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## **GRT** CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE MISINGS OF ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MAJULI ISLAND



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**Abstract:** The Misings are one of the tribes of Assam and are the second largest group with a population of 587,310 soul. They are one of the offshoots of Mongoloid stock while linguistically they are Tibeto-Burmans and most of them are inhabited in Upper Assam. The Misings had their own traditional beliefs and practices but ever since their migration to the plains of Assam they underwent a process of acculturation. This had resulted in the influence of different religions like Vaisnavism and Hinduism among the Misings. The Misings in course of time also got attracted to Christianity and thus the conversion towards Christianity is increasing. Thus the objective of my paper is to look in to the prevalence of Christianity among the Misings, factors responsible for it and the problems being faced by the Missionaries.

**Key words:** Misings, Traditional, Acculturation, Conversion, Christianity

### **INTRODUCTION :**

Christianity is a religion with a belief in Jesus Christ as the prophet of God. Church is their place of worship where the believers of this faith assemble on every Sunday. Christmas is the prime occasion of this faith where they celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. The Christian missionaries made several attempts to establish its impact upon the Misings along with that of the other hill tribes of the North East ever since the British rule began in this part of the country.

Although some instances are found regarding conversion of other tribes towards Christianity during the colonial rule but no such records or reports are available in case of the Misings of Majuli. If we look at the history of conversion to Christianity than we find that different factors are responsible for it. The extension of legal aid by the missionaries to get back their land rights played a huge impact upon the people of Chhotanagpur to convert to Christianity during the colonial period. In the North-East India exploiting the poor economy and illiteracy the Missionaries left no stone unturned to convert them in to Christianity. It was therefore mainly the commoners who embrace Christianity. A classic example is the conversion of people of Khasi hills inspite of strong opposition offered by their chiefs.

The Misings are one of the tribes of Assam and are the second largest group with a population of 587,310 soul. They are one of the offshoots of Mongoloid stock while linguistically they are Tibeto-Burmans and most of them are inhabited in Upper Assam. In the long back they used to live in the hilly areas in between the Siang and Subansiri districts of present day Arunachal Pradesh and came down to the plains of Assam around 14th -15th century. Since then they

began to settle on the riverside areas of the Brahmaputra and the Subansiri rivers of Assam. They are now concentrated in the Upper Assam districts of Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Golaghat, Tinsukia and Sonitpur. A large number of Misings are found settled on the Majuli Island which is surrounded by the river Brahmaputra to the South and the Subansiri and Kherkotia in the North. Of the total number of 243 villages in Majuli the Mising dominated village is numbered at 108.

Although a very humble beginning of the Christian missionary work in the Mising inhabited areas was started with the prime motive of spreading Christianity among them for the first time in 1836 at Sadiya subsequently at North Lakhimpur in 1894 and at Pthalipam in 1895; their efforts proved futile. Their efforts and the resultant failure are recorded as:

“At the beginning of 1897, Paul toured again from village to village along the Subansiri river. John, the local preacher, having discouraged due to deceit and cunning ways of the Miris (Misings), returned to his native town. Nevertheless, Paul managed to reach many villages and found interest hearers. In November again, Paul went out and camped in the midst of several Miri villages. Several young men were convinced and were willing to give up Hinduism, but the separation from houses and friends that stood in the way of their acceptance of Christianity...After that Paul went back to Sibsagar and met Mrs. Gureney, Petrick, Swanson and Firth, who seeing his weakness advised him to stay in the Dibrugarh station”.

It is only in the first half of the 20th century the conversion activities of the Christian missionaries bore fruit among the Misings. As per available records it is found that a section of Mising people comprising of 38 numbers

belonging to Lakhimpur district showed an willingness to embrace Christianity as their religion for the first time in their history during the period 1921-1930 A.D. However, the Missionaries were not totally successful in converting them and it is only in the post-independence period they could gain some popularity as they imparted training to some Mising youths in the theological colleges. In the year 1980 A.D. a section of Missionaries started their activities in the Mising inhabited villages of Majuli, Sadiya, Telam, Silapathar, Akajan and Tarajan by means of opening up English medium school. Of late, at the dawn of the 21st century (1990-2005 A.D.), Majuli has come to witness an altogether different development. This development is the conversion to Christianity in the Island. The converted people mostly belong to the Mising community scheduled under the plain tribes of Assam and are also the majority inhabitants in the Island. Most interestingly it is not the whole family that convert but an individual. There are many cases where children are converted without their parents' knowledge and consent.

