

# Folk Culture of The Misings of Assam

— Tradition and Change —

*Ashok Sarma*

The book cover features a central photograph of an elderly Mising man and woman. The man, on the left, is wearing a vibrant orange vest with intricate patterns and a white and pink striped shawl. The woman, on the right, is wearing a white top and a purple and pink beaded necklace. They are surrounded by various traditional woven items, including baskets and pottery, set against a warm, textured background.

Folk Culture of  
The Misings of Assam

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Ashok Sarma

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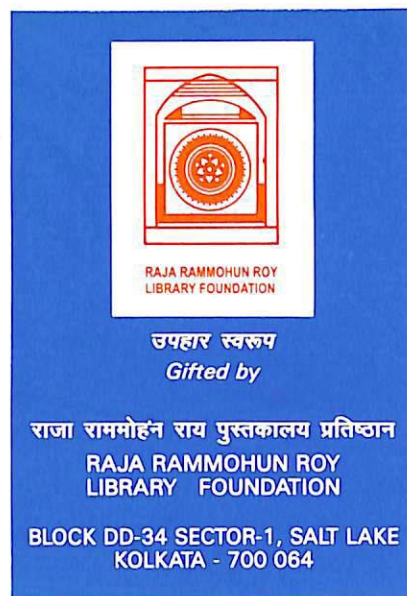
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## Preface

EVERY ethnic group of Assam is culturally rich and the cultural items of each group are quite distinct. The Mising, a well-known community of Mongoloid stock linguistically belonging to the Indo-Tibeto-Burman language family is an important ethnic group of Assam. The Misings are riverine people and their culture, particularly folklore is distinct and colourful.

I am fascinated to take up a cultural study of the Mising tribe of Assam as I have been closely associated with them since my childhood. In the rapidly changing world their culture, however, rigorous and colourful, gradually gives away before the impact of modernity.

In this research work, I have tried my best to give a true picture of the folk culture of the Misings which are still existing in the area of my study. The purpose of the study is to focus the artistic skills of the tribal folk, their love for the traditions and the trend of change in the society.

I express my profound sense of gratitude to my reverend teacher Dr. N.C. Sarma, Retd. Head of Dept. of Folklore Research Gauhati University for giving me a chance to work in this field of study. His parent-like guidance and constant encouragement in preparation of this research has enabled me to overcome many difficulties.

In the course of investigation and collection of information for this work, I got the opportunity to visit a number of Mising villages of upper Assam. The people of these villages were kind enough to furnish the required information. I express my deep sense of gratitude to them.

I am thankful to the staff of K.K. Handique Library of Gauhati University; the District Library of Jorhat and the Assam Institute of Research for S.C. and S.T.

Khanapara for their co-operation in consulting various relevant books in their libraries.

I wish to express my gratitude to all those scholars whose works have been a source of inspiration to me.

I shall be happy if I could make a small contribution to the knowledge of the existing folk culture of the area which has been neglected despite its growing importance and relevance in national integration.

I sincerely believe that the study will definitely help folklorists, anthropologists, administrators, planners and general readers.

**14 April, 2004**

**Ashok Sarma**

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	v
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Land and People of the study	1
Mineral resource	1
Climate	2
Flora and Fauna	2
People of the study	2
Aim of the study	3
Scope of the study	3
Objective and significant of the study	4
Methodology of the study	5
Organization of the study	6
<b>2. The Misings of Assam: An Introductory Survey</b>	<b>8</b>
Habitat and geographical distribution	8
Origin of the word Miri and Mising	9
Migration	10
Legends related Migration	
Clans and sub-clans (opin)	12
Customs relating to clan organization	13
Society	14
Family – Position of the women folk in socio-economic life	16
Kinship	16
Obligation and respects	
Marriage	18
Marriage Process – <i>Dugla-lanam</i> form of marriage – Socio-economic role of <i>Dugla-lanam</i> form of marriage – Dowry and bride price	

