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THE MISHING OF ASSAM- A QUESTION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

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Abstract:-

Assam is situated in the northeast part of the country. The north eastern region is comprises with eight states of north east part and Assam is its nerve centre. Tribal situation of Assam is in critical juncture because of different identity assertions of ethnic and tribal groups .Mishings are the second largest group of a scheduled tribes in Assam. They have their own distinctive identity. There are lots of basic causes of identity crisis of Mishings of Assam. This paper attempt to highlight the several issues of identity crisis among the Mishings in Assam in particular and the tribes of Assam in general.

Keywords: Mishng, Ethnicity, Identity

Introduction :-

The North East India comprising the eight states (formerly seven sisters) of India's North Eastern part namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim are predominantly inhabited by the tribal people both in hills and plains areas. Assam is the nerve centre of North Eastern region of India. Tribes are spread all over the districts of Assam. In this state, more than two thirds of the tribes are living in plains. The Bodos and Mishng are numerically two strong tribes in the state of Assam.

The tribal situation of Assam and North East India (NEI) are different from other parts of the country. Due to its unique geo-political and historical background, the region faced separate tribal situation. The tribal area as a whole is backward and remain isolated from the modern civilised society. The tribal situation was turned to separate direction during the time of British colonial rule. Due to its strategic location and with a view to the check entry of people into this area the British followed a separate policy. They declared most of the tribal inhabited area as "Backward track," Under the government of India Act, 1935 gave up the terminology of "Backward Tracks" instead described the areas as Excluded Areas" and partially Excluded Areas".

In pre-colonial Assam, there was no problem of language, polity or other types of socio-cultural problems. These are developed as a sensitive issue only in colonial Assam. In this state, several groups of mankind like entered from time to time during the long course of her history. Each group have their own culture, very interestingly, it can be mentioned that having their differences, all of them contributed their respective share towards the growth and development of greater Assamese society. During the British rule, this process was break down and several tribal groups became conscious of maintaining their distinct identity. For example, the language started moving from culture to political area and becoming an issue of conflict during this period . The colonialisation not only created the problem, it also became the adjudicator of the problem.

Identification of one self with a group or organisation is a universal human phenomenon. Identity relates with some natural benefit, social-political interest or some times on psychological satisfaction. “More importantly, an individual or a group may have more than one identity i.e multiple identity and its strength depends on the interest with which the individual identifies with values “(Barath,F 1969)

In Assam, identity assertions of various tribal or ethic groups have been articulated through religion, language, culture, region, race and other such type of issues. The tribal groups of this state are going to pressure either for the creation of separate and autonomous state on the basis of their socio cultural identities.

The Mishings of Assam

With this brief idea of the concept of tribal identity in mind this paper on attempts has been made to focus on the issue related to the identity consciousness of the Mishings of Assam. The Mishings are the second largest group of scheduled Tribes in Assam with their distinctive identity. They are mainly concentrated in the reverine areas of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. They are ethnically and linguistically belong to Tibeto-Burman groups. Originally there was no tribe like ‘Miri’ or ‘Mishing’ in Assam. They have been migrated from hills of Arunachal Pradesh. Delton (1978) remarked, ‘The Miri of the plains are offshoot from the Abors (now Adis) of present day Arunachal Pradesh. Though there are no written historical records of their own, the Mishings always believed that their downward move from the foot hills was initiated by the repugnant relation that grow between the Mishings and Pasi Minyongs (a section of the Adis) and partly by an urgency of more cultivable land. This mass migration must have occurred more than three hundred years ago before the arrival of Britishers in Assam”

Though Mishing people lived in various places of Assam, traditionally they lived river side of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries with a chang garh. They are basically agriculturist and they produced ‘Ahu’ paddy in their field. Most of the Mishing households prepare ‘Apong’ (rice beer) and this type of wine is regarded most prestigious in case of religious festivals as well as entertaining guests. There are many exogamous clan in the Mishing society such as Doley, Pegu, Taye, Kaman, Kutum, Regon, Bori, Kuli, Pamegam etc. The Mishing women are must hard worker than the male folk. They are involved not only household works but heartily busy with agricultural field also. Every Mishing women is an expert weaver and they produced different colourful cloths for al the members of family.

Objectives :- With the brief idea of the concept of tribal identity, the present paper is focus on the issues related to identity consciousness of Mishing tribe on particular and overall tribal identity situation of Assam. The basic objectives of the paper are :-

- i) To analysis the socio-economic situation of tribes of Assam in general and the Mishing in particular.
- ii) To find out the basic causes of identity crisis of Mishings of Assam.
- iii) To explore the consequences of identity crisis among the Mishings of Assam in particular and the tribes of Assam in general.