## 2.1 CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE MISINGS IN MAJULI:

Christianity in Majuli is divided in to Catholic, Baptist and Believer's Church. The epicenter of Christianity in the Island 'is the Jengraimukh area with its cradle at the Kumarbari Lakhimi Gaon' and the Borpomua Lakhimi Gaon. The first conversion towards Christianity in the Island took place in the year 1971. Kamleswari Doley, Bindra Doley and Late Purdoi Doley were the first to get baptized. They were baptized in Baptist Mission, Tezpur. All of them were nurse by profession and they were said to have been funded by the Missionaries. Since than it gathered momentum in the late 1980s. This happened with the arrival of Larson Sangma as the first missionary in Majuli around 1981. Larson Sangma along with some Mising converts like Bilash Pegu, Buddhe Pegu, Dhan Doley, Parma Pegu and others preached Christianity from door to door especially in the Borpomua village of Majuli. The attempts of the Missionaries took a new turn with the establishment of a Missionary School. The Missionaries established the St. Paul's School in 1987 in Jengraimukh, Majuli. The Misings of the locality saw the first school of this kind. This was led by Fr. Jose Varghese. The establishment of this school made the people acquainted with English education as well as new religion i.e. Christianity. It is to be noted here that it enabled the Missionaries to influence the people through their 'charitable' works.

Based on the nature of conversion it can well be assumed that the target of the Missionaries seem to be to get hold of the economically weaker sections of the Island. The failure of the missionaries to influence the people in the 1970s seemed to have made them to review their policy in the Island. Now, their main target was on the tribal families. This was probably because of the casual approach of the tribal people towards their religious beliefs and practices. However, it cannot be ignored that the Mising tribes were also more or less under Vaisnavite influence but with mixed devotion towards it.

Another reason for the growing influence of the

people towards Christianity is the simplicity and less expensive nature of its rites and rituals. This simplicity of belief has influenced most of the Misings as they were fed up with constant rituals, heavy expenditure and social discrimination in the name of religion.

Some of the factors that are instrumental in converting the people towards Christianity may be surmised as follows:

### 2.1.1 Poverty of the Misings :

The Misings are cultivators by occupation and therefore their entire economy is dependent on agricultural products. The Island was once a prosperous place with rich production of crops like rice, potato, mustard, black pulses, sugarcane, jute etc. Moreover, it also had the reputation of having easy availability of fish, milk etc. So the people lived with self sufficient economy. But in the last few decades the Island has been ransacked by the havoc of the mighty Brahmaputra. The constant flood has caused tremendous erosion and destruction thereby severely affecting the people and its livelihood. As a result people those who have land cultivate twice or thrice a year but still remain unable to suffice their needs. While the landless families have been compelled in to daily labourers. This situation seem to have been used to their advantage by the missionaries as the poor people are offered free supply of food stuffs, clothing, education and facilities relating to their health and hygiene, distribution of seeds, hand carts, cow, pig etc. According to records of the Circle Office of Majuli, Government of Assam and as per an estimate by a leading Assamese daily since the year 1972 A.D. the Island has lost 2,72,183 bighas of land. It is also revealed that a total number of 10,314 families have been turned homeless and landless in subsequent years. This is as follows:

Table No. 3.2

Sl. No.	Year	Number of Homeless families
1	1972	110
2	1973	173
3	1974	909
4	1975	140
5	1976	173
6	1977	292
7	1978	110
8	1979	148
9	1980	167
10	1981	193
11	1982	188
12	1983	343
13	1984	151
14	1985	227
15	1986	184
16	1987	416
17	1988	308
18	1989	51
19	1990	277
20	1991	559