- Pre-marital relationship	
Birth, Childhood and puberty customs	20
Tending children	
Food restrictions and feeding to the new born	
Laws of inheritance	21
Adoption	22
Right of the minor	22
Funeral customs	23
Funeral rights for women died in child bed - Purification of the family	
Religion, ritual and festivals	24
Festival circle	
Folk literature and performing arts of the Misings	28
Economy of the Misings	
Contribution of the Misings to the Culture of Assam	
<b>3. Material Culture and its Classifications</b>	<b>32</b>
Material culture	32
Classification of Material culture	33
Folk Art - Folk craft - Folk costume - Folk cookery - Folk architecture	
<b>4. Folk Art of the Misings</b>	<b>46</b>
Folk Art	46
Folk art of the Misings	46
Decorative folk art	47
Art in ornaments - Art in dress and decorative clothes - <i>Mimang</i> or <i>Chanaky</i> for loom embroidery - Decorative art other than dress items	
Use of colour in art	54
Colour use in art forms of embroidery	
Ritualistic folk art of the Misings	57
Ritual art related to <i>Ali-aya-ligang</i> - Art related to <i>Chang bihu</i> - Art related to <i>Dobory Paja</i>	
<b>5. Folk Craft of the Misings</b>	<b>59</b>
Folk Craft	
Cane and Bamboo works	60
Process of manufacturing	
Process of weaving basketry	62
Check or plane weave - Twill method - Irregular twill method - Hexagonal technique - Coil Work - Process of weaving coiled basket - Angular pattern - Twined method	
Design	68

Finishing step	69
Cane basket	69
Cane furniture	
Study of some specimens	
Carrying baskets	73
Fishing traps	
Dyeing of baskets	75
Basketry in social sphere	76
Handloom weaving	76
Types of looms - Name and dimension of various parts of a loom	
Technique of production in a loom	85
Warping - Inserting a reed - Centering the warp in the reed - Arrange of Boo - Preparing the weft - Use of bobbin winder - Looming - Weaving to a rhythm	
Silk works	88
Weaving silk cloth	
Weaving of colourful designs	89
The rain drop pattern - The zig-zag or "V" shaped pattern - Diamond pattern - Weaving of diamond pattern with twill fashion - The honey suckle pattern - Combination of all the patterns	
Salient features of Mising textile	90
Shawl weaving	91
Embroidery	92
Kurusa embroidery - Frame embroidery - Loom embroidery - Strings and knitting works - Dyeing or colouring	
Wood carving	94
Wood working tools - Sharping of tools - Technique of production - Painting and burnishing	
Some wood works of the folk carpenters	100
Making of boats - Cart making - Door making	
Pottery - the craft of clay	102
Manufacturing techniques	
Metal works	106
Some iron implements of the Misings	
Jute products	110
Mat weaving	110
Traditional musical instruments of the Misings	112
<b>6. Folk Architecture of the Misings</b>	<b>114</b>
Introduction to Folk Architecture	114





The village structure	114
Classification of Architecture	116
The housing process	116
Selection of site – Material use for construction – A typical house	
The foundation and platform – Posts and cross bars – Front portion –	
Entrance to the house — The “Yapog” – Division of the house	
– Fire place, <i>Moiram</i> or <i>Mcram</i> – Construction of the fire place	
Size of the house	124
Direction of the house	125
Granary	125
Cowshed	125
Latrine	125
Variations	125
Recreational Architecture	126
Religious Architecture	126
Some case studies relation to the house construction and settlement patterns	127
Case study 1 – Case study 2	
<b>7. Folk Cookery of the Misings</b>	<b>133</b>
Food Production	134
Rice ( <i>Apin</i> ) — The staple food	136
Curry ( <i>Oying</i> )	139
The vegetable fruit group	141
The pulse group of curry	145
Meat group of curry ( <i>Ading Oying</i> )	146
Fish group	146
Egg group	148
Food during festival	148
Preparation of <i>Apong</i>	149
Role of <i>Apong</i> in life	150
Food preservation process	150
Traditional process of salt preparation	152
Food for sick person	152
Food prohibition, <i>Ganna</i>	153
<b>8. Folk Costumes of the Misings</b>	<b>154</b>
Male dress	155

