

Gender, Property, and Witch-hunting: A study among the Mising of Majuli

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CERTIFICATE



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This is to certify that this dissertation titled ‘Gender, Property, and Witch-hunting: A Case Study among the Mising of Majuli’ submitted by Dinesh Mishong bearing registration number 17SAHL02 in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of ‘Master of Philosophy in Anthropology’ is a record of bonafide work carried out by him under my supervision.

This dissertation has not been submitted either in part or in full to any other University or Institution of learning for the award of any other degree.

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Declaration

I **Dinesh Mishong**, hereby declare that this dissertation titled ‘**Gender, Property, and Witch-hunting: A Case Study among the Mising of Majuli**’ is submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of **Dr. George Tharakan. C.** I also declare that this work has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my dissertation can be deposited in SHODHGANGA/ INFLIBNET.

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Abbreviations

AMSS
ABSU
MGK
SMS
TMPK

ASSAM MAHILA SAMATA SAMITI
ALL ASSAM BODO STUDENT UNIOUN
MISING AGOM KEBANG
SAH MAJDOOR SANTHA
TAKAM MISING PORIN KEBANG

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, human civilization has experienced major technological breakthroughs which have transformed our living standard. Nevertheless, under the pretext of traditional belief and practices, we very often give way to some nefarious practices as the shadow of superstitions still conceals itself beneath the predominant age of science and technology. One such heinous practice is witchcraft, which has widespread effects in society. The word “witchcraft” has been derived from two words, namely “witch” and “craft”. Here, the word “witch” denotes a male or female person who is suspected to possess magical powers which are considered “witchcraft”. This dissertation discusses the unique story of “witch-hunt” in the Mising community of Assam. By deploying the ethnographic method, this study aims to understand the relation between the Mising’s religion and witchcraft. In doing so, it aims at investigating as to how in a male-dominated society, men exert authority and power to control over both the physical and mental state of women, and how men triumph over women in the struggle for power, position, and property through accusation of witchcraft. Majuli, the river island district of Assam was selected as the empirical site for the ethnographic account of this study.

Concepts: This dissertation involves the use and understanding of the following concepts

Witch

In Assamese language, a “witch” is known as “*daini*” which refers to a male or female person who is suspected to possess magical powers that can bring evil to the community. In many cases, “witches” are women who are suspected to utilize their evil powers to harm others. In reality, among those accused of witchcraft, most of them are vulnerable women and children, the mentally ill, or elderly, who are sometimes the victims of an accuser's personal revenge. Hutton (2002) points out five major features of the witch. First, the witch is a person who seemingly uses supernatural powers to cause misfortune to others or harm others. Second, a witch causes harm to the known members of a community, the neighbors, or kin rather than unknown people. Third, the witch is

basically evil and performs acts which are malicious in design. Fourth, the witch follows a tradition, which means that he or she trains under someone else and therefore is not an isolated individual. Fifth, the witches can be removed or defeated by means of counter magic by other individuals (Hutton 2002:19). “Witch-hunting” generally means “killing of a witch”, which is a superstitious evil practice present among the Rabha, Hajong, Mising, Bodo, Adivasi, and other communities. People believe that a witch can cause death to the community people by using the powers of black magic in the village where she resides. The local *Ojhas* (sorcerers) “detect” and identify the witches.

Witchcraft

It is a common notion among the people that witchcraft is usually connected with inflicting harm to people or their property by exercising supernatural powers. In anthropological and sociological terms, it is a phenomenon that is invoked to narrate misfortune by ascribing it to someone’s evil effect, which may be either from inside or outside the community. So, witchcraft is traditionally used to bring calamity to rivals, enemies, and fancied oppressors, or to summon the dead, or to rouse passion of love in the person who is the object of desire, or to cause the death of some loathsome person.

Studies on witchcraft

Many researchers and scholars have attempted to find systematic ways to understand and interpret the nature of the witch-hunting in various communities. The literatures created by different researchers present a wide array of theories, concepts, and approaches from their research findings. It also offers insight into how and why witch-hunting occurs in the community.

Generally, on the subject of witch-hunting, the academic discourse starts with a reference to Evans-Pritchard’s work on “*Witchcraft, Oracle and Magic among Azande*”. His work concentrates on the beliefs concerning “magic”, and also the way this reflects and impacts the social structure of the “Azande community” of Sudan. Mostly, this moves around the belief of witchcraft and in the manner in which the Azande discover, blame, and respond to the witches and witchcraft. He also focuses on the role and notion of

oracles, sorcery, and witch-doctors in Azande social life. Evans-Pritchard (1976:18) argues that witchcraft for the Azande is a rational mode of elucidating things, “the concept of witchcraft provides them a natural philosophy by which the relation between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events.”

In his book “*The Modernity of Witchcraft*”, Geschiere (1997) explores how the discourses in the modern age on witchcraft influences their continuation and transformations in post-colonial Africa and affects political developments in Makaland of Cameroon. The common denominator indicates a sense that the whole concentration of power is attractive and also at the same time dangerous. It can be identified as an occult force which is locally named to be *djambe*.

Karlsen (1998:47) remarks that economic considerations, especially New England’s system of inheritance, provide clues about the special positions of the accused witches vis-à-vis their society’s rule for transferring wealth from one generation to another. Most accused women have no legitimate male heirs in their immediate families and therefore stand to inherit or do inherit the property left by their father or husband. These women are aberrations in a society with an inheritance system designed to keep property in the hands of men.

Karlsen (1998) also brings in a third factor i.e., religion, in addition to gender and economy in her analysis. In other words, Karlsen ties gender in the way of sexual terrorism and religion towards explaining witch hunts. Some theoretical explanations refer to witch hunts as a form of sexual terrorism, as a system by which males frighten, dominate and control females. According to Karlsen, the New England settlers also carried with them a dual conception of witchcraft and the menace it posed: witches were not only threats to their neighbors’ physical and economic well-being, but were heretics. Witchcraft was viewed as rebellion against God. The constant fear was about the Devil’s success in recruiting people to help destroy Puritan churches.

To counter the effect of witchcraft, Hutton (2002) explains “in every tribal society there are witch doctors or witch finder. Witch doctors are individuals who specialize in

detecting and removing the harmful effects of witchcraft. Though their purpose is to serve the tribal community and protect it from the evil influences of witches, they usually work for a payment. These specialists would be the first resort of people who suspected that they, or their dependants, relatives or neighbors, had been harmed by witchcraft. Direct action against the suspected witch would usually only follow a consultation with such an expert, often acting on information provided by the latter” (2002:19).

According to Jensen, “a witch hunt involves the search and pursuit of enemies (witches) based on fantasy and hidden motives” (2007:3). The key terms used here is “fantasy or hidden motives” signifying that the accused witches are either believed to be guilty by the accusers or they are innocents. Jensen argues that witch hunts are a type of social control. They are “organized attempts to control people or groups by lodging accusations of deviance through institutional control mechanisms. Such hunts are earmarked by accusations that are difficult to prove or disprove by motives, other than those publicly professed” (32).

Discussion on witch-hunting in India has either been taken as a case of gender problem or as a conflict between minority religious groups and organized religions. Nathan and Kelkar (1993:117) view witchcraft as a form of gender conflict and land and other property-related issues. They focus on women’s land rights and draw a connection to witchcraft accusation in the Adivasi community of Jharkhand. “The women who are accused are mostly childless widows, who have a life interest in lands that will pass on to their nearest male relative after their death. By accusing them of practicing witchcraft, those men inherit the land immediately. This persecution is part of a wide assault on women’s traditional rights and part of a successful attempt to establish a patriarchal order, an attempt to force women into a particular gender role that is considered appropriate. It is also a way to discredit the women who have an inside track with the household spirits” (1993:109-118).

Nathan and Kelkar (1993:109-118) lists two major functions of witch hunts. First, “witch hunts provides a convenient opportunity for the men of dominant lineage to get rid of any women who oppose the men politically, and second, it is helpful in avoiding social

scandals—i.e. to get rid of ‘unwanted females’ (widows; women who have become pregnant outside of marriage). It is through the “janguru” that witches are identified. Village level politics contributes towards the support in the hunt for witches” (109-118). Typically women from a rival feuding family are labeled as witches, who are responsible for accidents or deaths (Mishra, 2003).

Roy (1998), based on her study among the tribal of West Singhbhum and Deoghar districts of Southern Bihar (currently Jharkhand), suggests interventional approach and strategies to be adopted by developmental workers for amelioration of witchcraft related crimes. She puts forth that since the practice of witchcraft and witch-hunting fall within the boundaries of social sanction of the community; hence such practices cannot be condemned as violent. They are culturally acceptable and form a part of the traditional values and beliefs of the community (1998:136). This ‘sanctioned violence’ has major implications for developmental workers working in the area. The most difficult aspect involves countering the society’s belief system, especially when it is a part of the community’s ethos and culture. Being linked with local sanction, any intervention shall require a sensitive approach ‘without hurting the pride and sentiments of the local population and without creating a tribal-non-tribal divide.’ The community people might perceive the interventions of development agencies as a direct attack on their beliefs and culture. Hence, a very careful and balanced approach must be adopted by the developmental practitioners working in this domain. (ibid., pp.145).