21	1992	38
22	1993	73
23	1994	123
24	1995	63
25	1996	197
26	1997	60
27	1998	238
28	1999	286
29	2000	567
30	2001	63
31	2002	204
32	2003	100
33	2004	401
34	2005	471
35	2006	150
36	2007	564
37	2008	145
38	2009	52
39	2010 to 2013	1,400

### 2.1.2 Indifferent attitude of the Hindus:

Another factor responsible for conversion is the indifferent attitude of the Hindus towards the Misings. Although the Misings came into contact with the Vaisnavite faith and practices long before, the Satras have failed miserably to bring the community within their fold. The lower social status granted to the Misings by the Satriyā society have been greatly responsible. The religious heads of these Satras have paid little attention to the religious aspects of the tribe. The Gurus remained content in only collecting religious taxes from the Mising devotees rather than explaining the secrets of the religion to attract them to the faith. Leave the monks and disciples of Satras, even people from the mainstream Assamese communities have failed to give due dignity and acceptance to the tribes of the Island. Deviating from the teachings of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, a large section of the Vaisnavas showed their reluctance to give the due honor to their inmates. There are many instances to this like, not taking food offered by the Misings, showering pure water in the house after a Mising people have entered as they consider it to be as impure, throwing away that portion of the dried rice in which a Mising shadow have fallen etc. This has led to the development of the 'Mising-Mipāk' (The word Mipāk is used by the Misings to mean non-Mising) concept that has taken its root both into the hearts of the people and their society. Even a day's visitor will not fail to understand the truth of this 'Mising-Mipāk' divide. The words of Padma Pegu- a noted Christian convert of 1986 may be cited, "Discrimination against the Misings by the Satra is what prompted me to accept Christianity" citing a singular case of 1982, when he was not treated rightly by the Satra. Indreswar Pegu retired Principal of Jengraimukh College and who once actively propagated Vaisnavism, while explaining the reasons for its conversion seems to indicate that it is due to the despising outlook of the Satrādhikārs that Misings are moving away from Vaisnavism.

On the other hand this situation seems to have been

taken to their advantage by the Missionaries as it treats every sections of the society with equality. An interview with one Jatin Pegu reveals that he was extremely frustrated with the Vaisnavite influence and the discriminatory treatment meted out to the Misings by the Vaisnavites. On the other hand he claims to have found peace of mind in Christian beliefs and practices.

### 2.1.3 Casual approach of the Misings:

Another aspect of conversion is the fact that the Misings are very casual in terms of religion. They do not follow any strict ritual or sacrifices in the name of religion. Even in traditional practices they seem to be more concerned about the feasts involved than the main ritual. This is proved by the Bhakats and the people taking occasional drinks break in between in rituals. They even do not hesitate to use slang words in times of ritual. As a result the youth fail to learn the real devotion involved in it. Most of the youths are getting converted without their parents' knowledge. This has made the task of the Missionaries easier since it gives them a chance to impress the people through their 'charitable' works. The uneducated Mising youths are often sent to places like Kerala, Hyderabad etc. to pursue certain vocational courses. The Mising youths are greatly excited by the prospects of visiting new places and accordingly obey to the instruction of the Missionaries.

### 2.1.4 Welfare activities:

The Missionaries initiated a number of schemes to help the people, especially the poor, in times of disaster and in times of need. The service of the western missionaries through education and care of the sick and sufferers, sympathetic and enduring at the time of distress has a role to play in this connection. The means they apply are social service, education, medical aid, financial assistance etc. Likewise, they build houses for the economically weaker sections, distributed relief materials like rice, dal, boats, mosquito nets, ploughing materials, seeds, etc. in times of disaster. The Believers' Church, for example, has initiated a scheme called 'Bridge of Hope'. Under this scheme, students from different schools of Majuli are selected and these students are entitled to several benefits in their life. Like, they are provided with uniform, school fees, food, soap, surf, sweater etc. These students are financed individually by foreigners' either individually or through a society that promises to look after them as their own child.

