



Exploring Colonial Construction of the *Mising* tribe

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Abstract: *The region of northeastern India forms a museum of divergent tribal groups known for their distinct culture and identity. Reconstruction of identity and cultural history of these tribes is a very complex task as they didn't have any written documents about their past but may have cultivated and preserved in living oral traditions. With the initiative of 19th century colonial constructions such as ethnographic and administrative accounts the oral traditions and culture of such tribes found expression in written form for the first time. But as discussed in Edward Said's(1979) Post-Colonial critique the western academia did not allow the colonized to speak for them and history writing becomes an oppressive power struggle. The politics of knowledge and text can be seen in colonial ethnographic accounts and administrative documents through which they essentialized the history and identity of tribes in order to impose colonial modernity. In this context the essentialization, objectification and stereotype behavior of colonial constructions towards the history and identity of the Mising1 tribe of northeast India can be contested by applying oral history as discourse. The idea of oral history is the practice of collecting, preserving, interpreting and shaping individual, social and collective experiences which transmitted down from one generation to another in the form of oral traditions. Oralhistorian, Poul Thomson(1978) argues that "the discovery of oral history by historian.....is not only a discovery but a recovery. It gives a future tied no longer tied to the cultural significance of paper documents...."In this way oral history becomes a very significance discourse in deconstructing colonial construction of the Mising tribe.*

Key Words: *Culture, identity, reconstruction, stereotype, oral history, knowledge.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The 19th century colonial constructions of identities were the widely debatable subject in study of tribes of northeast India which conceived a dominant position in the historiography of the region. Works composed by colonial ethnographers and administrative officers exposed the identity of northeast Indian tribes with different interests and compulsions which can be seen in the context of the *Misings* also. The *Misings* as depicted in the colonial constructions are mostly divorced from the objective and subjective conditions in the context politics of identity. The history of origin and migration of the tribe has still not arrived at a conclusive point as they didn't have any written documents of their earliest past. The colonial constructions produced divergent views regarding the history of origin and migration of the tribe. These views reflects that the history and identity of the tribe has been oppressed by the *politics of knowledge and text* in order to impose colonial modernity. In this context the colonial construction of the *Mising* tribe needed to deconstruct by applying oral history as discourse in order to reconstruct the historical past of the tribe from their own perspective.

2. OBJECTIVES:

The present paper can be justified by following objectives:

- To explore the colonial construction of the *Mising* tribe.
- To critically analyze the depiction of Mising tribe in the colonial construction.



3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The Misings as a preliterate community preserves their history in oral form not in written documents. However, preservation of different information regarding the past of Misings began during the colonial period as a part of the surveys and missions etc., of the British administrative officers, Christian Missionaries and European travelers. The colonial knowledge construction regarding the colonized communities mainly comprises the written documents produced by the British administrative officials, Christian Missionaries and European travelers etc. Information regarding the origin, migration, settlement, culture and tradition etc. of the Misings also seen to be appear in those knowledge constructions produced by the British administrative officers, Christian Missionaries and European travelers etc. As for example knowledge regarding the origin, migration, settlement, ethnicity etc. of the Misings are seen to be interpreted in the accounts of Sir John M. Cosh (1837), William Robinson (1841), A.J. Moffat Mills (1854), E.T. Dalton (1872), W.W. Hunter (1879), C.J. Lyall (1881), H.B. Rowney (1882), Alexander Mackenzie (1884), J.F. Neeham (1886), L.A. Wadell (1901), A. Hamilton (1912), E.A. Gait (1905) and G.A. Grierson (1909), etc. However, such colonial knowledge regarding the colonized communities were influenced by different European theories. Thus, the colonial knowledge constructions witnessed tremendous critique from the postcolonial scholars. As for example; in criticizing the colonial epistemology, Benard S. Cohn argued that the construction of ethnic communities by colonial ethnographers or anthropologists are part of the projects for establishing colonial supremacy and control. He argues that; law which appeared to favor indigenous influences, actually reactivated colonial notions about regulating a colonial society that rendered the “others”. His study constructs a compound analysis of the facts in which the colonial the colonial exploration, accumulation and classification of knowledge regarding the ethnic groups colonial cultural supremacy as well political jurisdiction. Concurring with such postcolonial critique, the Mising tribe as constructed in the colonial epistemology are not only explored but also critically analyzed in this study.