Barman (2002), one of the few anthropologists studying witch-hunts in contemporary Bengal, claims that witch-hunt is a sort of persecution towards women, especially widows, who face a condition of marginality culminating in total exclusion from society. Her analysis confirms the findings of her previous works on the subject, as per the case study of Malda district in West Bengal, that witch-hunt in India primarily occurs due to the struggle for property involving widows and the deceased husbands’ kin (Chaudhuri 1981; Kelkar et.al 1993).

It is believed that the handiwork of a witch is the cause of major diseases such as cholera, pox, death of family members, livestock, etc. The foremost part of Mishra’s (2003) study

deals with health and law in the tribal areas. Some of the worst healthcare facilities in India are found in the tribal belts of the country. There are less number of medical practitioners in these areas, and the people of the area take help from the witch doctors when they fall sick. Lack of proper health care facilities, illiteracy, and superstition all contribute to strengthen their trust on witch doctors (*janguru*). There are a few women witch doctors, but the field is dominated by men. These witch doctors serve as “medicine men”, and they also mediate in the day-to-day problems of the people. They are religious priests or religious ministers, who are regarded to be the ones next to God, and who play an active role to save the people from epidemics by means of special skills or knowledge which they possess. The witch doctors also perform an important role in identifying a witch and inciting a witch hunt.

Talukdar (2011) emphasizes the aspect of gender in witch-hunting practices in Assam. She views that “among 116 witch-hunting deaths during the last decade in the state, 60 are female while 56 are male. The fact that an almost equal number of males have been killed does not help to conceal the gender-based nature of this discrimination. Many of the males killed include their wives and children to negate any threat of subsequent retaliations by any living member of the ‘witch’s family” (26-27).

Chaudhuri (2014:14), in her book “*Witches, Tea plantation and lives of Migrant laborers in India*”, makes an attempt “to understand the complex network of relationships, ties of friendship, family, politics, and gender that provide legitimacy before the witch-hunt takes place”. According to her, witch-hunt in India shows that the gendered nature of conflict leading to witchcraft acquisition can be linked to epidemics and major diseases such as Malaria, Cholera, small pox, and the resultant death of family members or livestock which might all be blamed on the witch.

According to Kuli (2014), “the origin of witchcraft practice among Mising society is not known. But it is a belief that when someone dies accidentally or affected by unknown diseases, these acts are conducted by the witch. The main aim of witchcraft is to harm others to death. This practice is used as an essential tool in confliction related to family matters like land and revenue, property-related issues, and jealousy. When someone

cannot confront the reality, he/she takes the help of witchcraft to obtain status and power and also to take revenge in the society. Those people are the propagator of witchcraft” (83-84).

Theoretical framework

Patriarchy

According to Walby (1990:214), “patriarchy” is a fundamental notion of the radical second-wave feminists, who define it as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women." The relations between men and women have been described as colonial or class relations. It has been concluded that “women's subordination could not be explained by, or with the terms of, those other systems of inequality. The rubric of patriarchy presented one particularly influential effort toward developing a general theory of sex-gender oppression.” Millet (1970).in her revolutionary book *Sexual Politics*, talks about the feminist use of the term patriarchy. Succinctly, in the radical feminist understanding, Eisenstein (1979:17) states that patriarchy is a "sexual system of power in which the male possesses superior power and economic privilege."

Doing gender and bargaining theory

The concept of gender refers to social expectations in the form of rules and behavior for the individual in everyday life. Gender is a social product rather than merely a result of biological sex differences. West and Zimmerman (1987) remark that, “doing gender” involves “socially guided behavior and interactions that constantly create expressions of an individual’s masculinity or femininity. Thus, in doing gender (at least in traditional societies), men are expected to behave in that ways that construct them as powerful, dominant, and in control of socio-economic and political order. Women are expected to behave in ways that (re)create a subservient, weak, and subordinate in status.” For example, the literature on witch-hunts repeatedly mentions that women with healing powers and midwives, or women possessing economic prosperity are seen to be dangerous to the system of patriarchy. As per the bargain model of relations, “the

bargaining position of each partner is affected by gender-specific, economic, and other opportunities and by changes over time in the value of women's sexual and domestic resources, depending on specific cultural and social setting."

Dual deviance

The idea of "dual deviance" indicates deviance at two levels. In level one, there is the "deviant group" and the "moral entrepreneur group" or "labeling group". The actions of the deviant group are regarded as dangerous to the moral order of the society or community to which the deviant group and the labeling group are related. The labeling or the moral entrepreneur group intends to uphold the community's moral boundaries and also assigns or classifies the deviant group as deviant. The term "moral entrepreneur" was coined by Howard Becker in *Outsiders* (1963). According to him, "the moral entrepreneurs fall into roughly two categories: 'rule creators' and 'rule enforcers'. The rule creators can be seen as moral crusaders, who are concerned chiefly with the successful persuasion of others, but they are not concerned with the means by which this persuasion is achieved. Successful moral crusades are generally dominated by those in the upper social strata of society. There is political competition in which these moral crusaders carry out crusades in order to reform them, based on what they think is moral, thereby defining deviance in every form possible. Moral crusaders must have power and public support, generate public awareness of the issue, and be able to propose a clear and acceptable solution to the problem" (Becker, 1963).

In the second level of dual deviance, the moral entrepreneurs are seen as deviants by a third group, outside both the deviant and the labeling group in the first level. This third group is outside the community, but it forms a chunk of the larger community which the group belongs to in the first level. In the second level, this third group performs to be the moral entrepreneurs. The labeling group in level one gets converted into the deviant group, whereas the real deviant group becomes the victim. In order to apply this logic to the contemporary Indian witch-hunts at level one, the accused witches are the deviants in the community, and they cause harm and misfortune to the tribal villagers. The accusers (who are typically other villagers), *mibo* (Mising local priest), and the village headman

act as moral entrepreneurs who see witches to be a danger to a peaceful society. The victims in level one are the victims of the witch's evil spell. At level two, the moral entrepreneurs include the state, the police, and outside the tribal community members that consider the accusers to be the deviants. Witch-hunting, at this level, is regarded as a harmful phenomenon for the tribal community, and the victims are found to be innocent people who are accused as witches.

The Statement of the Problem

This dissertation attempts to find out the meaning and explanation of witch-hunts in contemporary times in the Mising community of Assam. The study is based on in-depth interviews. The dissertation, especially focuses on the circumstances under which the belief in witches leads to subsequent witch-hunts in contemporary India. Although, in Europe and the American colonies, the spate of execution of women as witches, generally indicated to be “the early modern witch craze”, ended in the 1700s. Unfortunately some women are still being accused or labeled as witches in developing countries such as India. Indian local newspapers report witch-hunting incidents at a fluctuating pace which confirms that even under the prevailing era of science and technology lurks the shadow of superstition. People very often indulge in heinous practices in the name of traditional belief and practices and, in the process, become victims of them pitifully. Witchcraft is one such heinous practices, which has wide-ranging effects in society. The report provided by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) states that 768 women were murdered in India following accusations of being ‘witches’ during the period 2008-2012. A report published by North East India Studies (NEIS) states that there were more than 65 witch-hunting cases in Assam alone during the period 2007-2012.

This dissertation adopts a deviant behavior approach to analyze contemporary witch-hunts. It deals with various factors contributing to witch-hunts in the tribal areas of Assam, especially the Mising. This dissertation attempts to find out as to what defines a “deviant” (in case of witch) in the Mising community and what social condition makes for “suitable” aspects leading to a deviant. This research work has integrated the anthropological literature on deviance and on witch-hunts to understand and explain the

factors or conditions influencing witch-hunts in India. On a theoretical level, the study will be useful in developing and broadening the scope of anthropological theories from a non-western perspective by explaining who qualifies as a “credible deviant”.

Research Questions

Following the statement of the problem, the research questions have been formulated as follows:

RQ1: *How does power relation exist in the Mising society?* The Mishing follow patriarchal pattern of family structure. Inheritance of property goes through male line and daughters do not have claim on paternal property. Only the maternal properties like bangles and other ornaments are passed on to the females. Thus the patriarchal structure of family, unequal status with men in ritual functions, non-claiming of property after getting married, unable to make financial decision in the family and village matters all contribute to establishing women's subordination and help men's societal dominance.

RQ2: *What is their socio-economic status?* The Mising are one of the backward communities of Assam. Since ancient times, they are engulfed in superstitious beliefs and practices, which indicate lack of literacy and weak socio-economic condition.

RQ3: *How far does the subordinate position of women help us to understand the practice of witchcraft?* For instance, the literature on witch hunts has mentioned that the gendered nature of conflict leading to witchcraft accusation is linked to epidemics, major diseases, accident and the resultant death of the family members or livestock which might all be blamed on witch. In many cases witches are believed to be women who are suspected to utilize their powers to harm others. Among those accused of witchcraft, most of them are vulnerable women, children, mentally ill people or elderly women, who are sometime the victims of an accuser's personal grudge.