Apart from that there are also schemes which bore financial assistance to children for their education and even send poor youths to towns and cities to pursue certain vocational courses. There are several instances of the Father and sisters of Missionary schools individually sponsoring poor children for higher studies. Mention may be made of Christian students like Tamil Pegu, Biju Pegu and Joy Doley who were provided financial assistance for their studies since they belonged to poor families. Today, Tamil Pegu and Biju Pegu have a secured job and are well settled and even they cannot ignore the assistance they received from the Missionaries. This has resulted in wide scale conversion in the last decade of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Jiban Chandra Saikia, retd. Headmaster of



Jengraimukh Higher Secondary School, said, "As the past five years had routinely witnessed crop failure in Majuli, allurements in cash or kind were enough to win over the Mising tribals by the missionaries".

The Believers' Church and the Baptist Missionary seem to be playing an aggressive role in converting the Misings towards Christianity. Most of the Mising converts who have by now turned preachers have little or no education but were attracted to this field by easy availability of money. Some noted preachers of the Island are mainly from Jengraimukh. Most of them are under-matriculate and only very few of them have received graduation. In recent years most of them are engaged in personal conflicts due to financial mismanagement. As a result some have even built church in their own houses. Dhan Doley of Kumarbari Lakhimi Gaon and Buddhe Pegu of Borpomua Gaon have built churches in their own campus due to conflict arising out of financial mismanagement.

However, apart from the role played by the missionaries one cannot ignore the fact that there are also other factors like families that have converted due to dislike upon their traditional beliefs and practices. They were exhausted with the heavy expenditure involved in regard to traditional beliefs and practices. These sections disliked animal sacrifices, offering of Āpong, unnecessary lavishness and 'unorganized' system of rituals involved. Moreover traditional beliefs involve lots of rituals in one single year thereby draining out a family economically. According to them, traditional rituals are merely concerned with feast and drinking without any proper devotion towards the Almighty. An instance of witch-craft accused converting to Christianity has also been found. Mention may be made of one Bhimnath Pegu of Ratanpur village who was accused of witch-craft and murdered in the year 1998. Though he was murdered but still the villagers watched their family with suspicion and therefore his wife along with their children have converted to Christianity with the hope that the villagers will spare them. However the villagers still do not behave normally with the family and thus are deprived of equal social positions. But such cases are very rare.

On the contrary to both the beliefs, Christianity appears to be a simple religion without any complications. Church is their place of prayer where both the rich and poor occupy equal status; pray equally and also there is no any social division. Most important is the fact that except visiting Church on every Sundays there is no heavy expenditure in the name of religion. Moreover, they have only one big occasion .i.e. Christmas. This simplicity of belief has influenced most of the Misings as they were fed up with regular rituals, heavy expenditure, and social discrimination in the name of religion. However, the fact remains that this mindset of the converted sections of the Misings is due to their lack of deep knowledge towards their traditional beliefs and practices as well as that of Vaisnavism.

The conversion towards Christianity is increasing at a rapid pace. In the Ujani Majuli block currently 23 churches are in operation, the first being established in 1989. The Believers' Church which started in the Island since 1997 is spreading at a more rapid pace in comparison to the other two forms. Dairing Doley, District Supervisor of the

Believers' Church of Majuli reveals that there are 20 Churches and more than 4500 converts alone of this faith. Apart from Jengraimukh which is the main base, their Churches are located in Mohrichuk, Nangonchuk, Cherpaikhowa, Gejera etc. They have also more than 400 Mising pastors and every year 100 students are trained as Pastors for a period of two years. They have adopted welfare schemes like community development, distribution of piglets, blanket, tin sheet, boats etc and even built houses for families that have been ravaged by flood. However, he claims that none of these families were pressurized or influenced towards conversion but if the people converted willingly than they have embraced with an open heart. The Believers' church has also established one English medium school named Island School in the year 2007. The regional head of this faith is in Dhemaji while its main base is in Kerala where most of the pastors are send for further training. The other two faith- Catholic and Baptist have a lesser ground in comparison to the above. The Baptist was the first to formally establish their footings in the Island with the establishment of Baptist Good News Centre at Jengraimukh. The Baptist faith functions with its head office at Nagaland. They have around 6 churches in the Island. They have also initiated several developmental schemes like the other two and thereby tried to win the hearts of the people. Recently they are constructing one residential English medium school at Namoni Cherpai Gaon of Cherpai Gaon Panchayat. On the other had the Catholic functions from Dibrugarh where the Bishop resides. They have Church in Jengraimukh, Kekuri, Lathiborchuk etc. Through their welfare schemes they have educated young girls as General Nurse, financed the poor and meritorious students for higher studies, distributed cows, seeds etc. The St. Paul's School established by them did a long way in influencing the Misings of the area. The departure of Fr. Jose Varghese in the year 2000 has definitely played a role in decreasing popularity of catholic converts. However, even than a person by the name of Rama Pegu who became a Father is a catholic convert.