<i>Contents</i>	xi
Female dress	156
Winter dress – Taboo in dress – Dress of a dead body	
Headgear and hair style of the women-folk	157
Coiffeur of the men-folk – Hair care	
Ornaments	161
Ear ornaments – Neck ornaments	
Tattooing and body painting	166
Utility articles worn with dress	168
Cosmetic and perfumes	168
<b>9. Tradition and Change of the Material Culture of the Misings</b>	<b>170</b>
Tradition and change	170
Change brought in art and craft – Change in folk architecture of the Misings	
Trends of settlement	176
Change in folk costumes of the Misings – Change in folk cookery of the Misings	
Change brought into the agriculture	179
Change in communication medium and transport	181
<b>10. Summary and Conclusion</b>	<b>182</b>
<i>Illustrations</i>	189
<i>Glossary</i>	213
<i>Bibliography</i>	219
<i>Index</i>	223

# Chapter

## 1

### Introduction

#### **Land and the People of the Study**

ASSAM is one of the States of Indian sub-continent and is located in the north-east corner of the country. It extends from 24° N to 28° N latitude and 49.8° E to 96° E longitude. Assam is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the north; Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram on the south; Manipur, Nagaland in the east and West Bengal, Meghalaya and Bangladesh on the west. Topographically it can be divided into three distinct zones, namely: the Brahmaputra Valley in the north; the Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills in the middle and the Barak Valley in the south. The long and narrow Brahmaputra Valley stretches across the state from east to west. The plain zone is starting from the Tinsukia and Dhamaji districts in the east to the Goalpara in the west covering the vast area of 56194 km<sup>2</sup>.

The Barak Valley lies on the southern side and it is fertilized by the river Barak and its tributaries. It covers an area of 6922 km<sup>2</sup>.

In between the two valleys, there lies the Karbi plateau and the North Cachar Hills. The average height of this plateau is 300 to 400 m. The highest peak is known as Singhasana which is about 1360 m. This two hill districts covering an area of 15322 km<sup>2</sup>. The soil of the two valleys is alluvial and the hill areas are red and acidic. The total area of the State is 78,438 km<sup>2</sup>.

#### **Mineral Resources**

Petroleum, natural gas, coal and lime stone are the important mineral resources of the state. Assam possesses valuable deposits of coal and iron and smelting of these ores has been an important industry. Earth quakes are also of frequent occurrence of this region.

**Climate**

Assam has a tropical climate. The monsoon starts here generally from mid-May and continues up to September. The winter season begins from the mid-October and continues up to the month of March. The summer days are quite hot while the winter days are sufficiently cool. Humidity is high in summer season than the winter. Annual rainfall is from 40" to 60" (100-50 cm). Most of the rainfalls pours down during the four months from June to September and the rain during April to May is rather low. Strong winds blow from the south-west during February and March.

**Flora and Fauna**

Assam is known for her rich forest wealth with varieties of flora and fauna. Sub-tropical evergreen forests are found in the whole region. The total area under forest in Assam was 21.52 lakh Ha. at the end of March, 1994, out of which area under reserved forests was 17.58 lakh Ha. Thus the area under reserve forest constitute about 22.40 per cent of the total geographical area of Assam.<sup>1</sup> In the early decades of the twentieth century, there was much denudation of forests. In these forest zones grows enormous number of vegetation species. Timber, bamboo, cane, grass, gum, lac and medicinal herbs are such forest products. The soil of the state is suitable for growing cotton, silk, coffee, sugar cane and tea. Like the flora, the deeply wooded terrains of Assam are no less rich in fauna. One of the most attractive feature of the State's forest sector is its colourful wildlife comprising variety of animals, birds and fishes. Some of the species found in the State are either exclusive to her or are rarely to be seen in any other part of the country. In this connection mention may be made of species like the hoolock gibbon, the stump-tailed macaque, the golden langur monkeys, the pigmy hog, the clouded leopard, the golden cat, the white-winged wood-duck, etc. Among the greatest varieties of wildlife, one horned rhinoceros, tiger, wild elephant, sambur, bear, barking deer, leopard, wild elephant, smbur, bear, barking deer, leopard, wild buffalo, musk deer, wild goat etc., are common. During the winter season, the region also receives visits by migratory birds from the Northern Asia.

