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Health, Sanitation and Living Conditions of Rural Mishings: A Case Study in the Eastern Sonitpur District of Assam

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Abstract:

The Mishings or Miris belongs to Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid group are the second largest schedule tribe of Assam after Bodos. They constitute 17.8% of the total tribal population of Assam (Census, 2001). The Mishings are basically concentrated in the riverside areas of eight districts of Assam and in Sonitpur district, mainly concentrated in Gohpur sub-division (eastern Sonitpur). Around 98.2% of total Mishing population inhabits in rural areas of Assam and only 1.8% of total population resides in urban areas, which is lowest among all the tribal groups. This shows that majority of Mishing population is untouched by the roots of modernity and spatially they are found to be distributed in areas beyond the zone of urban influence. They being the riparian tribe are well accustomed and adjusted to face the fury of floods every year during monsoons with their traditional knowledge evolved through time. The raised platform houses (locally known as Chang Ghar) are the glaring example. Illiteracy, acute poverty and superstition are found to be deep rooted among the Mishings of the study area. There is practically no provision of sanitary toilets and 98% of the total Mishing inhabitants of the study area practices open defecation. Water borne diseases like dysentery, typhoid, jaundice, diarrhoea, cholera, gastro-intestinal infections and also malaria is very common among them. Moreover, there is very limited provision to access clean drinking water sources. In fact, the availability of clean drinking water sources, status of sanitation and living conditions of a population group are the indicators of human development. All these three aforesaid parameters are closely associated with other essential determinants of human development such as education, income, health and hygiene, nutritional status, etc. The overall analysis shows the Mishings the still very backward and are very little conscious about health and hygiene. The present paper is based on field study data collected through household survey during 2014-15. The paper attempts to highlight the problems of Mishings in respect to health, sanitation and living conditions and also suggest the need based measures and awareness programmes regarding health and proper hygienic behavior to be urgently taken by Government and Non Government Organizations.

Keywords: Mishing, Sanitation, Health, disease and Illiteracy

1. Introduction

Assam is the homeland of many rich and diverse culture, tribes and religions. In Assam there are as many as 23 tribal communities which constitute 12.82 per cent of the total population of the state. The tribes of Assam may broadly be divided into two categories: plain tribes and hill tribes. The plain tribes mainly inhabit the plain areas of the state and the hill tribes are mainly concentrated in the hilly areas. The Mishings of Assam belongs to the plain tribes. Bodo- Kacharis (Plain tribe) constitute the largest tribal group in Assam who account for 38 per cent of the total tribal population of the state. Next to the Bodo Kacharis, the Mishings constitute 17.8 percent of the total tribal population, are the second largest schedule tribe of Assam. Mostly they are concentrated on riverside areas inhabiting in large parts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sonitpur and Tinsukia districts of Assam. The Mishings or Miris belongs to Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid group and share linguistic, cultural and ritual similarities with the Tani people community of Arunachal Pradesh in India and Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in China (Bordoloi,1991). Dalton (1973) describes them as yellow Mongolian type, tall and powerfully framed with deep tough voice and slow method of speaking. Mishing language belongs to Indo-Tibetan group of languages. Legends say that they came into contact with more civilized communities living in plains of Assam as early as in the 16th century. There is no written history of Mishings about their migration from hills to the plains of Assam. They might have migrated to the plains of Assam in search of fertile land as well as in search of civilization progress. The community started settling down in the riverside areas of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri rivers of Assam even before the start of the Ahom reign (Bordoloi et al, 1987). The Mishing tribe is currently enjoying a sub state like autonomy under

the name of Mishing Autonomous Council, which was formed after the signing of MAC act 1995 between Mishing Organization and Government of Assam. MAC includes 40 constituencies in eight upper Assam districts comprising core areas and satellite areas.

Mishings are one of the most colourful tribal groups. Do-ni, the Sun and Polo, the Moon are the main god and goddess of the Mishing Tribes. Do-ni is addressed as mother and Polo as father. The Mishings believe that the gods and goddesses have been divided into two groups, malevolent and benevolent. The main priest of the Mishings is known as 'Mibu.' He is the most revered person among the Mishings. It is believed that he has the ability to connect with the gods and goddess. During festivals they sacrifice chickens and pigs. Majority of them practice Hinduism and believe in their own traditional rituals. There are sizeable number of Christians among Mishings both Roman Catholic and Baptist in recent times.

The traditional craft of weaving is a very bright aspect of Mishing culture. Weaving cotton clothes is the principal domain of a Mishing woman weaver. Mishing women have good traditional knowledge of natural dyes.