4. DISCUSSION:

Like many other ethnic groups of the world, the *Misings* lost their script and hence there is no written history about their origin, spread and cultural practices. It was the colonial constructions in which the history of the tribe has found expression in written form which diverted the identity of the tribe with various ways. In this way history of the *Misings* has been oppressed by the colonial constructions. The colonial constructions exonerates the *Misings* from being like other non *Mising* people. The colonial construction described the *Misings* with certain derogatory terms like barbarous, uncivilized and peculiar etc. which can be seen in the following examples.

Alexander Mackenzie and E.T. Dalton were the first colonial scholars who used the word, *Miri* in the late 19th century to denote Mising community. Alexander Mackenzie (1884) in his book, *History of the Relations of Government with the Hill Tribes of Northeast Frontier of Bengal* explored that ⁱⁱⁱ“the Abors and Miris coming originally from the same habitat are still so alike in all material respect as to warrant us in calling their earlier and late migration of the same tribe-the Abors as the last comers retaining more of their pristine savagery and hardihood, while the Miris have been to some extent influenced by free association with the plains and settled habits of civilization... and under the Assam Government the Miris acted, and they do now to some extent act, as the go between of the Abors and traders of Assam.” In his *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), E.T. Dalton mention, ⁱⁱⁱⁱ“For a long period under the Assam Government the Miris managed to keep themselves the entire trade between Assam and the Abors; an as being thus the only medium of communication between the two peoples, they obtained the name *Miri*, which means mediator or go between and is the same word as *Miria* or *Milia* used with the same signification in Orissa. Perhaps the ‘*Meriah*’ applied to the sacrifice of the *Khunds* is a cognate word, the *Meriah* being the messenger or mediator between man and the deity.” Subsequently, the scholars have drawn the conclusion that the meaning of the word ‘*Miri*’ is ‘go between’. Whatever may be the attempt to explain the meaning of the word ‘*Miri*’ but the existence of this word is a reality among the *Mising* community. However, the word ‘*Miri*’ has not been found in any dialect of the *Mising* language. Edward Gait (1905) also mentioned in his book, *A History of Assam* that the word ‘*Miri*’ means ‘middle man’ or ‘go between’. He had argued that the *Misings* worked as middle-men between hills and plains and carried out the business^{iv}. British Officer Col. F. Jenkins mentions in his letter to A.J.M Mill, dated the 4th June, 1853, about the tribe of Assam. He stated that ^v“*Miris* and *Abors* are kindred tribes and more or less intermixed in the hills extending from the present *Lakhimpur* to *Dibing*. The *Abor* generally occupy a jurisdiction over the latter whether in the hills or on the plains. From the Persecution of the *Abors* arising throughout Upper and Central Assam is small clans in the midst of jungle, mostly along the banks of the great rivers and their tributaries. The *Miris* near *Lakhimpur* are not mixed with the *Abors*, and the *Abors* beyond the *Dibang* and up to the *Dibong* are with the former exchanging the products of the plains for canoes and large timbers”. W.W. Hunter (1879) observed that the *Misings* are semi barbarous people whose original home appears to be the low hills of north of *Lakhimpur*, whence they spread in large number through upper Assam. Their language is similar to that of the



Adis and they are supposed to be an off-shoot of that tribe. Indeed, the Adis look upon the Misings as their dependents, and used to demand a heavy tribute from them, to escape which, the Misings migrated to the plains of Assam^{vi}.