Methodology :-

The methodology used in this paper is analytical. The important inputs for the study are collected from experts, leaders, local people of the tribe and related secondary facts are collected from different journals, published books, news papers etc.

Major findings and Discussion :-

Socio-Economic situation of Tribal People of Assam-

The total tribal populations of Assam was 33,08,570 (2001) and these people are found in all districts of Assam. The major tribal groups each of whom has more than one lakh population are Bodo, Mishing, Karbi, Santali, Garo and Rabha in order to size of population. Some of the tribal groups like Dimasa (more than 8 thousand population) group and Tiwa (originally known as Lalung) who have more than 40 thousand population centralised only in Darrang and Morigaon districts.

Apart from these groups some other main tribes of Assam are Bodo, Kachari, Sonwal Kachari phakial etc. There are some other main tribes who are mainly migrated from other parts of North East and different corner of the country. The North East migrated tribes are chakara, Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Kuki, Mizo, some Naga tribes , Lakhe, Hmar, Pawi etc. The other tribes who have come from for employment, mainly in tea gardens, from North Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Sikkim are Lepcha, Bhutia, Munda, Oraon, Santal, Bhil etc. There are some other ethnic groups of Assam who have enlisted in other or more other Backward (OBC/MOBC) categories. The Mongologid origin these groups are Ahom, Chutiya, Moran, Tai-Phake, Aiton, Turning, Duonia, Koch, Rajbanshi, Choudang, Moran, Matak etc. Six groups of the above are going to long time fight for ST recognition. Every tribal group has their own distinct socio-economic features, they have self identity in their language, culture, custom, traditions and own economic structure. Though, most of them are agriculturist, there have own agriculture pattern and traditional occupation.

The Mishings is the colourful tribal group and they maintain their traditional socio-cultural traits in spite of changing situation of the modern society. They are very simple and peaceful tribe and also avoid any evil practices. Originally they were animistic. Due to the influence of Sri Sri Sankardeva, they are attracted to devotion of vaishnavism in Assam. But they performed their own festivals and using customs of Mishing tribes. Their dances are called paksong or soman and bear great similarity with Bihu dances of Assam. The Mishings songs also known as Nitom. It has three major types as Aku,oi and Anu Nitone. Oi-Nitone are traditional and historical song and Anu Nitom are contemporary love songs and also used modern musical instrument.

The Mishing women are expert weaver and they produced different colourful cloths for all the members of family. 'Mibi Galuk' (traditional Mishing male cover coat), Gaseng (self-woven lion cloth using by females) RibiGaseng (beautiful shawls used in winter season) are the famous Mishing handloom cloths all over the North East India.

Question of Tribal Identity –

The question of tribal or ethnic identity is not raised suddenly or once a time or due to one factor. There have a long past and multi-dimensional factors regarding the issue of identity of tribal people in Assam and entire North East India. Traditionally Assamese caste Hindu elite who had held important positions in the bureaucracy even during the Ahom rule. Due to the upper caste status and economic upliftment the Assamese caste Hindu elite played dominance role in social, political, cultural fields.

The role of tribal people were negligible one. During the British colonial rule tribal people couldnot get any meaningful benefit from their administration. So these mongoloid tribals become backward educationally socially economically and even politically . It thus appears that the strategic location, backwardness, relative isolation from the political and cultural influences from the mainland spread of early Christianity and largest concentration of tribal are some of the factors which led to the development of a separate identity of the tribal inhabiting in the North East Region (NER) of the country . Though the Mishings were original inhabitation in this region and have separate entity , the educated Mishings had created among themselves a sense of self assertions and cultural identification . Some of the issues of identity of Mishings which raised gradually among them are analyzed below :-

1 Issue of religion and identity

The Mishings are economically poor and their social status is not so prestigious among the so called Assamese people . Due to various causes, such as process of assimilation, modernisation led to lost of their original tribal identity, During the colonial period when the tribes likes khasis, Nagas, Kukis, Mishing etc adopted Hindu rituals and their ways of life have become purity. The Mishing were originally followers of the 'Donyi polo' faith which based on the belief of supernaturalism and animism. Following the Vaishnavite movement in Assam, a major section of the Mishing accepted vaishnavism. A small section of people came under the influence of the Christian Missionaries and eventually embraced Christianity. Though vaishnavism profess equality of all people, but in practice as the Mishing subsequently for behind what was intended by Sri Sankardeva. They have never enjoyed an equal status in the religious sphere. A small number of people after Christianity totally lost their own religious identity. Even their own customs and taboos has redefined. The traditional structure of the Mishing identity is more disruption, especially self- identity regarding rituals, religious base agricultural, social festivals, formation of the new endogenous unit within the tribe etc. This type of situation raising chaos in their identity formation.