RQ4: *Who are the witches and victims of witchcraft?* Witches are mostly believed to be women who are suspected to possess magical powers that can bring evil to the community. It is difficult to prove the existence of witches or find real evidence of witches. Witch hunts are not directed at real witches (Jensen 2007:12-18). Instead they

are individuals who are “victimized” for particular characteristics. Thus, witch hunts are a response by society towards individuals who do not adequately fit social gender roles in conventional ways.

Both male and female can be accused of witchcraft, but most of the accused are vulnerable section of the society, such as women, the poor and elderly people.

RQ5: *Is there a connection between the low social status of individuals and individuals being suitable targets for witch-hunts?* Studies on witchcraft finds that women and other vulnerable section of individuals become a suitable target of witch hunt. Their role, income, unequal distribution of power, property, decisions making capacity in the family and village matter indicates lower social status in the society.

RQ6: *Do women with property, skills, and male guardians face less a threat of attack as witch?* Studies indicate that witch-hunting generally is directed by personal revenge, conflict over land and other property. While studying witch hunting in the Adivasi community, Nathan and Kelkar (1993:117) argue that witch hunting usually occur in conditions where the women possess an economic status which is comparatively higher thus becoming a threat to male authority. It is also found that women with male guardians compared to vulnerable women are less prone to victimization.

RQ7: *Are witch-hunts higher in communities where the community is located away from the mainstream population?* In other words, as structured enemies in these areas are absent, people look for hidden enemies in their neighbors for causes of death, misfortune or other accidents. The lack of structured conflict and the homogenous nature of the community might lead to higher rates of witch hunts. In the Indian context, the areas where the hunts occur, are isolated both geographically and in relation to community life. The Mising live in a homogeneous social structure. They live in areas situated far from the nearest town. They have poor basic amenities, such as electricity, water, school and health and are an isolated unit. Currently the Mising of Assam are undergoing identity problems.

RQ8: *Is there a connection between the rate of falling sick and the rate of witch-hunts in the community?* As seen in the previous studies on witchcraft, ‘witch’ accusations come from the relatives or fellow villagers of the accused, but not from strangers. All witch hunt incidents are a result of prolonged illness and disease death.

RQ9: *How does the village and family level politics have a important role in the process of witch-hunting?* Geographical proximity of the witch accuser and the accused is important. Rarely do the hunts involve strangers. The targets and the offenders can be related either through blood, marital, occupation or through physical proximity (neighbor).

RQ10: *Does any connection with religious beliefs contribute to witchcraft practices?* Anthropological studies on witchcraft shows there is a strong co-relation between religious rites and rituals and witchcraft practice. It is found that religious practitioners or local healers fall victim to witch accusations. As stated by Payeng (2014) the Mising’s beliefs on witchcraft mainly derive from the belief in existence of soul after death.

Aims and Objectives

Based on above discussion, the following aims and objectives have been identified. There are three objectives of the study:

1. The study aims to understand the history of witchcraft in Mising society.
2. Focus will be made to understand how certain women are branded as witch.
3. The objective is also to understand the role of village and family politics in witch-hunting.

Tools and techniques of data collection

This dissertation examines the pattern of incidents of witch-hunts among the Mising of Majuli Island District of Assam and seeks to understand and explain contemporary witch-hunts through in-depth analysis of the incidents. The in-depth analysis of these cases will be helpful in the analysis of social indicators that lead to social reactions in the form of

witch-hunts. This dissertation also uses a combination of methods: qualitative methods of interviewing, selected case studies, and ethnography, which allowed the people studied to relate their experiences on witch hunts. The data collection of this project spanned a total duration of three months.

For detailed study two villages of Majuli were selected namely Borduwa Luhit Chapori and Balijan respectively which come under Goal Goan Anchalik Panchayat of Kamalabari development block of Majuli. The two villages have been selected on the basis of occurrences of witch-hunts in the last ten years. Household survey reports were collected from Anganwadi centres, panchayat office and village headman on the basis of different variables of age, sex ratio, educational qualification, income, marital status, family type, land size of the family from each village. These variables provided useful insights during group discussion.

To study the problems, anthropological tools and techniques were used for data collection. This study is primarily founded on case study method, qualitative method, and ethnographic study. The data has been taken from both “primary” and “secondary” sources. Primary data are based on observation, personal interviews, and group interviews followed by non-participant observation and unstructured interviews. Secondary data was taken from literatures which were available viz. books, journals, articles, newspapers, web sites, etc.

Observation

Observation is a scientific technique was used as a principal method during fieldwork. It provided insights to understand the situation better. Observation in Anthropology is not just viewing but trying to understand every aspect and noting it down. Also, non-participant observation method was used as a technique of data collection to study from a distance.

Interview

A substantial part of the data for this dissertation came from face to face interviews with accusers, accused, villagers, and activists involved in the witch-hunt interviews. As the

main purpose is to understand and explain contemporary Indian witch hunts, the use of face to face in-depth interviews is an appropriate method, as this method helps the researcher to learn what participants perceive, and how they interpret their perceptions, that is the interior experiences of participants.

Non-structured Interview

The required data gathered through interaction with different people, i.e. accusers, accused, villagers, local priests and activists. Some questions were put in a conversational style. Respondents were contacted during home visits.

Case-study

Case study is the in-depth studying of a person, institution or an organization, and social group. Four cases of witch-hunting incidents have been documented in support of the research. It helped to understand the villagers' intentions and motives and experiences of witchcraft, their present situations and reality. Case studies are collected from face to face interviews with accusers, accused, villagers, local priest, and activists involved in witch-hunt. Each case is an individual case of a witch-hunt incident, and there are twenty-one variables for each case. The variables are, year of the witch hunt incident, gender, age, religion/tribe, marital status, and occupation of the victim/accused; whether the accused was a midwife; whether there was any previous family or village conflict between the accused and the individual who accused him/her of practicing witchcraft; whether there was any presence of illness or disease in the "victim" of the witch; the characteristic of the "victim" of the witch; the characteristic/gender of the accuser; the relationship between the accused and the accuser; whether there was any involvement of the local *ojha* or priest during the witch-hunt; whether there was a witch trial prior to the hunt; the method of the hunt; characteristics of the "witch"; characteristics of the village; whether there was any legal action; and if so, what kind of legal action was taken. These four cases were selected on the basis of uniqueness in terms of number of individuals accused in each case, reaction of the police, methods of the hunt, and so on. A detailed discussion on the selected cases will be done on the issues in Chapter IV.

Sampling methods

In order to select the sample for the in-depth interviews, snowball or network sampling methods were used. Network sampling, as the name suggests, relies on social ties to access a group of participants, who then refer to another group and so on. Contacts were thus crucial for sampling in this method. In the villages, the sample was selected from the villagers who were present at the time of the incident, and the villagers who were involved in the incident, the headmen, and the relatives of the accused or accuser

The significance of the study

The current research study is based on short-term ethnographic study of Mising of Majuli. This study provides several insights into the witch hunting incidents, their patterns in the present period. In addition to academic contribution, the study would be useful in formulating future policies related to witch-hunts in India. The analysis of the circumstances along with observations on the anti-witch hunt in the area will give clues to future policy-makers on how to prevent witch hunts among the tribal people.

Limitation in the fieldwork

During fieldwork, certain restrictions and hindrances were faced. Some of the factors that pertain to it are as follows- as Majuli is a island and the selected villages are very far from district headquarter the problem of the transportation remained as one of the core hindrance.

The other main problem faced during my fieldwork was interviewing respondents about witch hunting as the phenomenon is “highly” sensitive. It was difficult to get participants to talk about such events due to fear of retaliation or ostracism, and the extreme level of secrecy involved during the actual incidents of witch-hunts.

Chapterisation

The layout of this dissertation consists of seven chapters. The first Chapter is entitled “Introduction” which includes literature survey, conceptual and theoretical framework, the statement of the problem, research questions, research objectives, and methodology.

The Chapter II discusses the ethnographic profile of the Mising community in detail. The Chapter III gives a brief idea about the Mising religion and witchcraft. The Chapter IV throws light on the witch-hunting cases in Majuli. The Chapter V discusses women as witches in Mising society. The Chapter VI analyses on the witchcraft accusation and local politics in Mising society. The Chapter VII is the conclusion and the research findings.

Chapter II

ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF MISING COMMUNITY

Origin

The Mising in Assam are one of the indigenous tribes. Racially, this tribe is identified as Mongoloid and ethnically one of the tribes called *Adis* of Arunachal Pradesh. It is believed that they have originated from the same ancestor called *Abutani*, the father of man or human race (Nyori 1993:2). According to Lego (2005:1), “The *Adis*, *Apatanis*, *Hill-Miris*, *Lobas*, *Mising*, *Nishis*, *Puroiks*, and *Tagins* of Arunachal Pradesh (India), Asom (India) and Tibet (China) belong to the great *Tani* group of Tibeto-Chinese family of Mongoloid stock”. In addition, Lego observes that geographically “the *Adis*, *Apatanis*, *Hill-Miris*, *Mising*, *Puroiks*, and *Tagins* universally accept *Abo-Tani* as their common ancestor.”

