of the couple have to spend a large amount of money by way of entertaining the guests. Pork and Apong (rice beer) are essential items for the marriage feast (Bordoloi 1987). On the other hand, *Duglalanam* is the most popular form of marriage among the Mishings. It is usually the outcome of an intrigue between the boy and the girl and is sometimes necessitated by the poverty of the parties. When the parents of either the boy or girl disapprove of proposal the idea of the marriage or express inability to bear the expenses of a formal wedding, the boy, with the help of his friends, takes away the girl on an appointed date and the bride is received in an unceremonious function. The total expenditure incurred in this system of marriage is usually less than that for a Midang and

seems to be favoured by a considerable bulk of the population. The boy is allowed to pay the bride price in three to four instalments (Bordoloi 1987).

In the Mishing society cross cousin marriage is also prevalent. One can marry father's sister's daughter or mother's brother's daughter. Other than these no cross cousin marriage is prescribed. Today, the Mishings strictly resent any breach of the tribal laws regarding marriage, because any offence is believed to be ominous and is regarded as a cause of all natural calamities or they attribute it to incestuous relationship or violation of the rules of marital relations (Bordoloi 1987).

Bride price

The payment of bride price is known as *Alig*. In earlier days, a Mithun or its equivalent of Rs. 100/- or so was charged as bride price. Today, the amount has been considerably minimized by the efforts of the enthusiastic and educated Mishings. A sincere effort has been made to root out the system, which has a harmful effect upon the marriageable boys and girls. Thus, the custom is not favoured by the Mishings of today (Mipun 1993).

Divorce

In their society divorce can be made effective if the parties concerned mutually agree to it. No social ceremony is necessary for divorce. Yet, divorce is very rare among the Mishing (Mipun 1993).

DRESS

The dress of the Mishings can be divided into two distinct types; namely, (i) the general dress for everyday use and (ii) the special dress for festivals and ceremonial functions. The dress for the everyday use of the people is very simple. The dress of the men is similar to non-tribal Assamese. A simple white dhoti (*ugon*) or sometimes a long coloured towel (*dumer*) and a shirt (*galuk*) constitute the dress of the men. The dress of the women is also simple, but divided into two pieces of garments. They generally wear a skirt covering the part from the waist to the knee. The upper piece fastened above the breast falling along with the skirt. Occasionally, a blouse is seen to cover the upper part of the body (Bordoloi, Sarmathakur & Saikia 1987).

The dress for the special occasions is the special product of their loom. On special occasions, a man wears a skirt (*mibu galuk*) over his usual dress and a towel is must. Only a few of them use turban (*paguri*). The dresses on special occasions are used in such a way as a man will look like *gam* or leader. The dress of the women is the same as they use daily, but the dresses for festivals and functions are more colourful and decorated. The plain dresses without colour and decoration are generally not used in festivals and rituals. Women are fond of various types of ornaments. Ear and neck ornaments, chains, different types of bracelet are very much common among the women In recent years, due to easy communication and other facilities, mill-made clothes have penetrated into the farthest corners and the traditional cloths are fast disappearing (Bordoloi, Sarmathakur & Saikia 1987).

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The traditional religious practices of the Mishings make three major belief systems; viz, beliefs about the creator of the universe, beliefs about the existence of spirits around human habitats and beliefs about human soul. Although the Mishing introduce themselves as Hindu, yet, it is difficult to find a nomenclature for the Mishing religion. Moreover, they follow Mahapurushia Vaishnav Dharma and they worship different gods and goddesses. Worshipping of spirits, sacrificing of fowls and consumption of rice beer are practiced hand in hand with the Vaisnava ideals, according to which worshipping of different gods and goddesses and sacrificing of animals in the name of god is prohibited. They worship the spirits underlying thunder and lightening (*Mukling Teleng)*, earth and water (*Among Asi)*, air and fire (*Esar Emi).* According to the belief of the Mishings, they are benevolent to human beings, protect their farms and families from damages and misfortune. These spirits have to be kept appeased with occasional offerings called *Taleng Uie* and *Rokpu Done* (eater of white cock). There are various other evil spirits such as *Asi uie, Adi uie, Umrang uie,* etc. to whom all calamities are attributed. Another important spirit is *Dopum Dorum* who is believed to be a three headed demon. The *Miboo* or the village expert is the only person who can appease these spirits (Kuli 1998).