**People of the Study**

Assam has a very ancient civilization. Situated in "one of the great migration routes of mankind" the region of north-east India, ones forming the greatest State

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1. Director of Economic and Statistics, *Assam — Economic Survey*, Assam, 1996-97, p. 24.

of Assam, forms a museum of races. People of different races and cultures have come to this part of the country and contributed to the formation and enrichment of the local culture throughout the centuries.<sup>2</sup> Assam is a meeting point of colourful tribes consisting of both hills and plains tribes having different ethnic and linguistic background. Among the plain tribes of the region, the Misings occupied a significant position, being the second largest group with a population of 259,551 as recorded in 1971 census. In remote past, eastern part of the sub-Himālayan range of mountainous region especially the Siang Valley of present Arunachal Pradesh was the homeland of the Misings. The Misings were formerly referred to as Miri in religious scriptures, ethnographies. Ahom chronicles and government records till very recent times. They have been living mostly along the banks of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries for which they are called riverine people. They now spread over wide range of the plains of Assam and are found in the districts of north Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Sonitpur and Tinsukia. These districts are situated on the eastern part of Assam bounded by Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland.

The Misings belong to the Tibeto-Burman language speaking group of the great Mongoloids. They present very attractive varieties of material culture, such as spinning, weaving, basketry, cane and wood works which have been known to the tribe for quite a long time. The Mising people of the region have an excellent taste in colour and remarkable skill in diverging patterns. Their handiworks show high standard of technical perfection. They are self-sufficient for centuries with their home products. It is seen that the Mising folk is gradually assimilating themselves with other indigenous people of the plains of Assam and their culture.

### **Aim of the Study**

The Misings of the plains of Assam carried some distinctive artistic skills in making their useful articles, art, craft, costumes, cookery and architecture. But no systematic study or research has been done on this topic.

The aim of the present study is to collect elaborate data on the material culture of the Mising society. Moreover, the present study attempts to analyse the changes in the field of material culture due to various factors.

### **Scope of the Study**

The present study is confined only to the systematic study of the material culture

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2. D. Nath, "The Misings in the History of Assam" in the *MTHC*, ed. J.J Kuli, p. 1.

of the Mising people of Assam. This study includes various aspects of material culture of the Misings, such as folk art, folk craft, folk architecture and folk cookery. The study has tried to show that the Mising people are expert in both folk craft and folk art. Besides they give more emphasis on the pleasure giving aspects in the context of folk art. The Mising weavers can weave artistic ideas in their various designs of clothes. The women folk may show their distinctiveness in this respect. Furthermore the building process and style of various houses founded in the field seemed to be significant since such types of houses are rare among other tribes of Assam.

The various dimensions of the material culture of the Mising including their raw materials, making processes, style of those artefacts, their domestic utility and their aesthetic appeal have fully been discussed keeping in view the historical and comparative aspects of the topic. As such the study is based on the historical and comparative methods.

Emphasis has been given to the changes that have taken place in various aspects of material culture of the villager's life.