ii. Issue of Language and Identity

“In pre-colonial Assam, there was no problem of language which became a sensitive issue only in colonial Assam. The language started moving from culture to political arena and becoming an issue of conflict even between speakers of two sister languages in Assam. The colonialism not only created the problem, it also became the adjudicator of the problem. In fact, linguistic affinity transformed into identity, as a part of one’s political consciousness” (Phukon, G, 2003) The Mishings are using the Assamese language as their medium of communication with other non-Mishing people. But they are using Mishing dialect among themselves. The educated Mishings deeply felt the need of their own language for asserting identity. So, the educated Mishings formed an organisation named “Mishing Agom Kebang” (Mishing Sahitya Sabha) in 1967 with the objectives of developing their dialect to written language by adopting a script and creating literature in the language. The Mishings students’ organisation (Takem Mishing parin kebang, 1978) also added strength from their side to develop their own language. The government of Assam accepted their long standing demand and since 1987 introduced the Mishing language as a subject of study in primary schools of the Mishing dominated areas of the state. Now, the Mishing language has been gradually developed and it encourages them to assert their existence with distinct cultural pattern and linguistic identities.

iii. Issue of Socio-economic situation and question of identity:-

Some problems of Mishings are similar with the problems of other tribes of the country. Extreme poverty and backwardness in every aspect have led the community to analyse their situation. Generally, it is seen that the political leaders, bureaucrats not only from the outside the group, but within the group also exploited the simple minded poor Mishings of the remote areas. The whole picture was very disturbing among the mass people of Mishings. The Mishings inhabitated are affected by flood every year. They suffer from acute scarcity of agricultural lands as the lands are sited by the surging water of the river Brahmaputra and other tributaries. Erosion of their lands is a regular phenomenon. They could not maintain their culture and rituals relating to agriculture.

When we interact with many Mishing leaders and educated persons in the Mishing villages it was found a very significant findings from their views and comments. From their comments it has been seen that the Mishings of remote areas were exploited from some non-Mishings and even from Mishing political leaders also. They have lost their land property. They know the mal-practices of different development activities. Now the present generation of Mishings are educated and conscious for their own position and traditional culture based value pattern. Therefore, solidarity developed under the several organisational banner. They are now, search for their rights and identity.

v. Issue of polity and separate identity

Many tribal people feel it that the political power under the dominant section of the Assamese people restrict the scope of the aspirations and efforts for development. So the emerging educated elite of the tribal groups try to establish political power. To fulfil this purpose, some of them started forming certain political platform “The ethnic (tribal) assertion in this region are mostly linguistic and culture in nature. In a bid to maintain distinct lingo-cultural identity, most of the ethnic groups of this region have been demanding either autonomous or separate states and their demand have been conceded creating new states from the original state of Assam. But the demand for either separate

or autonomous states on the basis of ethnic identity has not ended yet. Thus the ethnicism continues to be a major factor in moulding the nature of politics of the North East” (phukon, G 2003)

When the study of tribal movement in North East India we find out that the first step of this movement is to assert the identity around certain social problem. The second step concretises the identity by forming an ethnic association. Thirdly, process for a separate administrative arrangement and they concern to preserve their cultural heritage, language etc. Lastly, demand a separate administrative unit comprising the areas where the ethno cultural groups forms a majority. The Mishing ethnic assertion started when the organisation of Mishing Bane Kebang formed in 1942. The other organisation like Takam Mishing Porin Kebang (Asom Mishing students union) also started agitation and they demand to complete autonomy for the community. Their demand for autonomy transformed into mass movement.

After long discussion with the leaders of different organisation, the government of Assam passed a bill in the Assam Legislative Assembly to give effect to memorandum of settlement on 24th July, 1995, The Mishing autonomous council (MAC) became reality.

Although, having realized the long cherished dream of autonomy, the ordinary Mishings are far from being convinced that autonomy as it would not have any positive implications for it has enough scope for interference from the state government. Limited financial and executive power are also some of the major handicap which would effectively reduce the chances of reaching out to the poorest members of the community.