Thus originally the Mising were hill tribes living in the Siyang district of Arunachal Pradesh where *Adis* are mostly concentrated. They have close physical, linguistic, and cultural affinities with those of the tribes who call themselves as the *Adis*. It is worth mentioning that the *Pasi*, *Padam*, *Minyongs*, *Apatani*, *Nishis*, *Galongs* and other tribes of Abor hills of Arunachal Pradesh are called as *Adi* or *Abor* tribes. As such, the Mising also claim to be one of the *Adi* tribes.

At the time of their settlement in Assam, the Mising were called *Miris* by the non-Mising in the plains, and still officially they are recorded as *Miri*. In his “*A History of Assam*”, Gait (1984:305) interprets the meaning of the term *Miri* as “go between” in the view of the fact that the Mising performed more or less the role of interpreter of both the plains people and the hill tribes, who did not know each other’s languages. The prominent writer Numal Chandra Pegu (1981:4) in his book “*The Mishing of the Brahmaputra Valley*” remarks that “A proposition that the word *Miri* is derived from the improper intonation of the word ‘*Miri*’, an ambiguous term denoting the socio- religious functions

prevalent among the *Pasi-Minyongs*, the *Padams*, and the *Galongs* of the Abor hills and the Mising of the plains is generally agreed upon to be genuine.”

Migration

From both oral and written literatures, it is clear that the Mising of the plains migrated from the present state of Arunachal Pradesh. Before migration, the Mising of the plains belonged to different clans or groups of the *Adi* tribes. At that time, there was no particular group called “Mising”. The community became known as “Mising” after the conglomeration of different clans of *Adi* group which left their abodes in the hills and settled in the valley. There was no particular occasion for different clans to get together and move down the plains at a time. Different clans gradually migrated at different points of time and through different routes under different circumstances and settled in different localities in the valley.

A section of the Mising was once called *Chutiya Miris* because they settled first in Chutiya land. The Chutiyas ruled a part of upper Assam beginning from the early part of the 12th century to the first half of the 16th century with their capital at Sadiya, which shares the border with the present district of Siang of Arunachal Pradesh (Baruah, 2007). So it can be said that some Mising settled in Assam before 15th century. But there is no historical literature of Assam wherein it is mentioned as to why the *Miris* came into contact with the Chutiyas and settled in their kingdom. It was the *Pagro* group of the Mising who were at that time called *Chutiya Miri* (Rajkumar, 2000). There is another group of Mising, which is known as *Samoguria*. This group does not know the Mising language. According to a folk story, the Mising from this group under some unfortunate circumstances happened to kill their own men and women in a dark night while they were living in the hills. After learning about the incident in the next morning, they became totally upset. Out of remorse, the group immediately left the place and floated down on a raft in the river Dibang and landed on the bank of the river Brahmaputra in Assam. The Ahom monarch appointed them to kill a big python which swallowed many men and animals of some villages in the locality. The skilled Mising archers killed the python by a poisonous arrow for which the king allowed them to settle in a place where there were

plenty of a kind of tree called *sham*. So, they became known as *Samoguriya Mising*, which means Mising settled in the area of *sham* tree. Since they did not come with any women, they married some local non-Mising women for which they lost their own language but retained their social customs, religion, beliefs, and practices.

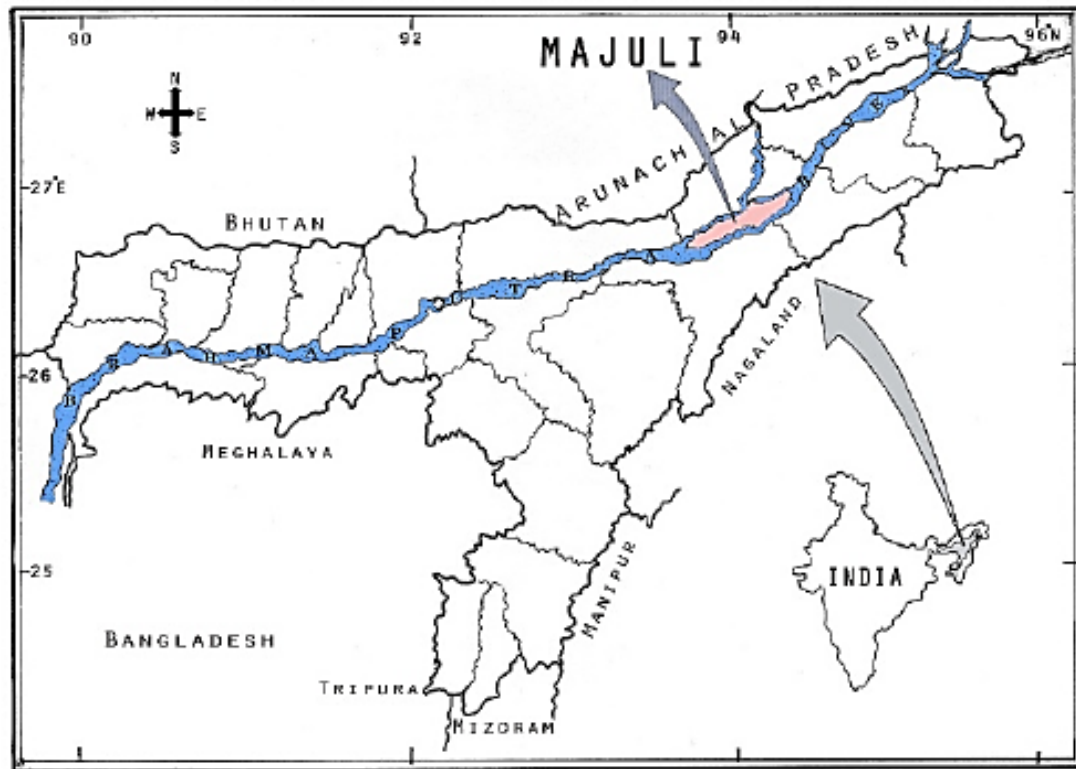
Prior to migration to Assam, the different clans of Mising lived in the present undivided Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh (Pegu, 2008). The district has a common border with the Chepakhuwa sub-division of Tinsukia and Jonai sub-division of Dhemaji District of Assam. While migrating to the plains, the Mising first settled along the bank of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The riverine areas of the valley were suitable not only for crops but also for growing various vegetables which the Mising used to take plenty in the hills. Moreover, the Mising find river banks cool due to the breeze coming from the riverine vegetation and therefore, suitable for habitation. Thus in the first phase of their migration, the Mising settled in the present district of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, and Tinsukia through which innumerable tributaries of Brahmaputra flow. From there, they gradually dispersed to the districts of Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, and Sonitpur.

Profile of the Majuli District

The present study is carried out in two villages of Majuli namely Borduwa Luhit Chapori and Baliyan respectively. Majuli is the first river island district of India declared as the new district carved out from Jorhat district in the year 2016 having 352 km². Majuli is situated between 26°45' and 27°22' north latitude and between 93°39' and 94°35' east longitude is the abode of the Neo-Vaisnavite culture of Srimanta Sankardeva¹. To the north of Majuli lies Biswanath Charali, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji district; Jorhat and Sivasagar district lies to the east. To the south there lies Golaghat district, and Tezpur district lies to the west. Majuli is well known as the largest human inhabited river island in the world that immensely deserve the glory of global heritage site for its unique scenic beauty and the cultural creativity of the indigenous communities that the island has nurtured since antiquity. Situated between the river Brahmaputra is a common homeland for many colorful ethnic groups.

¹Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) is one of the socio-cultural reformers of Assam

Map 1: Assam showing the location of Majuli



Source: www.researchgate.net

Majuli occupies a very significant position in the cultural map of the world because of its rich cultural heritage. The *Ek sarania dharma* or the Neo-vishnavite religion professed by Srimanta Sankardeva in medieval Assam has made a very significant impact in Majuli, through the *satras*. The Vishnavite culture, which constitutes the core of cultural heritage of Majuli, has been fostered by the *satras*, since time immemorial. In this regard, the main four *satras* patronized by the Ahom Monarch, namely, Dakshinpat, Auniati, Garamur and Kamalabari and about fifty nine other *satras* are tirelessly promoting the Neo-vishnavite philosophy and culture. Most of the *satras* of Majuli were established either at the royal patronage or by the *Satradhikars'* own endeavour. At present the *satras* are repositories or practicing centre of all Assamese classical dance and music, tagged together as satriya culture.