Agriculture is the principal occupation of the Mishings. They grow different varieties of rice paddy, some of which they sow in spring for harvesting in summer, some others being transplanted during the rainy season and harvested in autumn. They also grow mustard, pulses, maize, vegetables, tobacco, bamboo, areca, etc., chiefly for their own use, with the exception of mustard, which brings them some cash. The women contribute to the income of the family by rearing pigs, fowls and, occasionally, goats. They make almost all the tools required for their day-to-day life, such as baskets, carry bags, trays, boxes, fish traps of various kinds, hencoops, etc., using bamboo and cane as material. The wooden items they make include their boat-shaped mortar and the pestle, and, of course, canoes, so indispensable for riparian people living in flood-prone areas. A very small percentage of their population have different categories of jobs, especially in the public sector, small trading, etc. as sources of income. Rice along with fish and meat is their staple food. The Mishings also rear pig, goat and duck and eat their meat. They also eat vegetables, forest herbs and 'namsing' i.e. dried and grinded fish. 'Apong' a type of drink (traditional beer) made from rice is famous among the Mishings. The drink is also offered to the guests during weddings, religious occasions, festivals, etc.

The Mishing Tribes usually live in small huts on the banks of rivers. The houses have an elevated platform known as '*Chang ghar*.' Their dwellings have thatched roofs and stilted floor generally constructed with flattened bamboo. The houses are usually built four to five feet above the ground. Affluent people built their houses with wood while others use bamboos. Houses where joint families reside are usually huge in size and have several fireplaces. In the front side of the house a portion of platform is kept open to be used as a verandah. A raised area of the house is usually extended to serve the purpose of cleaning utensils, straining of rice etc. The houses have two doors, one at the front and other at the back. Sometimes a third door is also constructed that might open to an exposed platform. The space is used for sitting, lying down and also for drying paddy grains. Under the influence of modern housing styles, the traditional '*Chang Ghar*' has undergone changes in terms of building materials and style. Those who can afford to have used concrete pillars in place of bamboo or wooden stilts and corrugated iron sheets as roofing material in place of thatch to enhance durability and concrete staircases have also been added to the floor.

Mishing tribe is very backward in the field of education. Literacy rate among the Mishings stands at only 62.1 % is lower than Assam literacy rate of 64.84 % (Census, 2001). The status of woman of the Mishing community is backward to a great extent. Gender gap in literacy among Mishings is very high as the female literacy is only 52.4%, while the male literacy rate stands at 72%. Due to high illiteracy rate among the female folks of the Mishing Community women empowerment is yet to be achieved in the proportional way. Majority of them are totally unaware about health and hygiene for a better living. In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the problems of Mishings in respect to health, sanitation and their living conditions.

2. Objectives

- i. To highlight socio-cultural and economic status of the Mishings in the rural areas of Eastern Sonitpur District.
- ii. To understand the health, hygiene and sanitation practices among Mishings and the status of water supply in their villages.
- iii. To find out the correlations between awareness level about personal hygiene and literacy.
- iv. To suggest measures and policies to be taken in near future for the upliftment of Mishings and involve them within the broad spectrum of nation building process.

3. Study Area

The Sonitpur district is located on the North bank of Brahmaputra river; within longitudes 92°16'E-93°43'E and latitudes 26°30'N-27°01'N. The district is bounded by Arunachal Pradesh in the North, river Brahmaputra in the South, Lakhimpur district in the East and Darrang district in the West. The total Geographical area of the Sonitpur district is 5324 sq.km. The district headquarters is Tezpur and there are three sub-divisions -Tezpur, Biswanath Chariali and Gohpur. The present district comprises of 7 Tehsils/circles and 26 Mouzas. There are 1615 no.s of villages (including 19 under BTAD), and 5 towns (Tezpur, Dhekiajuli, Rangapara, Biswanath Chariali and Gohpur). It stands among the largest districts of Assam. In terms of area Sonitpur is the second largest district of Assam after Karbi Anglong district. The Brahmaputra River forms the South boundary of the district. A number of rivers which originate in the Himalayan foothills flow southward and ultimately fall in Brahmaputra River. There are number of river island in Brahmaputra river locally known as Chars or Chaporis. They are generally sandy. Some chars are large enough and fit for habitation and cultivation. According to 2011 census, Sonitpur has the population of 19, 25,975, while according to 2001, total population was 16, 77,874, which indicates a growth rate of 15.67% over the decade. The population density is 365 inhabitants per sq. km. The sex-ratio is estimated as 946 females for every 1000 males. While the literacy rate of the district is 69.96%. The Scheduled Tribes or Tribal forms about 12% of total district's population. The population of Mishings tribe is around 0.6 lakh in the district. The Mishing people live in a scattered

manner in the northern part of the Naduar and Biswanath Circles, i.e. east of the Bhorali River; and a significant portion of the population inhabits in Gohpur sub-div.