FOOD HABITS

Food habits of the Mishing are now-a-days similar to those of the non-tribal neighbouring Hindus. But to a certain extent, their food habits still have a similarity with the Adis of Arunachal (Elwin 1964; Roy 1966). As described by Hunter (1979), before the acceptance of Hinduism and the impact of non-tribal Hindus to a greater extent, the Mishings ate pig, fowl, and beef and drank spirit and beer, and had no caste notion about the preparation of food. Now, after Hinduization, lots of changes are taking place in their food habits. As found in the field, rice is the staple food of the Mishing. Along with rice they take leafy vegetables, edible roots and fish. Meat and fish are not everyday items of food but are occasional delicacies. Their great delicacies are fowl and pork. The preserved fish, *Ngo San* has a great demand for entertaining guests. This dried fish they prepare in the hot rays of the sun or over the hearth of a fire placed on a bamboo sieve called *Perap* (Mipun 1993).

There are certain food taboos among the Mishings. If any member of the family dies then taking of meat is prohibited to all the members of the family until the obsequial performances of the deceased are over. Again, if a party is out on hunting, the villagers must not take any meat (Ibid).

Every household brews its own *Apong* (rice-beer) and serves it as drink and a food for everybody, young or old. "The Mishing Apong is of two varieties which differ slightly in taste, colour and method of preparation. The *Nagin Apong*, rice-beer proper, is whitish in colour and fermented from pure boiled rice but the *Poro Apong* has a dark green colour due to its alkaline base added to the boiled rice. It can be preserved for weeks together" (Ibid). *Apong* is considered to be the most valuable item for entertaining guests. The beer is brewed in every house and it is solely the women's business. Every family should keep some Apong to entertain guests. The women who prepare the *Apong* are required to observe certain rules of ceremonial purity. Before the preparation she must take a bath and wear washed clothes. Taking of milk, egg, mustard oil and spices is not very popular, but gradually greater use of such products is gaining ground (Ibid).

EDUCATION

Mishings were lagging behind in the field of education when they came down to the plains. But, now-a-days, their literacy rate is higher than some other tribes of Assam. This is due to their growing consciousness in this field as well as acculturation with other non-tribal communities. Now, one can see doctors, engineers, and other professionals in their society (Ibid).

HUNTING AND FISHING

In the past hunting was a means of livelihood. But with the passage of time hunting has changed from a means of livelihood to entertainment. Apart from casual hunting, regular hunting is organized during summer. Firearms, bows and arrows, and spears are the main hunting weapons. When the community hunting party is out from the village, the villagers follow some customs like the women in the village do not comb their hair, weaving or preparing rice-beer is prohibited and no animal is killed or sacrificed till the hunting party returns to the village. These restrictions are observed to get rid of any unfavourable circumstances during the visit (Ibid).

Fish catching is a regular affair of the Mishing women. *Zurki, Chaloni, Diradang* and *Porang* are the common instrument used by the Mishing women for this purpose. Now-a-days, fishing nets have become popular. The community fishing operation is a very interesting scene. The whole fishing scene causes excitement (Ibid).

FESTIVALS

Though the Mishings profess Hinduism as faith, yet they observe many festivals according to their own tradition and beliefs. Besides observing the three Assamese Bihus; namely, Bohag Bihu, Magh Bihu and Kati Bihu, the Mishing observe *Ali-Ai-Ligang* festival on first Wednesday in the Hindu calendar month of *Falgun* (in the month of February) with much pomp and grandeur. It is a spring dance festival of socio-cultural significance. During this festival they worship the Mother Earth and sprinkle the *Ahu* paddy seeds ceremonially. All the villagers irrespective of age and sex join a community dance known as *Pakso Monam*. This dance sequence is performed, it is believed, to appease the divine power who bestows upon them a rice harvest. The Mishings

generally observe five-day holiday, following the *Ali-Ai-Ligang* when they abstain from all sorts of work (Kuli 1998).