### **3.1 CHANGES AFTER CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY:**

The conversion towards Christianity resulted in change in the socio-cultural and economic structure of the Mising society. There was not much difference in their social life when the community was under the influence of Hinduism alone. This was because even after the influence of Hinduism they practiced traditional and Hinduism beliefs and practices simultaneously. However, the nature of Christian religion did not provide the people any scope for mix up with the traditional one. Therefore the Christian converted people have to give up their traditional beliefs and practices. There are instances in which the Dod:gāng of a person was performed differently by different brothers on the basis of their religion. In one family the husband named Bhaben Pegu and wife Tasiri Pegu died within a short gap. After a few years Late Bhaben Pegu's mother named Unadoi Pegu also passed away. In February, 2007 the Dod:gāng for the trio was performed by their children in a Bhāgavat method as per their belief. However, Late Unadoi Pegu had two other sons named Bilash Pegu and Buddho Pegu who

were Christians. Therefore on that very day the two Christian brothers also performed the rituals as per their own Christian belief.

This is another instance of the prevailing differences within their society. Apart from giving up their traditional rituals the social bond that existed among the society is also gradually weakening. In times of performance of traditional rituals villagers used to visit the concerned family which in turn reflected a symbol of co-operation and understanding. However, now a days the Christian people do not attend such rituals since they do not believe in it or at the same time not preferably invited by the host. As a result the social relation is gradually widening between Christian and non-Christian Misings. Moreover the mode of lifestyle and the level of struggle are also widening between them. Like, the Christian Misings are provided with houses, their children's education are sponsored or are provided seeds, bullocks, piglets etc. While on the other hand the non-Christian have to struggle throughout their life for the education of their children or ran after political leaders to get their houses repaired etc.

In recent years the Missionaries are initiating local culture and local language to popularize their religion. Like, prayer songs are sung in Mising language, Bible is written in Assamese language and even Āli Ā:ye Līgāng is celebrated by the Christian community of the Island. Even when someone is seriously ill or when there is special occasion in a family than they visit the concerned family whether Christian or non-Christian, and perform prayer in the name of the Christ for the well being of the family. It is interesting to note that even the Christian Misings celebrate the Āli Ā:ye Lī:gāng, their national festival, with all festivities.

#### 4.1 CHALLENGES OF THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES:

The Christian Missionaries are also facing many new challenges recently. One important challenge is the lack of deep rooted faith and proper dedication among the Christian converts. There are instances of people embracing it and alienating it gradually. These sections of people especially belong to Catholic faith and use to attend church regularly for prayers and were involved actively in every related activity. It was around the period from 1996 to 2000 A.D. when Majuli was reeling under flood. During this period the Missionaries offered various assistance to reduce their sufferings and as a result lots of people converted towards this religion. However, in the later years offer for assistance by the Missionaries began to subside as the Island was back to normal. An interview with Father Bartho Lomeu Bengra, Principal, St. Paul's School have revealed that there are times in which the people use to complain lack of assistance received. 'Āgor Fathere imān disele, etiār Fathere eku nidiye' (Lots of assistance were received earlier but now-a-day no any assistance). He further says that his stay in the Island and in trying to understand the people he found that the converts expect something in return. One must try to understand the circumstances under which they converted. The flood of 1996 and 1998 had caused great sufferings to the people. So at that time the then Principal Fr. Jose Varghese under the aid of their societies supplied relief materials like

food, clothing and other shelter to the people. However, he wonders as to how they will be able to offer assistance always. Thus gradually the numbers of Catholic Christians have decreased. This is proved by a visit to their Sunday prayer in which only the elderly women are seen to attend including two-three men.