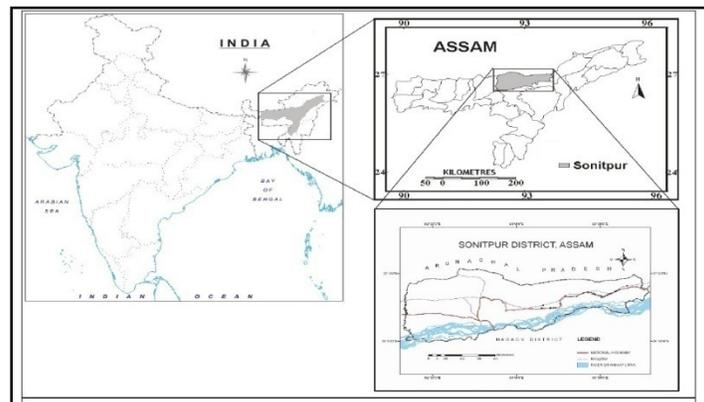


Figure 1: Location Map of the study area

4. Methodology

As the Mishings are found in large numbers in the eastern portion of the Sonitpur district, so the Mishing villages located mainly in the Gohpur sub-division is considered for study. A village is said to be Mishing village if the percentage of Mishing households in the village is 50 or above. A set of three Mishing villages viz; Chairaibari, Uzapara and Uttar Kari Bil located in the three different corners of the study area is taken for sample survey. A total of 160 households (i.e., 30% of the total households) from the three sample Mishings villages have been selected for intensive study. Thus the study will be confined into 160 sample (Mishing) households. The entire study is primarily based on the field survey data collected from sample households with the help of a series of questionnaire prepared for the purpose. While the secondary data is collected from the authentic sources like the District Statistical Handbook, Population Census Report, journals, books, articles of online and offline sources etc.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Status of Socio-Economic Condition among the Mishings of the Study Area:

The Mishings are basically agriculturalists, still depending on the traditional method of cultivation. Around 80% of the surveyed respondents are agricultural and daily wage workers, while 15% of them are engaged in self-business and small trade and just 5% of the total workforce is engaged in public/private sector. The respondents surveyed are poor in general with 67% of the households living below the poverty line (BPL). It is found that the dominant form of family structure among the Mishings is nuclear (i.e.72%). Around 40.06% of the sample respondents are illiterate, 15% have completed primary school level, 38% have completed upper primary, 4% have completed high school level and just 3.33% are graduate. The female illiteracy rate in the surveyed area is found to be 47% while that of male stands at 36.1% (as shown in table 1). Interestingly, it is found in the survey that majority of the respondents though illiterate wants their children to be educated and get a good job.

Category	Male (%)	Female (%)
No response	15.05	25.5
Illiterate	36.1	47.0
Literate	10.2	6.3
Up to Primary	10	6.1
Up to Upper primary	25.2	14.4
HSLC	2.3	0.7
H.S.	1.1	0
Graduate	0.05	0
Other courses	0	0

Table 1: Educational status of population Age group 15 and above (Sampled Mishing families)

Source: Sample Survey

Around 90% of the Mishing households are constructed in their own traditional pattern i.e. *Chang Ghar*- a thatched house built on stilts made of wood and bamboo. The average height of the plinth is from six to eight feet above the ground. Only 10% of the households are designed in modern way using concrete pillars and corrugated iron sheets as roofing material in place of thatch. Most of them are allotted under IAY scheme (Indira Awas Yojana, a housing programme of Govt. to allot shelter to BPL families). The houses vary in length according to the size of the family, but most of the households (45%) are congested and is in unhygienic form. Most of the BPL respondents complained that they are being denied of the housing schemes of Govt. and whenever they approach

Govt. or Panchayat for IAY shelter they does not pay any heed. In some cases they also demand bribes from them in lieu of allotment of IAY shelter.



Figure 2: Modern Chang Ghar build on Concrete pillar and corrugated iron sheets used as roofing material



Figure 3: Traditional Chang Ghar of Mishings

When they are asked about the probable reason of deprivation of their villages under IAY scheme compared to their counterparts, they promptly replied that poor transportation and political affiliation of the masses is the main factor behind such discrimination. Apart from that it is also found in the survey that only 17% households have electricity facilities and rest are still non-electrified though the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Vidyutikaran Yojana (A Govt. Programme to provide electric power supply to BPL households at concession rates in rural areas) is the popular slogan throughout the country. Regarding fuel consumption pattern, it is found that 90 % of the total surveyed Mishing households used wood, 7% used Kerosene stoves and just 3% were found using LPG. The roads in the villages are kutcha and such during monsoon season every year the sampled villages is almost inaccessible and deplorable. Boats and rafts made from the woods of banana tree is the only mode of transportation during monsoons.