### **Objectives and significance of the Study**

The importance of the study of material culture of the Misings of Assam is great from the point of view of both Assam and India. Such study will reveal truth and provide historic continuity, cultural progress, skill and needs of the folk. The Mising folk culture is a part and parcel of the Mongoloid culture which has influenced to some extent the indo-Aryan culture and vice versa. So the folklore studies may help to strengthen a cultural relationship between the tribal and non-tribal forms of the region. Thus the scientific study and analysis will also pave the way for national development and emotional integration in our independent India.

There is also potential dynamism in folklore. The traditional life and folk culture are being eroded day by day due to the advancement of modernity and urbanization. Folklorists have always been warning that folklore items are disappearing without leaving any trace behind. This warning is relevant to material culture of the Misings also. A scientific study of the cultural heritage and socio-economic conditions is an imperative necessity with a view to formulating plans and programmes for the future development of the community.

## **Methodology of the Study**

### INTERVIEW METHOD

I have met a number of representatives of the villages belonging to the area under investigation. The purpose of this interview is two-fold: (i) Securing certain information on the subjects under study, and (ii) to obtain in picture of present position, appreciation and transition of folk material culture.

### PARTICIPATION METHOD

During my field survey, I have met some of the folk artisans personally for first hand knowledge of the subject.

I hope the oral introduction of the village folk. Photographs of the specimens, observation of the working process of the folk artisans have certainly helped me in studying their material culture.

### LITERARY WORKS

I have essentially applied the method of descriptive analysis which is elaborately exemplified in a good number of books written by the folklorists and social scientists.

I also take the help of a number of selected published journals, gazetteers, census reports, bulletins and a good number of research papers on different aspects of folk culture.

### INFORMATION FROM THE INFORMANTS

I have kept constant connection with my chief informants.

I have tried my best to present a true and authentic description of the folk material culture of the Misings of Assam with my available equipments in the light of the knowledge gathered from fieldworks as well as theoretical training. As there is no written history of the Misings and their culture therefore most of the information is taken from the widely prevalent oral history.

The designs on craft works, housing, cooking and artistic works are described here with personal observations during the field study.

## **Fieldwork**

With a view to getting an indepth insight in the material culture at micro level, field study has been carried out in twelve Mising villages located in five different districts of Assam. The following villages are chosen for intensive survey.

Sl. No.	Name of the village	District	Total families
1.	Bahphala village	Jorhat	120
2.	Gondhia Mising Gaon	Jorhat	72
3.	Bodoti Dohghoria Gaon	Lakhimpur	40
4.	Bokakhat Bohikhowa	Golaghat	65
5.	Jengrai Mukh	Jorhat (Majuli)	
6.	Ratanpur	Jorhat (Majuli)	65
7.	Kamalabari Dhopak Gaon	Jorhat (Majuli)	47
8.	Dikhowmukh Jan Missing Borgaon	Sibsagar	35
9.	Jonai	Dhemaji	100
10.	Gogamukh	Dhemaji	100
11.	Vekuri Chapori (Dehing Mukh)	Sibsagar	60
12.	Disangmukh	Sibsagar	55

#### CASE STUDIES

Some case studies are taken to provide concrete examples in suitable fields that are practised in contemporary Mising society.

Apart from these techniques a camera was used during the fieldwork to illustrate the specimens.

#### Organization of the Study

The study is divided into ten chapters.

In the introductory chapter a short description of geography, land and people, their history, aim, scope and methodology of the study is given.

The second chapter deals with an introduction of the Mising tribe of Assam—their origin, migration, clans, religion and festivals, marriage, birth and death rites, laws of inheritance, dialect, folk literature and economic profile.

The third chapter deals with a general study of material culture and its classification. It is a general discussion of physical folklore (material culture).

The fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth chapters discuss the folk art, folk architecture, folk cookery and folk costumes of the Misings of Assam respectively.



Chapter 9 is related to the trends of change in various fields of material culture of the Mising folk in recent years. This chapter envisages the recent changes taking place due to the impact of urbanization and modernization on the Mising society of Assam.

The conclusion drawn on the study has been presented in chapter 10.



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