He is of the opinion that unless deep rooted faith is developed among the people it is impossible to hold on to their belief. He even cite instances of a Christian family seeking financial assistance from him for performance of traditional death rites i.e. Dod:gāng. There are also cases in which a family will invite them for prayer in their house and immediately after the same family will invite a Bhakat for conducting similar prayer. He says when he asked these families for such double belief than they reply that it is to satisfy the neighbours and relatives that they have to do this. However, he is of the opinion that it is the fear and the belief that the family might be attacked by evil spirits for not performing traditional rituals that is pressurising them to stick to such double belief. Thus he seem to indicate that time will come in which the people will give up Christianity if no any assistance is received.

#### 5.1 CONCLUSION:

Thus the Christian Missionaries after repeated attempts to spread Christianity among the Mising people of Assam gained success especially in the post independence period. In Majuli it gained momentum especially in the period between 1996-2005 A.D. when the Island was reeling under heavy flood. It is found that the emergence of Christianity is gradually changing the whole socio-cultural and economic life of the Christian converted Misings of Majuli. Thus a sort of gap in relation is widening between the Christian converted Misings and non-christian Misings. Nevertheless the impact of Christianity is a reality. Only time will tell as to the kind of impact it prevails upon the society as a whole.

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XVII. Interview with Dilip Doley, Age-48, teacher in Cherpai Lower Primary School on 22/02/2012

XVIII. Interview with Padmadhar Pegu, Age-63, Retired Asstt., Prof., Jengraimukh College, Place- Opposite Jengraimukh High School on 04/01/2010

XIX. Interview with Jatin Pegu, Age-55, Catholic Christian, Place-Kumarbari on 18th January, 2010 and Dairing Pegu, Age-46, District Supervisor of Believers' Church of Majuli, Place- Jengraimukh on 17/01/2010.

XX. Records collected from Circle Office of Majuli, Government of Assam and an article titled, *Dah Sahasradik Bhumihiin Poriyalokloi Sintit Nohoi Rajya Sarkar* (Assam Government not worried about 10,000 landless families) in newspaper *Ahomiya Pratidin* dated 6 March, 2013, p.5

XXI. Pullock Dutta, *Majuli Monasteries Wake Up To Conversion Threat*, *The Telegraph*, June 21, 2000, P.6

XXII. Lakhinath Pegu, op. cit. in B. Tripathi, and S. Dutta (ed.) *Religious History of Arunachal Pradesh*, New Delhi, 2008, p.117

XXIII. Interview with Padma Pegu, Age-55, School Teacher and Baptist Mission Propagator, Place- Cherpai Gaon on 06/11/2010. He also wrote an article titled, *Conversion has never been on our Agenda*, *The Assam Tribune*, November 29, 2000

XXIV. D. Nath, op cit., p. 94

XXV. Interview with Jatin Pegu, Age-55, Catholic Christian, Village-Kumarbari on 18th January, 2010

XXVI. Interview with Moheswar Doley, Age-61, Village-Molual Miri on 15/01/2011

XXVII. Interview with Dairing Doley, Age-46, District

Supervisor of Believers' Church of Majuli, Place-Jengraimukh on 17/01/2010.

XXVIII. Interview with Mikahil Pegu, Age-30, Village-Jokaibowa on 10/01/2012

XXIX. Laxhi Nath Pegu, op. cit. in B. Tripathi and S. Dutta (ed.), *Religious History of Arunachal Pradesh*, New Delhi, 2008, p.117

XXX. Interview with Romen Pegu, Age-30, Catholic Christian at Lakhimi Village on 11/01/2012 and Raju Doley, Age-32, Baptist Christian at Jokaibowa Village on 13/01/2012

XXXI. D. Nath, op. cit., p.93

XXXII. Interview with Fr. Bartho, Age-46, Principal of St. Paul's School on 06/05/12



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