As discussed above there are divergent views regarding the history and migration of the Misings produced by the colonial constructions. The colonial scholars used above pessimistic political connotations in order to hegemonize the history of the Misings. It is, therefore this paper explores the politics behind the texts that lead to deconstruct the colonial knowledge by study of Mising oral narratives. However, the colonial knowledge has also been apparently existed in post colonial period. The Assamese and Non Mising scholars were highly influenced by the colonial construction of Mising which has been reflected in their writings. The Misings were earlier known to most of the non-Misings as *Miri*. The use of 'Miri' by non Mising scholars is a derogatory. Such literature is abundantly available in the existing literature. The Assamese scholars and other non Mising scholars like Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Bhupen Hazarika, Rajani Kanta Bordoloi Lakshmi Devi, Gunaviram Boruah, P.T. Nair, used different pessimistic connotations in their literature but they all consider the Misings as 'Miri'. Lakshmi Devi (1968) is of the opinion that the term, *Miri* is derived for "the Miris acted as gobetweens of the Abors and traders of Assam" during the Ahom rule (1228-1826 A.D.). Gunaviram Boruah in his *Assam Buranji* (Reprinted-2008) mentioned that the word 'Miri' is derived from 'Mikir', 'Sukhamig' or 'Mokott'. P.T. Nair (1985) in his book, *The Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh* observed that the meaning of the word *Miri* is 'go-between on interpreter as they act as a channel of communication with the Abors of the hills'. Surprisingly, the Misings were regarded as 'Miri' by the Constitution of India (Scheduled Tribes) Order 1950. It seems the Constitution of India has been influenced by these hegemonic ideas created by the non-Mising scholars. Apart from above discussion about the origin of the 'Miri', the scholars also discussed about the migration of the Misings. They stated that original habitat of Sino-Tibetan speakers appears to have been north-western China covering the courses of the rivers Huang-Hu and Yang Tzse Keang. S.K. Chatterji (1974) asserted that migrations of Sino-Tibetan speakers of Central Chinese region towards south and west seemed to have begun in the early part of the first millennium B.C. Following the courses of the Brahmaputra, Sindwin, Irrawadi, Salwin, Mekong and Menam, and the mountain passes of Assam and Burma these people entered Assam and drove away its original Mon-Khmers into the different regions. Besides some parts in Nepal and Tibet, the new comers occupied regions of the Himalayan foothills of Assam and gradually extended even to the plains along the banks of the river Brahmaputra. P.C. Chaudhury (1987) asserted that their migration took place at different periods of history "most of them if not all, came after the intrusion of Aryan from the west." D. D. Nath (1998), an Assamese historian concludes that: ^{vii}"The Misings had their original habitat in north and the central China. As a matter of human migration; they gradually moved towards south and dividing themselves into various sections, entered in the northern and eastern hills of the Indian sub-continent as early as the Vedas or even earlier. They used to live in the hills till medieval times; but it was before neo-Vaishnava movement towards the plains and gradually became mixed up with the population of the plains". The scholars from Mising community like N.C. Pegu, T.C. Pamegam, Jatin Mipun have produced divergent views in order to contest the arguments presented by the Assamese & non Assamese literature and colonial ethnographers. The derogatory nature of literature towards the use of word, *Miri* has been countered by these scholars. The word, *Miri* has been portrayed in negative connotation in Assamese literature. For instance, some proverbs still prevalent in Assamese society that sounds derogatory like, "Tiri Miri Bhatou Kowa Ai Charir Asoy Nopuwa". This meaning is one should not trust upon Women, *Miri* (Misings), Parrot and Crow. Nomal Chandra Pegu (1947) stated that the *Misings* who had been inhabitants of Abor hills after their migration to the plains were employed by the Ahom kings as 'Dubhasi' or 'Duānia' meaning interpreter during their contact with the Abors. Keeping the Ahom tradition, the British rulers retained many of the leading *Miris* as *Dubhasi*, *Gām* or *Kotoki* to maintain a peaceful Hills-Plains relation. The unique position thus enjoyed by them at the beginning of the British rule brought to the focus of the English writers naturally and as such they struck a new meaning of the term *Miris* as 'go-between'... In 1956 he opined that the word 'Miri' is derived from the Tibetan word *Mi* (man) and *Ri* (mountain) meaning 'man of the mountain' and the term was used to denote all tribes coming down from Tibet and living north of Assam in the earlier centuries. This is possible because all these tribe belongs to Tibeto-Burman group. However, it has to be corroborated with use oral history. T. C. Pamegam (1989) has suggested that the word is derived from the combination of *Mi* (man) and *Āsi* (Water). It seems to have derived out of the nature of the community to reside by the riverside. However, this opinion is contested. One suggestion strongly put forward is that it is derived from the combination of *Mi* (man) and *Ānshing* (docile or peace loving). Another section stresses that, the term came from *Mi* (man) and *Yāshing* (fair complexioned, well behaved). Tai Nyori (1993) in his book *The History and culture of the Adis* (1993) states that the Adi people called them *Mising* to mean 'pure relatives' in contrast with the *Mipāk* (impure or outsider). But all these opinions are based on their own innovative theories and assumption and not based on historical data. Dimbeswar Doley (1998) also stated that ^{viii}"the migration of north Assam branch tribes have taken place during the middle period of the pre-history and the sixth century A.D. and their settlement in India has begun since before first century of the Christian