Table 2.1: Demographic Profile of Majuli

Sl. No.	Demography	India	Assam	Majuli
1	Area	3,287,263 km ²	78,438 km ²	352 km ²
2	Population	1,210,193,422	31,205,576	1,67,304
	Male	623,724,248	15,939,443	85,566
	Female	586,469,174	15,266,133	81,738
3	Population density / km ²	382	398	300
4	Sex ratio	940	958	955
5	Sex ratio	940	958	955
6	Literacy rate	74.04	72.19 %	78.56%
	Male	82.14	77.85 %	74.76%
	Female	65.46	66.27 %	61.34%

Source: Census 2011

The cultural diversity is another unique feature of Majuli. The heterogeneous social structure makes Majuli, a multi-cultured society. Apart from the Satriya culture, the rich cultural tradition of the indigenous ethnic communities makes Majuli a glorious cultural heritage site. The Mising are the single largest community in Majuli. This community carries a very rich culture and tradition. Their traditional food habit, *chang ghar*, traditional dresses and the festivals like *ali- aye-ligang*, *porag*, *murong ghar*, etc reflect their distinct cultural identity. The Mising of Assam live in village in sporadic manner in the midst of other non-Mising communities. As different groups came down from the hills through different routes and in different points of time, they settled in different areas though mainly on the banks of river. A group of family consisted of different clans forms a village. So a Mising village contains a number of households belonging to different

clans. There is hardly any single clan village among the Mising. In a village, however, there may be a cluster of households belonging to the same clan.

Generally, a Mising village contains not less than 50 households and its number goes up to five hundred or so at a place. The houses are built scattered mainly for the reason that the house site is selected by divination. The house is built only in the site which is found to be proper by test of divination. As proper sites are not necessarily found in a row, the houses are built in scattered manner in the village.

The Deories and the Sonowal Kacharies are another major ethnic group in Majuli. Like other tribes, they have also their own socio-religious festivals. Apart from these indigenous inhabitants of the island, the few other non-indigenous communities settling in Majuli are Bengali, Bihari (Deswali) Marwari, Nepali and a few Muslim families.

This agricultural community carries a very rich culture and tradition which enriched Majuli. They are found almost in the entire island. The indigenous art and crafts especially, the mask culture (*mukha silpha*) and the earthen pottery (*kumar silpha*) have been always attracting the outside people. The Salomora area is very significant for pottery craft. At present it is a matter of great concern that this area is on the verge of extinction due to the land depletion caused by perennial flood and erosion of the Brahmaputra which subsequently marks the question about the very existence of this island in near future.

The Area under Study

For detailed study two villages of Majuli were selected. The villages are namely Borduwa Luhit Chapori and Baliyan respectively.

Barduwa Luhit Chapori village comes under the Sriluhit Anchalik Gaon Panchayat under Kamalabari development block of Majuli district. To the north resides the river Subansiri and Kongkur Gaon, also to the south Malapindha and Lalitimorang Gaon resides. In the east Ajarguri and Namsing Bill and to the west there is Subansiri tributary and Notun Maharichuk village. The village is situated at a distance of around 17 Km from Majuli district headquarter. As data collected from village headman, there are around 152

household and around 1079 people residing in the village. The main source of income of the villagers is agriculture. There are two lower primary schools and one upper primary school in the village. There is an unavailability of high schools and colleges in that area so the students have to go several miles to attend their classes. Due to these reasons the proportion of illiteracy is high in this area. In following tables I have shown data regarding literacy, age-sex structure, and marital status and so on.

Village Balijan bounded by the Nalduwar gaon on the East, and Borduwa gaon on the West, Subansiri tributary in the North, Lalitimorang goan in the South. This *Mising* village is situated at a distance of around 13 Km from Majuli district headquarter. According to the village survey there are around 87 households and around 699 people residing in the village. Agriculture is the main source of income of the villagers. There is only one lower primary school.

The following tables shows the educational and age profile along with marital status of the population in these two villages will be very useful for analysis of the specific research objective of this study.

Table 1.2: Educational Profile of the Study population

S.N.	Educational Qualification	Bordua Luhit Chapori				Balijan				Total			
		Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
		No.s	%	No.s	%	No.s	%	No.s	%	No.s	%	No.s	%
1	Illiterate	385	69.87	398	75.37	203	65.27	308	79.38	588	68.21	706	77.07
2	Up to primary	91	16.51	101	19.12	59	18.97	60	15.46	150	17.40	161	17.57
3	Up to 10 th	35	6.35	16	3.03	19	6.10	10	2.57	54	6.26	26	2.83
4	Up to HS	25	4.53	10	1.89	17	5.46	4	1.03	42	4.87	14	1.52
5	Graduate	12	2.17	3	0.56	7	2.25	5	1.28	19	2.20	8	0.87

6	Other	3	0.54	0	0	6	1.92	1	0.25	9	1.04	1	0.10
Total		551	100	528	100	311	100	388	100	862	100	916	100

A profile of the educational status indicates that a majority of the population is still non-literate or dropouts after primary level education. There are several reasons for these. The principal among them is the lack of accessibility to the schools and other institutions of higher education. The geographical factor comes into play here. Certainly, governmental interventions need to be made at the earliest to reverse this situation.

Table2.2: Age distribution of the study population of Borduwa Luhit Chapori and Baliyan

S.N.	Age Group	Bordua Luhit Chapori		Baliyan		Total	
		Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%
1	0-10	111	9.15	102	12.54	213	10.50
2	11-20	89	7.33	93	11.43	182	8.97
3	21-30	123	10.14	109	13.40	232	11.44
4	31-40	423	34.87	272	33.45	695	34.28
5	41-50	211	17.39	122	15.00	333	16.42
6	51-60	165	13.60	61	7.50	226	11.14
7	61-70 above	91	7.50	54	6.64	146	7.20
	Total	1213	100	813	100	2027	100

Age-wise data shows that majority of the study population comprises of the young adult population with 51% of the population lying between 31-50 years. This is an indication

of the presence of a formidable work force, which probably influence collective decision-making and also execute the same.

Table2.3: Marital status of study studied village

S.N.	Marital Status	Bordua Luhit Chapori		Balijan		Total	
		No.s	%	No.s	%	No.s	%
1	Married	563	52.17	390	55.79	955	53.71
2	Unmarried	451	41.79	288	41.20	739	41.56
3	Widow	65	6.02	21	3.00	86	3.65
Total		1079	100	699	100	1778	100

This is a sizeable number given the average age at marriage among the population is 20 for boys and 18 for girls. This delay in entering into marriage is due to extraneous factors like exposure to other cultures largely due to migration for purpose of livelihood and economic diversification.

Housing pattern

The Mising traditionally live in a house which they call *taleng okum* or *chang ghar* which means a house built on a raised platform. The platform is raised five feet above the ground level. It is a long rectangular type single house containing one or more living rooms. Each room is marked by a fire place where children of each single family sit around in the evening time before going bed. In case of a joint family, the head lives in the last room of the house where food and drink are generally prepared and taken. All the members of the family come together and sit around the fire place of the head's room and take food together and also discuss family matters. The house has only two entrances-one in the front and the other at the back of the house.

The Mising houses are constructed by wood, bamboo, cane materials, and thatch for roofing. Wooden ladders are fitted in the front and the back of the house for climbing to

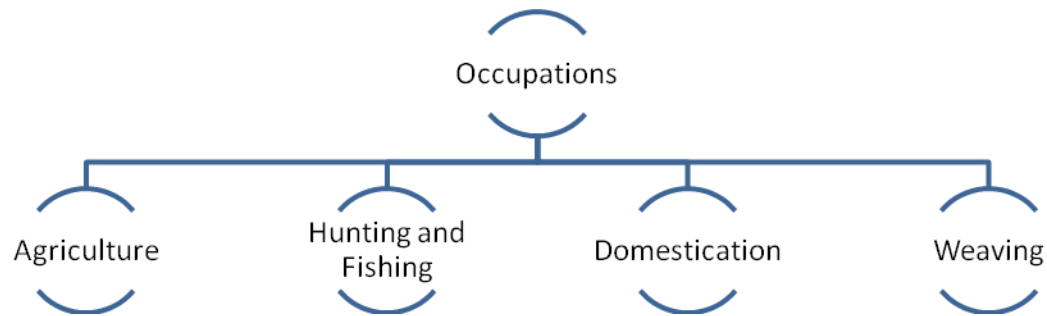
the raised platform. One or two spacious platforms called *kare* are constructed attached to the main house, mainly for drying paddy grain in the day time and for sitting and gossiping in the evening during summer. On every fire place, a piece of ceiling made of bamboo splits is kept hanging for the purpose of smoking fish and meat which Mising relish most. The suspended ceiling is called *perap* on which they keep earthen jars (which are used to store rice beer) upside down for smoking them. It is important to note that the Mising regard the fire place to be the most sacred. It is constructed on the platform in the middle of the kitchen which is divided into upper area (*ri:sing*) and lower area (*koktog*). The *ri:sing* has ritual significance and social status.

Economic life

Economy is one of the basic social institutions of any social system. It is an organized system of production and distribution of goods and services required for living. Technology is the main determinant of the system but culture has also role to play in its operation. In the tribal society which is characterized by application of crude technologies to production, culture plays the major role in functioning of the system leading to development. As such economy becomes relevant to understanding sanskritization of tribal culture.

The Mishing are primarily dependent on agricultural economy (Doley, 1998). They produce mainly rice, mustard oil, black pulse and varieties of leafs and fruit vegetables. Rice is their main objective of production not only because it is their staple food but it is necessary to prepare their national beverage rice beer called *apong*, which is an indispensable item of socio-religious functions of the community (Sharma et.al 1998:117). According to Doley (1998) as Mising live in near to river bank that facilitated hunting and fishing, which is their another important economic activities. The Mishing are generally rear pigs, chicken, duck, goat, pigeon for consumption and ceremonial needs. But from around 1970-80, due to economic pressure, they have started to opt for other business. They earn their living by selling pigs as the popularity of pork has increase over the years. The Mising women are expert weavers and handloom designer. Now a-days Mishing women use their handloom products for commercial purpose.