Porag is another important festival held at the close of the *Ahu* cultivation. It is festival of feast and merry-making. The *Morung* (dormitory) is either decorated or newly constructed. A *Miboo* is elected who is able to make contacts with the spirits. The function starts with some offerings to the creator, *Chedimelo* and *Dolnyipolo* (Sun and Moon) etc. Feast and dance continue day and night for three days (Ibid).

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

The Mishing language belongs to the Northern branch of the Indo-Tibeto-Burman languages. There is much similarity of their language with the Adi and Nishi languages of Arunachal Pradesh. Each of the three tribes calls its languages by the name of its own tribe, i.e., *Nishi-agom, Adi-agom* and *Mishing-agom*. Usually, they call the language as *Tani-agom* (human speech or language). The similarity is visible because the Mishings were once a tribe of Arunachal Pradesh (Padun 1972).

Though there is a common language among the Mishing, different tone in each sub-group is often visible. Each of the sub-groups; viz., *Chayengia, Pagro, Delu, Ayengia, Dambukial* and *Samua* has slightly different tone. But as the language is basically the same, all the people can follow and understand each other easily (Ibid).

The Mishing language emerged in written form only recently, first, in the wake of the movement led by the *Mishing Agom Kebang* the biggest literary organization of the Mishings. Around and after Independence, a few booklets and magazines in the Mishing language were published by native speakers of the language using the Assamese-Bengali script. But during these early attempts at rendering the Mishing speech into writing, the phonetic features of the language were not properly reflected in the system of writing. In the process of acculturation the Assamese language is also visible among the Mishings. The Assamese language is as popular as the language of their own. They have adopted various Assamese words in the Mishing language. In a way, the Assamese language is the part and parcel in their daily conversations. Moreover, majority of their adults know Hindi and English. Their common language next to Assamese is Hindi (Ibid).

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Morung

Bachelor's dormitory is one of the important features in a Mishing village. The bachelor's dormitory of the Mishings is called *Morung*. It is a public hall visible in all the Mishing villages. The *Morung* is constructed on a raised platform, 5 to 6 feet above the ground. The posts and the beams are decorated with wood carving of primitive designs. The Mishing *Morung* serves the purpose for the annual *Porag* and other major festivals. Public gatherings such as *Kebang* are also held here. It is also the usual venue where the village *Gams* (chiefs) give judgment in different cases. Since the function of the *Morung* has changed to some degree, the building is not always maintained. Therefore, when the occasion arises as for festivals the house is completely renovated. At present, in some relatively developed villages many of the old functions of the *Morung* have been taken over as the *Namghar* (Prayer Hall). This is due to the influence of the *Gosains* (head of the *Satra*) whose pioneer activities in removing the age old backwardness of the Mishings are noteworthy. Generally the *Morung* is constructed in a central place of the village. During festivals the *Morung* is decorated and it becomes the centre of attraction for all the villagers (Pegu 1981).

Kebang and *Bane Kebang*

Kebang is time-honoured institution deriving its authority from age-old traditions. In fact, it functions as village Panchayat, giving expression to the will and power of all the members of the society who constitute them. The *Kebang* is the pivot, round which the Mishing corporate tribal life moves. The *Kebang* is the village council of the Mishings. This is a democratic institution in the most modern sense. Constituted by the village elders, the *Kebang* exercises important legal and judicial powers. It controls the village on all matters. Every Mishing village with a *Kebang* is, thus, an independent administrative unit by itself. The *Kebang* directs and regulates all village activities and adjudicates matters of dispute and all other matters of common interest. It is the chief judiciary in the village. All cases of disputes are brought before it for judgment. Women generally do not take part in the *Kebang*. The verdicts of the *Kebang* are final and binding on all the concerned. The jurisdiction of the *Kebang* extends to its

own village. Inter-village disputes are settled by the inter-village tribal council, known as *Bane Kebang*. A *Bane Kebang* consists of all the headmen or *Gams* of the villages constituting it. The customary laws of the Mishings are based on some definite codes of conduct. These codes are accepted and abided by all the members of the society. This willful acceptance precludes the necessity of any coercion for enforcement of law by the *Kebang*. The *Kebang* deals with a number of civil and criminal cases such as marriage, divorce, theft, assault, homicide etc. (Nath 1998).