era. T.C Pamegam (1989) opines that the *Misings* were popular hunters and when they came down to the plains they mostly hunted down many deer or 'Mrig'. Therefore they are said to have been called as 'Mrigi' and from this word the term 'Miri' is said to have been derived. Jatin Mipun (1987) in his book, *The Mishings (Miris) of Assam: Development of a New Lifestyle* is of the opinion that, "the Abors of Arunachal Pradesh called their priest *Miri* or *Mirin*. It is probably the non-tribal people of Assam who called the tribe as *Miri* after they came in to contact with the priest."

The above arguments come from Mising scholars could not escape its own silences and selectivity and defiance of the presence of its own margin. It seems they were influenced by the colonial constructions and Assamese literature. The ideas produced by the non-Mising scholars also offer derogatory nature of the history and migration of the Misings. In this context oral history becomes a significance discourse for recovery of the history of Misings. For instance, one of the oral narrative comes from Misings speaks regarding the origin of the word, 'Mising'. It seems to be more convincing. It says that the *Mising* sprang up from *Se:di* and *Me:lo*. Out of *Se:di* and *Me:lo*'s conjugal effort *Dilling* was born, *Dilling* was survived by *Litung*, *Litung* by *Tuye*, *Tuye* by *Yepe* and *Yepe* was survived by *Pedong- Āne*. *Pedong Āne* gave birth to many sons viz. *Domi*, *Do-Pāng*, *Do-shing* and *Do-bāng*. From *Domi* sprang the *Minyongs*, from *Do-pāng* the *Padams*, from *Do-shing* the *Mising* and from *Dobāng* the *Gāllongs*. Since the *Mising* sprang out of *Doshing* therefore they are known by that name. One of such myths, the *A:bang* mythology of the Misings traces the origin of human evolution and its stages. Existence of spirits and deities which the Misings in different occasions are narrated through the *A:bangs*. *A:bangs* are of different types, such as *Mibu A:bang*, *Do:ying A:bang*, *Ni:tom A:bang*; etc. *Mibu*, the priest of Mising society is the only narrator of the *A:bang*. He performs or recites it in different occasions with different purposes. Songs such as *Doying Ni:tom*, *Lo:le*, *Lerely*, *Seloya*, *Oi-Ni:tom*, *Yamgur Ni:tom*, etc. are valuable sources which bears various information of different phases of the construction of Mising tribe.

5. CONCLUSION:

From above discussion it may be clear that the colonial constructions used history writing as an oppressive power struggle which can be seen in the context of their description regarding the history and identity of the *Misings*. The views and opinions produced by the colonial constructions are widely accepted by other Non Mising and Assamese scholars. The *Mising* scholars are also not free from such influences. In this context the colonial constructions can be contested by the recent Mising scholars by constructing their history from 'study from below perspective' which can be studied by applying oral narratives of the *Misings*. Hence the main contention of the Mising scholars that the stereotype, objectification and essentialization of history cannot be accepted to study the history of the *Mising* tribe. The history of the tribe needed to rewrite from their own perspective which will pave the way of giving a proper expression to their identity. In such initiatives the oral history of the *Misings* should be use as principal source materials which helps in reconstruction of their history by understanding how their identity has been exposed by different historical context. In this way it help us to deconstruct the *politics of knowledge and text* perceptible in colonial constructions of the *Misings*.

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Notes and References:

- ⁱMisings are one of the tribes of Northeast India who were earlier known to the non-Mising people as Miris. They are a tribal group inhabiting in Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Charaideo, Majuli, Biswanath Chariali and Golaghat districts of Assam. In Arunachal Pradesh they concentrated in Lower Dibang Valley, East Siang and Lohit districts.
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