Fig: 2.1: Showing occupational pattern of the Mising



Agriculture

The Mising are traditionally agriculturalists and spend most of their time in cultivating paddy. They produce two types of paddy; namely *ahu* (the dry variety) and *shali* (the wet variety). *Ahu* is cultivated in high lands, while *shali* in low lands or wet fields. Traditionally, there is no practice of irrigation in the agricultural fields. Their paddy cultivation solely depends on the seasonal rain water. During rainy season, the low lands where they cultivate the *shali* variety of paddy become full of water. The people also produce mustard seeds, black gram (*matimah*), sweet potato, jute, cotton, banana, etc. They also have learnt to cultivate some other vegetables, fruits, pulses, and cereals as subsidiary crops.

Table2.4: Occupational patterns in the study village

S.N.	Occupation	Bordua Luhit Chapori				Balijan				Total			
		Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
		Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%
1	Primary(agriculture)	511	86.46	481	98.56	342	90.47	317	98.75	853	88.02	798	98.64
2	Secondary(migratory)	71	12.01	4	0.81	34	8.99	3	0.93	105	10.83	7	0.86
3	Tertiary (market based and other profession)	9	1.52	3	0.61	2	0.52	1	0.31	11	1.13	4	0.49
Total		591	100	488	100	378	100	321	100	969	100	809	100

It was observed during the study that large numbers of school dropouts are opting for secondary means of livelihood. They generally migrate to industrially advanced states for availing the opportunities of earning in the construction industry. Women are mainly involved in the agricultural and other household chores. They are generally less preferred to migrate for various reasons, such as security purpose, economic hardship etc. Season migrant workers are in good numbers. Some of the villagers prefer to migrate mainly because of economic hardship, as there are large numbers of landless family in the village.

Table2.5: Landholding system in the study village

S.N.	Land Size	Bordua Luhit Chapori		Balijan		Total	
		Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%
1	Landless	79	51.97	45	51.72	124	51.88
2	0-2 acre	41	26.97	33	37.93	74	30.96

3	Above 3 acre	32	21.05	9	10.34	41	17.15
Total		152	100	87	100	239	100

The womenfolk have an important role in agriculture. The activities like ploughing, sowing, manuring, and carrying the harvested crops from the field to the granary are the tasks of the males, while transplantation, weeding, harvesting, thrashing, winnowing, and husking of the paddy are the activities of the females.

No joint ownership of land is prevalent among the people. As the Mising are agriculturalists, most of the festivals, rituals, and ceremonies are found to be associated with different activities and occasions of cultivation. Thus the major festivals like *Ali-aye-ligang*, *po:rag*, *saragpuja*, *dobur puja*, *amrok*, and *kuber puja*, etc. are all associated with different phase of agricultural cycle.

Hunting and fishing

Traditionally, the Mising were fond of hunting and fishing. Originally, they used to settle on river banks that facilitated fishing. Hunting was also not difficult as forests remained within their easy reach. Community fishing and hunting was a unique economic pursuit. However, this is on the decrease now-a-days due to various reasons. Fishing beds and hunting grounds are not easily available now. Besides, there have been some changes in the socio-economic life of the people.

The common hunting weapons of the Mising are *machor* (firm-arms), *kali* (spears), *abog-apuk* (bow and arrow), and *yoktung* (dao). Hunting in group is generally a merriment activity. If someone from a family goes for hunting, the entire family does not take meat or slaughter any bird or animal till the return of its member(s) from hunting expedition.

Fishing is much more popular among the people, and it is frequently practiced by them. Community fishing or group fishing is generally fixed in advance and the party proceeds in the early morning of the day towards the fishing spot. Both the male and female members can participate in the fishing party. However, they can also do it separately. The

females also catch fish from their surroundings in summer and rainy days by using *zakoi* (drawing basket), *chalon*i (net-basket), *zurki* (plung-basket), and *tuli* (fish storing basket). The menfolk uses *kali* (spears), *assap* (drowning net), *zurki* (plung basket), and different types of traps made of bamboo splits known as *dirang*, *dingora*, *porang*, *turji*, *dirtok*, *pod*i, and *paraak*. There are two occasions when fish can be caught easily, i.e. during the winter and the onset of monsoon. In winter, the natural *beel* (ditches) and small rivers and streams become dry, shallow, and easy for fishing. Again, on the onset of monsoon, the first rain results in a small current of water to the deep-water resources or rivers. The fish run up in these current up to the shallow lands, where the people can catch it. They also catch tortoise and crabs during fishing. Formerly, the Mising caught fish only for household consumption and for festive occasions but, now-a-days, they also do it for selling in the market as a good source of income.

Food habits

The Mising may be called voracious eaters of rice with meat and fish curry cooked with mainly leafy vegetables. They eat all varieties of fish and meat of all animals. They eat chicken, pork, deer, duck, and goat meats and avoid horse, dog, monkey, snake, cat, etc. Beef is strictly prohibited by them. A beef eater may be excommunicated. A Mising family or the village community honor a guest by offering rice beer called *po:ro apong* (pure wine). They also prepare white variety of rice beer called *nogin apong*. Without *apong*, a religious function is considered incomplete. *Apong* continues to be a cultural item for the Mising. Like any other tribes, the Mising never used tea as a part of their daily beverage.

Domestication

The Mising traditionally domesticated different animals, such as pig, goat, cow, and buffalo and the birds, such as fowls, duck, pigeon, and chicken. Pork is a very popular delicacy among the people. They get milk from the cows and buffaloes. The buffaloes along with bullocks are also used as draught animals in their agricultural fields. Chicken and its eggs are also important delicacies among the people.

Almost every household rears pigs and fowls. Apart from being a source of cash income, both pig and chicken are considered to be very important on ritual and festival occasions. The guests are generally entertained with chicken and pork to make the occasion lively and successful one. Usually, the females of the family take care of the domestic animals and birds.

Weaving

Like most other communities in Assam, weaving forms a part of the Mising life. It, however, is confined to the womenfolk only. Every household possesses its own loom and the yields are generally meant for domestic consumption. The girls get training on their household loom right from the childhood. They generally weave the items like *gamocha* (a kind of towel), *ugon* (a cloth for males to use as dhoti), *ege* (a female lower garment also known as *mekhela*), and varieties of female upper garments called *sumpa*, *dumer*, *hura*, *galuk*, etc. Apart from these, they also weave warm clothes like, *endi-chador*, scarf, etc. Now-a-days, they also produce fine and beautiful clothes using polyester and woolen yarn purchased from the market.

Dress and Ornaments

The people usually wear their traditional dresses inside the village and during ceremonial or festive occasions. However, the minors, the youths, and the educated people are generally found in modern dresses. The aged males often wear a short dhoti (*ugon*) from waist to knee and keep the upper part of the body bare in summer.

There are several traditional dresses for the males. *Galuk* is a shirt with open front and short sleeve decorated by coloured stripes over the back and waist. A head-gear (*dumer*) with coloured decoration is also an important dress item. The *ugon* is usually white in shade, but some coloured and decorated ones are also not infrequent.

The traditional dresses of the females are unique among the Mising. After marriage, the traditional dress called *ege* (cloth to cover the lower part of the body from the waist) and *gero* (cloth to cover the upper part from hips to the neck) are compulsory for a Mising woman. Wearing *ege-gero* symbolizes the marital status of Mising women. The

unmarried girls wear only the *ege* to cover the lower part of blouse. The girls also use a piece of cloth sufficient to cover their chest called *ku:pok*.

All the Mising traditional dresses for men and women are home-made or home spun. Female clothes are made very colourful making them quite attractive. In fact, Mising *ege*, *ribi*, *gaseng*, and *mibo galuk* (priest-shirt) have good market demand for their colourful designs as well as quality. Mising *gadu* is not a dress but a heavy cotton rug made for family use. Thus the Mising have their own dress pattern.

The Mising have a number of traditional ornaments. The females wear the ornaments in ear-lobe, wrist, arm, and neck. Both gold and silver ornaments are used but the golden ones are preferred and valued more. The most common ornaments used in ear include *jengphai*, *kentu*, *turi*, etc. *Golpota* (a necklace of unique design), *madoli* (a drum-shaped ornament used as locket), *polo-madoli* (a crescent shaped ornament used as chain), *sandrang* (a necklace of a number of flat silver beads), *docksiri* (a necklace of coloured beads and golden or silver chain), etc. are the common ornaments for neck. There are other two highly-valued and sacred necklaces, locally known as *dokne* and *tadok*. These are made of unique types of coloured beads and are inherited from generation to generation. These are sometimes used in certain family rituals as well as in festivals. The frequently used bracelets include *konge*, *onsomora*, and *gam-keru*.