ECONOMY

Property and Inheritance

The Mishing social structure is patriarchal. After the death of the father, the property is owned by the sons. Both moveable and immoveable properties are divided among the sons. Daughters are not entitled to share the property of father. But if a man is without a son, his property is divided equally among his daughters on the condition that the daughters will bear the funeral expenses of their parents. During the lifetime of a father the sons can demand a division of the family property provided all the sons have attained matrimonial status. In the event of such a division the father will not keep a share for himself but divide the whole property equally among his sons. He can choose to remain with any one of his sons whom he likes. On the other hand, if a man has no son but his son-in-law lives in the father-in-law's house till the latter's death, he may inherit the father-in-law's property. In the absence of the children the nearest agnates of the deceased inherit the property (Ibid).

Agriculture and Village Economy

Agriculture still plays the dominant role in the village economy of the Mishings. But agricultural development is very slow. Besides recurring floods and absence of facilities for winter cultivation, small landholding is also an important factor for slow developmental growth in agriculture. Again, the operational holding in the areas with high tribal population is very small. It accounts for the very low level of income of the tribal people. Uneconomic holding, extreme dependence on agriculture, underemployment, chronic indebtedness and participation by a small fragment of

population in the secondary sector creates poverty amongst the Mishing (Bordoloi 1987).

The Mishings are habituated to settled cultivation. *Ahu* cultivation occupies an important place among the Mishings. *Ahu* is widely grown by the Mishings. The Mishings also cultivate mustard seeds, potatoes, pulses, bananas etc. Now-a-days, *Sali* paddy cultivation has also become popular among the Mishing (Bordoloi 1987).

The Mishing women also contribute a great deal towards enhancing family income. The Mishing women are industrious and work side by side with their menfolk in field and forests. Thus, they not only contribute to the family income but also develop an independent spirit. The contribution of women towards the economy is of great importance. They weave, spin, rear silk worms for thread and thus look to the clothing needs of the members of the family. They rear pigs, fowls, etc. which are a great source of income. In fact, the Mishing women contribute a lot towards the betterment of the economic life of their families and thereby the economy of the society (Ibid).

HOUSE TYPE

Generally the Mishing village consists of 10 to 100 or more household, built on bamboo platforms. They generally build their houses haphazardly within the village area and to a certain extent perpendicular to the river flow if the villages are situated on the bank of a river. It may be made of wood or bamboo. On the stilts they form the floor with the matc of thick bamboo splits. The complete houses are usually about 40 ft. to 100 ft. in length and 10 ft. to 15 ft. in breadth. The main items for the construction of a house are wood, bamboo and thatch (Mipun 1993).

A house is not divided into different rooms. There are only two doors in the house, one in the front and other in the back. Windows are not found. One *verandah* is constructed in the front where there is a ladder leading from the front to the ground and another *verandah* is in the back. The fire place situated in the middle of the house is noticeable. Several fire places are found in a house, which depends upon the size of the household. The fire place is constructed by fixing wooden trays in gaps covering them with the earth. Over the hearth hangs a three-tiered bamboo shelf, which is used to dry firewood, meat, fish and other items. In the upper side of the house, parallel to the fire

place, the head of the family sits and the lower side is generally occupied by the females. The fire place is important because it makes the division of the house. The upper side of the fire place is called *rising* and the lower side is named *koktok*. They sleep in the upper side of the house (Ibid).

OCCUPATIONS

The Mishings are agriculturists and their economic structure is essentially based on agricultural productions. The main agricultural products are rice, mustard, jute, potatoes and some other vegetables. Originally they used to produce these crops only for domestic consumption but, now a days, rice and mustard seeds are produced for commercial purposes also (Bordoloi, Sarmathakur & Saikia (1987).

HEALTH PRACTICES

The Mishings followed certain health practices of their own. The traditional notion about disease of the people is that there are unknown spirits behind all kinds of diseases making them suffer. They worship their ancestors with worships like *Dabur, Dotgang, Urom Apin*, etc. for the prevention of unknown diseases (Mipun 1993).

In sum, the Mishings have a well-organized social structure with tribal characteristics. From the point of view of folklores and folk songs, the Mishings are very rich. They have their traditional health care practices and observe certain *pujas* for prevention of unknown diseases. Of late, as they are living with the non-tribal Assamese for many centuries, changes have naturally been taking place in their tribal social structure.