5.2. Status of Water Supply in the Surveyed Mishing Villages:

The supply and availability of clean drinking water is inadequate in all the three sampled villages of the Mishings. Under the survey it is found that most of the households have hand pump/tube well within their premises and use it as the common source of water supply of the households, basically used for drinking and cooking, while for rest of the activities they depends upon the nearby water body i.e. river. For most of the households who does not own tube well depends completely on river. There is practically no provision of drinking water supply by government. However, Government has provided few public well which is not sufficient and for some households it is quite far. Every year during floods many of the tube wells and as well as the public well were buried under deposits of sand rendering them unusable and contaminated. Some people dug out the tube wells from six to eight feet down, repaired them, and put them to use. Only 15.63% of the households have a home-made filter (equipped with sand and charcoal) for filtering the drinking water and 48.75% are aware of boiling water before consuming. Rest of the respondents (35.62%) consume raw water directly from tube well or water body as shown in table 3. Under such circumstances the frequency of water borne diseases is more common and frequent among them (table 2), particularly in children. Dysentery is a common disease prevalent in the study area.

Type of disease	No. of HH	% of HH
Dysentery	62	36.75
Typhoid	27	15.88
Jaundice	16	10
Small pox	10	6.25
Cholera	17	9.63
Malaria	13	7.11
Dengue	07	4.38

Table 2: Households affected by waterborne/sanitation related diseases (%) in the sampled Mishing villages:

Source: Sample survey

5.3. Sanitation Condition and Hygiene Practices in the Surveyed Mishing Villages

Regarding the condition of toilet, it is unfortunate that majority of surveyed Mishing households prefers to use open space nearby riversides, bamboo bushes and fields in the backyards of their dwellings as toilet which is very unhealthy and results various sanitation related diseases. They are totally unaware of the diseases that can spread from open defecation which makes the occurrences of such diseases more prominent. Despite of sanitation drives launched by the Government for rural area, the Mishing villages under study are still lacking any sanitary facilities and are forced to defecate in open.

From the table 3, it is evident that around 12.5% of the households do not practice the habits of using soap to wash their hands after toilet, 25% of the sampled families do not practice the habits of washing their hands before and after meal, 43.75% of the households do not cover the utensils where water is stored for consumption. The above data gives a clear picture about the poor awareness level about health and hygiene due to massive illiteracy among the surveyed Mishing households in the study area which makes them more vulnerable to infectious diseases.



Figure 4: A Mishing woman weaving traditional attire



Figure 5: Livestock kept at the basement of Chang-Ghar.

As the basement of their traditional dwellings built on stilts is used to support livestock (mainly pig) rearing and poultry is very unhygienic and flies falling on their feces are the carrier of many serious diseases.

Hygiene practices	No. of HH	% of HH
Use soap to wash hands after toilet	140	87.5
Use only water to wash hands after toilet	20	12.5
Practice of washing hands before and after meal	120	75
Practice of covering the utensils where water is stored for consumption	90	56.25
Practice of filtering drinking water	25	15.63
Practice of boiling drinking water	78	48.75
Practice of consuming drinking water raw	57	35.62
Awareness regarding sanitary and water-borne related diseases	50	31.25
Avails scientific medical treatment	127	79.37
Uses traditional medicine only for curing health ailments	33	20.63

Table 3: Hygiene practices and awareness level among the sampled Mishing households:

Source: Sample survey

6. Suggestion and Conclusion

The findings of the study shows that the status of health and hygiene, education and the living conditions of the rural Mishings are much backward and needs immediate attention of the policy makers to uplift the standard of this section of the society. To remove poverty and deep rooted superstition among Mishings, women empowerment is due necessary which can be achieved through improving female literacy status and employment generating schemes should be implemented through skill development among youths which can improve their financial conditions. Apart from that the Mishing women weavers should get financial assistance from the Government and their handloom products should get national and international exposures in the market.

As the Mishings are riparian tribe and their habited areas are annually inundated, so their problems are different from that of the other tribes. Thus the policy and schemes must be specially designed for them so that it is fitted to their habited environment. For instance, their traditional dwellings are the outcome of their adaptation with the physical environment and are designed to face the fury of floods, so the IAY dwellings provided by the Government also must be designed accordingly with concrete basement and pillar. Likewise, considering the problem of flood every year, the sanitary toilets provided by Government for poor rural Mishing households must be also build on stilt with a pipe connected with a basement pit covered up on the ground suitable for habitats there they settle. Decentralization of schemes initiated by the Government specially meant for the downtrodden section of the society must be implemented along with proper monitoring so that the needy are not being deprived. Special campaigns should be organized by NGO's to create awareness about the personal hygiene and need of sanitation among the Mishings. The problems faced by the Mishings have to be examined carefully and need based developmental programmes should be implemented specially in the field of education, economy and health as the foremost priority so as to actively involve them within the broad spectrum of nation building programme.

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