Social life

Clan organization (Opin)

Like any other tribes, the Mising society is also based on clan relationships. A number of patrilineal clans constitute the society. A clan is called *opin*, which is formed by the offspring of the same ancestor, and which traces its origin to a common male ancestor. For example, the clan *doley* traces its *opin* from *se:bo* from which all *doley* have originated. A clan may also have a number of sub-clans.

Among the Mising, there are 51 exogamous clans (Pegu, 2005:22) so far, and each clan has sub-clans. Individual belonging to the same clan cannot have marital relationship between or among them. One must search for one's life partner from any other clan with

whom marital relationship is permissible. However, the Mising have also a system of clan alliance. Some clans form an allied group, the members of which do not establish any kind of sexual relations including marital relationship. For example, the clans such as *doley*, *kutum*, *kuli*, *kumbang*, *taye*, etc form an allied group and they do not establish any marital or sexual relationship with each other. A *doley* boy does not marry a *kutum* or *kuli* or *taye* girl although they do not belong to the same single clan. The alliance does not have any significant function except in the sphere of marital relationship. It is not known under what circumstances and for what purpose the alliance was originally formed, but the practice has been maintained without any break till now.

The Mising marriage (Midang)

The Mising regard marriage as one of the most important objectives of life. They call marriage, *midang*. This means to take a woman home for the purpose of procreation of offspring, which is very important for survival and continuity of clan. The Mising follow patrilineal and patrilocal pattern of kinship. Their kinship is traced to the paternal side and the woman is taken to man's parent's family, where she adopts the surname of her husband and the children born to them get the surname of their father. So, as soon as a boy attains marriageable age, his parents look for a girl for marriage.

Mising marriage is a two-day affair. On the first day after having performed all the necessary rituals, the groom goes to the bride's home accompanied by a pair of page boy and girl, and some young boys and girls and three relatives of the groom. The rituals consist of taking bath by ritually-collected water from river or ponds, wearing fresh white clothes specially made for the purpose, and offering prayer to the deities for safe journey to the bride's home and return. After completing these rituals inside the house, the groom is taken out by a group of young boys and girls by beating drum and cymbal in a procession which is called *mida-yamnam* meaning "marriage in procession". The procession comes to an end in front of the house where the village young boys and girls get together and hold a round of merry-making by singing and dancing and bless the groom for safe and happy journey and return home with the bride. Meanwhile, two messengers called *duktad* leave for the bride's family to inform that the groom is coming.

Then they announce the message in the bride's village by distributing pieces of areca-nut among the individual families so that the bride's family as well as the village folk gets ready to welcome the groom and his party. Accordingly, the bride's party receives the groom's party in a ceremonial manner and accommodates the guests in the makeshift camp arranged in front of the bride's home. The groom along with the pair of boy and the girl and few friends spend the night in the camp. In the evening, the young boys and the girls of the bride's village hold singing and dancing in front of the bride's home. The young boys and girls coming with the groom also join the merry-making. The evening becomes quite joyous.

In the next morning, some rituals are performed for preparing the bride to be received by the groom, and after all customary norms are complete, the groom is brought inside the bride's house ceremonially and is seated beside the bride. Both of them are asked to pray the deities and ancestors of the family for happy conjugal life. After the prayer, the bride and groom are taken out under the cover of the same cloth on heads with beating drum and dancing and singing. When the party is out of the house, the young boys and the girls receive them in the open yard of the house by holding a round of dancing and singing and then bid farewell to the groom's party and the bride. On the same day, the marriage party is received at the groom's family and, after completing rituals in this connection, the wedding comes to an end.

Thus Mising *midang* involves the participation of the entire village-folks of both bride and groom directly or indirectly. So, from the very beginning to the end of a *midang*, the whole thing becomes a community affair. At the time of making proposal and also at the time of final settlement and fixation of the wedding day, the members of the village community get involved in one or the other way. After the proposal is accepted, when the prospective groom comes to the bride's parents and spends a couple of days in the village, the matter becomes widely known to the village community and they look forward to the ensuing marriage. For Mising folks, *midang* means festivity in the village.

The Mising *midang* is a long-drawn affair. It involves considerable time, labour, money, and material costs. From the stage of submitting the proposal to wedding ceremony, it

takes not less than a year. For the Mising families mainly being cultivators, it is not manageable for them to hold a ceremonial marriage within a year. It takes more than a year to be fully prepared for such a marriage. It may also be mentioned that it is customary for the Mising bride to wear clothes made by herself and also for her mother and sisters. One of the important gifts is a heavy cotton rug called *gadu* which only Mising woman would make out of raw cotton. It takes more than six months to make a *gadu*.

Now-a-days, *midang* is confined to only the well-off and educated section of the community. Even then the procedures have been changed considerably. Now, the marriages are arranged on the basis of mutual love and consent. Marriage proposal is sent on prior consent of the boy and the girl. The parents' initiative in this regard is nominal and has become a matter of formality. The traditional *magbo dugnam* is given up. The wedding ceremony is also performed in the same day. It is no longer a two-day affair. The other customary practices have been however, maintained till now. The educated Mising are becoming conscious of their cultural identity in the changing socio-cultural situations of the general people of the contemporary time. There are different types of marriages popular among the Mising.

Kumbo sulala:nam (marriage by blessing): This is a simplified form of *midang*. In this type of marriage, many of the formalities of marriage are dropped. Once the proposal is accepted and finalized by the parents of the boy and the girl, the date for the wedding is fixed. Accordingly, the groom along with some of his relatives and friends come to the bride's family which arranges a simple religious function for the occasion. A few of the family's relatives and elderly persons of the village attend the ritual. In the presence of relatives and friends of both the parties, the union of the bride and the groom is declared as formally and ritually married. The couple kneels down before the priest and their helpers and prays for blessings. A simple entertainment is held on the occasion. The groom party returns home with the bride on the same day, and by performing a ritual in the family, the marriage is declared over. *Kumbo sulala:nam* marriage is preferred when the families concerned cannot afford time and expenses of formal *midang*. Now-a-days, educated boys do not like to go for *magbo-dugnam* because they do not have enough time

to spend in helping the girls family as per the custom. The girl's family itself does not prefer the practice in contemporary social system and cultural environment. So, the families of low economic status and educated boys and girls prefer simplified form of *midang* for which *kumbosula-lanam* is becoming popular. There are different types of marriage popular among the Mising.

Dugbolla:nam or *Po:lala:nam* (elopement) in Mising society is very common if not popular. It is socially not approved but tolerated, in view of some compelling circumstances. It takes place when love develops between a boy and a girl for each other but the parents of either one or both do not allow their marriage. In such a situation, the boy and the girl elope and they stay outside their respective villages until the matter is settled. As soon as the incident is known to the parents of both the boy and the girl, the parents of the boy take the initiative to settle the matter. The problem becomes complicated when the opposing party refuses to reconcile to the elopement. However, after a protracted negotiation through the village council, the compromise of the parties is arrived at by asking the boy's parents to pay certain amount of money or a number of cattle in lieu of cash. This is called *aalig* or *adum* which means compensation for the girl whose departure from the family is considered to be a great loss because a girl in Mising society renders more service to the family than a boy.

Elopement is, however, socially formalized as marriage by performing a ritual in the boy's family. The community accepts the couple as duly married and allows them to enjoy all rights and privileges as enjoyed by formally married men and women.

Marriage by kidnap also takes place in Mising society though it is rare. If a girl is kidnapped, the girl's parents and their relatives react sharply demanding the return of the girl immediately. The matter is immediately discussed at the village *kebang* for necessary action against the family of the kidnapper. The boy's family, however, appeals to the girl's parents through *kebang* for mercy and allow the girl to be married. If the appeal is accepted, the case is settled on the payment of *aalig* and the marriage is ritualized. In such cases, the amount of *aalig* is very high, for which reason the boy of a poor family

does not dare to kidnap a girl. Now-a-days, marriage by kidnapping is totally given up. There was no report of marriage by kidnapping in any of the villages studied.

Family (Erang)

The Mising of Assam are patrilocal and patrilineal by tradition. The families are generally monogamous, but polygamous families are also not uncommon. Both nuclear and extended types of families are found among the people. They call the family *erang* which means a group of persons living together in a house. The group of persons, however, must be formed on the basis of marriage and birth, because *erang* does not mean a group consisting of any and every person of different clans and kin. The basic unit of an *erang* is a married couple and the children born to them. A Mising family is headed by the father or the eldest son in the absence of the father. When the sons are minor, the widowed mother can also act as the head of the family. A joint or extended family is managed and controlled by the eldest member even though the sons or the brothers may be adult ones. If one of the sons or brothers decides to live separately, he may do so and may claim for a share of his parental property. Usually, two or more nuclear families may live in a common house. Even a nuclear and an extended family may also live in a single household having separate kitchens.