In reality there is a long way to go before it could be assured that the Mishing have achieved what they aspired for. It is also mentionable that many of the leaders of MAC are corrupted and the mass of poor Mishing people could not set actual benefit from the Autonomous council. Sometime conflict between Mishing and non-Mishing (Mipak) has been seen particular areas of Autonomous council.

iv. Migration and Ethnic Assertion in Assam- from the experiences of Mishing :-

From the very beginning of British colonial rule, there had been a continuous flow of migration into Assam. Many people came here from different parts of the country to search of occupation and occupied the tribal inhabitant cultivable land . The situation becomes more critical when a large number of Muslim migrants began to flow from over-populated East Bengal (Now Bangladesh) into Assam in search of land. Initially they occupied the char areas (plains of the river valley) then began to occupy the government land and encroached upon the grazing reserves. Since 1920 onwards they started encroaching the areas inhabited by the tribal. This situation is faced by the Mishings of Brahmaputra valley, who were lost the cultivable land and **deviated** the tribal economy. This type of migration and Bangladesh immigrant adversely affected the socio political life of the people. Many immigrant people settled in the Mishing belt and engaged in agriculture fields of valley areas. This situation leads to disequilibrium of various kinds of socio-economic life of the Mishing people. More over many non-tribal also occupy the government waste –land and even the bulk of reserved forests of the north of the Brahmaputra valley. Biruchan Doley, President of Tribal Belt and Blocks Liberation Moncha, Lakhimpur remarked, : “they (migrant carried children when they came and by now their population is multiplying in numbers resulting the situation in the areas explosive. In the extensive areas of North

Lakhimpur sub-mountainous tribal belts, the Muslim emigrants have made a base of strong hold deep into three Mouzas, namely Nowboicha, Laluk and Nakari so much so that village after village of the Adivashi tribal have gone under their conquest. As the situation is becoming not only alarming but also very explosive which may give rise to vexed problem of communal tension some they or other". (The Assam Tribune, 9th July, 1990)

Large scale migration into Assam and its affect on tribal belt will changed the demography composition of the tribal society. It brings threatens the tribal identity and ultimately manifests the demand for separate or autonomous state.

v. Issue of Modernization and Tribal Identity

Increasing assertion of tribal identity is a part of the overall process of social changes and modernisation of tribes. Due to development of transportation and communication system, the people who were in isolated areas are in connected with different communities. Rapid development of communication has brought communities closer to each other. The small tribal groups have come in closer contact with larger communities. They have started to assert political identity. It could be observed that the demand of autonomy by the Mishings were raised because of political movement of Bodos. Due to modernisation the people like Mishings also becoming conscious for their viable needs.

vi. Consequences of Identity crisis :-

One state of Assam divided into five parts were based upon the identity formation of different tribal groups of Assam. The state of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh were the part of 'Bor Asom'. Now, the Bodo tribes struggling from last four decades for separate Bodoland. The same situation raised from Koch Rajbanshi (demand for Kamatapur state), Ahom and several other tribes of Assam. Some Autonomous council developed due to the long standing demand of tribes of Mishings, Rabha, Kachari, etc. One of the most striking result of ethnic movement of Assam is the growth of sub-nationalism. It is generally assured that the politics of identity in the state has been posing a threat to the integration of the Assamese society. The large section of people are belong to different tribal or ethnic groups. the growth of more and deep ethnic and tribal sentiment in the name of district identity is detrimental to the progress and prosperity of Assam and the Assamese society.

The Mishings are the very peaceful tribe in Assam. They are not demanding separate for themselves. They are maintained a distinct culture of its own form the ancient time. They are also trying to assimilate with the greater Assamese society. They also try to preserved traditional dresses, weaving technology, folk dances, songs, rituals, dialects, food habit etc. The educated Mishings organisationally working for asserting their own Mishings identity on the basis of the culture and language in the forefront. It's observed that the Mishings have been more conscious regarding their cultural problems in the changing situation of the country and accordingly trying their best to maintain cultural identity.

Conclusion :-

Identity crisis among the tribal people in North East India emerging as a major problem. Several movement, agitation and also issue of insurgency raised

due to the separate identity of their tribal people. In the very recent past, a new situation has been emerging in the Mishing society in the attitude towards religion, culture, language and politics. The major section of the Mishing has been determined to preserve their distinct cultural identity in the face of 'Cultural invasion of Hinduism and Christianity. In the present time, they have not only tried to adjust their traditional institution and practices but also create a strong sense of cultural consciousness among the people. As a result of this sense of cultural protection a group of educated Mishing are really showing concern for the growth of their language , religion and distinct identity. For this, a harmonious and balanced understanding is the need of time in the society. The Mishing tribe is one of the groups of Assam which contributes to the formation of greater Assamese society with their own tribal identity.

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