Table 2.7: Family pattern of Borduwa Luhit Chapori and Balijan

S.N.	Family Type	Bordua Luhit Chapori		Balijan		Total	
		Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%
1	Nuclear	134	88.15	75	86.20	209	87.44
2	Joint	18	11.84	12	13.79	30	12.55
Total		152	100	87	100	239	100

The above table shows that more than 87 percent in the two villages are nuclear families and this resulted in disorganization of joint family and fragmentation of landholding to

the deceased's heirs. Inheritance of property goes through male line and the daughters do not have any claim in the paternal property. However, in some cases, a married daughter is found to live in her father's house with her husband and children, and these daughters are generally provided with a part of their father's property. In case a man has no son, his daughters may share the paternal property. In the absence of any children, the nearest agnates of the deceased person may inherit the property.

Religious life

Traditionally, the Mising subscribe to animistic faith. They believe in supernatural powers and a number of malevolent and benevolent spirits and deities. However, at present they embrace Vaishnavite Hinduism under the influence of the great scholar philosopher and saint of Assam Srimanta Sankardeva. But in reality, they subscribe to both the faith simultaneously. Thus, one finds the presence of both *Nam-ghar* (vaishnavite prayer hall) and *Satra* (Neo Vaishnavite institute) as well as *Ai-than*, *Dangaria-than* (places to propitiate spirits and deities), and *Murong* (a traditional public hall). The spirits are called by them as *ui*. There are different kinds of *ui*, such as *urom*, *taleng*, *gumin*, *dobur*, etc.

Urom ui is the spirit of the ancestors which appears after the sacrifice of two or three pigs and the offering of *apong* (home-made rice beer). *Taleng ui* is responsible for thunder, storm, lighting, drought, etc. They are worshipped occasionally both at family level and community level by offering fowl, pig, and *apong*. The *gumin ui* is considered to be a benevolent spirit of a family and is worshipped along with the *pujas* or offerings meant for other spirits. The *gumin* is believed to be the ancestral soul.

Dolung dobur ui, on the other hand, is the spirit that causes flood and other natural calamities as well as diseases. But, if worshipped regularly, it brings peace and prosperity to the villages. The worship may be performed both at family level and village level. The venue of worshipping *dolung dobur* is usually the outskirts of the village. It is a post harvesting socio-religious ritual.

The traditional rites of the Mising are performed by a priest called *mibo*. He is believed to have supernatural powers, and who has also to observe some restrictions of diet and behavior from his early childhood. The post of *mibo* is neither hereditary, nor is it limited to the members of some particular clan or family. The powers of *mibo* are divine, and these appear spontaneously during the childhood in a male who is needed to observe some definite rules and restrictions to be a *mibo*. They also do not have any totemic object to sustain their possession of supernatural powers. Besides the traditional rites and practices, the people also worship different Hindu Gods and Goddesses like *satyanarayan*, *lakshmi*, *biswakarma*, *saraswati*, and so on.

Festivals

Ali-aye-ligang

The Mising observe both their traditional festivals (i.e. *ali-aye-ligang* and *Porag*) as well as the common festivals of the Assamese people (i.e. Bihu). *ali-aye-ligang* is an agricultural festival. *Ali-aye-ligang* means “sowing seeds”. It is celebrated in the beginning of the *ahu* (a dry variety of paddy) season, i.e. on the first Wednesday of the Assamese month of *phagun* (February-March). On that day, the head of every family goes to his field and bring a handful paddy grain in the eastern corner of the field and offer prayers asking blessings of the *Do:ne-Po:lo* (sun and moon), *Sedi-Melo* (creator of the universe), and the ancestor of the family for safe and healthy growth of the crops. In the afternoon, the young boys and girls start a kind of singing and dancing called *Gumrag So:man*, a group dance in steps. The party holds *gumrag* in each and every house of the village offering prayer to the *Do:nye-Po:lo* for well-being of the family and their property. The family offers *poro apong*, *purang* (boiled packet rice), and other food stuffs available at that time to the *gumrag* party. The day is observed by entertaining friends and neighbors with food and drink.

Po:rag

Po:rag is also another important festival of the Mising. *Po:rag* is a festival of reunion of the people staying outside the village. In the natural process, some people particularly the

female members leave their own village on marriage and they cannot come back to the village frequently. The village people remain busy from morning till evening in their day-to-day works finding no free time to visit their friends and relatives of their own village. Therefore, the village youths feel the necessity of arranging a feast where the old and young men and women of the village as well as those who are staying outside may get together for the feast, and they can freely and leisurely enjoy food and drink for a day or two. With such objective in view, the village youths arrange a grand feast called *po:rag*, followed by some programs of dance and music. For that, a decorative open hall is constructed to accommodate atleast a hundred persons to take food and drink at a time. The hall is called *murang* (open house). They put 3 kg fermented rice into 500 leaf packets for ritual. For the feast during *po:rag*, at least 10-15 matured hogs are collected, and 10-15 quintals of rice are required along with many food stuffs like vegetables, fish, chicken, etc. In this way, a prolonged and thorough preparation is necessary ahead of holding *po:rag*.

Once the date is fixed for *po:rag*, the village folks become alert for their duties and responsibilities in performing the programme properly. Every person feels the question of prestige and reputation of the village community involved in holding the *po:rag* which would be attended by the distinguished invitees from outside the village. Invitation are sent out to those who are born and brought up in the village and now staying outside, particularly the women members who are living elsewhere after marriage. The next important groups to be invited are the youths of the neighboring villages who perform dance and music at the *po:rag*. Besides these groups, important personalities of the community are invited to the function. Apart from entertainment, *po:rag* is held to pray for peace and prosperity of the village community.

Thus *po:rag* has social and cultural significance. However, it is not regularly held now-a-days. In fact, many villages have stopped celebrating the festival. Due to heavy financial expenditure, it is hard to arrange such a huge feast. The Mising youths like those of other communities are becoming too busy in career making activities. They can no longer afford to spare time and labour for festivals like *po:rag*, which needs a long time to prepare.

Bihu

Bihu which refers to merrymaking festivals of Assam are the original festivals of the plains. They do not belong to Mising tradition. The Mising adopted them from the non-Mising Assamese communities in the plains. Now, the *bihus* have become part and parcel of their cultural system and accordingly they observe them enthusiastically. There are three *bihus* – *kati bihu*, *magh bihu*, and *bohag bihu*. On the day of *kati bihu* (autumn festival), the Mising also observe it by putting earthen lights in front of their individual house, granary, and in the paddy field for prosperity and good harvest. The *magh bihu*, the harvest festival is observed in the midst of January. The Mising offer prayer to the celestial Gods for good crops and harvest in the coming season. The *bohag bihu* is observed as new year festival in the mid-April. They follow the same procedures and programs of observing *bohag bihu* as the other non-Mising communities of Assam. Thus the Mising observe both Mising and non-Mising festivals of Assam. They have adopted the musical instruments such as *dhol* (drum), *pepa* (trumpet made of buffalo horn), *taal* (cymbal), etc.

Village organization

The Mising live in villages without any central authority. They do not have any particular land or region to be called Mising motherland under any single authority or ruler. They are self-ruled people by democratic political system called *kebang*, in which every person irrespective of age and sex freely express his/her view. As such, every Mising village has an independent organization, called *do:lung kebang* (village council) headed by *gam* (Chief). A senior man of personal integrity and well versed in Mising customs and traditions is selected as *gam*. He may belong to any clan but he must be able to earn confidence, respect, and good will of the fellow villagers. This is the principle of selecting a *gam* for the village community. He holds the office as long as he earns the confidence and appreciation of the people. He may be removed from gamship if he loses confidence of the members of the village community. He may be succeeded by his son if the son is found worthy of the office. So, gamship is not hereditary (Kagyung, 1989:12).

Literally, the word *kebang* means “a public meeting to discuss and decide any problem”. So, *do:lung kebang* is concerned with every type of problems of the village community. The nature of the problem may be personal or family disputes, a criminal offence, violation of customs, inter-village conflict, natural calamities, epidemics, socio-religious functions, etc. Whenever some problems arise, a *kebang* is held and a decision is taken on a consensus of opinions of the people attending the *kebang*. The session of the *kebang* is presided over by the *gam*, and his decision is considered as final and irrevocable. Thus the Mising have long tradition of resolving their problems democratically by themselves. Until recent past, the Mising did not resort to police and court for setting any interpersonal dispute among them. Even violent crimes like kidnapping, maiming, murder, etc. were tried and settled by the *kebang*. In recent time, however, the institution has become weakened under the impact of the emerging changes in the general society of the country. The British administration introduced the appointment of *gaonburah* (village head) for the Mising villages and the system also continues now. The *gaonburah* is granted some power and privileges to act on behalf of the district administration for maintaining peace and order in the village and also to look after some other problems. Now, *gaonburah* presides over the *kebang* for discussing all the problems which were discussed and solved earlier under the leadership of the *gam*. At the same time, *panchayati raj* has been introduced in the country after independence. Now all problems including minor crimes are dealt with by the *gaon panchayat*. Thus the traditional perfect democratic system of Mising village administration has been replaced by the mode of institutions like *gaonburah*, *gaon* panchayat, and development committees.

Youth organization

Another most important organization of a Mising village is the organization named, *ya:me-mimbir*, which consists of young boys and girls. As soon as a boy becomes 12-14 years old, he automatically becomes a member of the boy organization, and the girls after puberty also become members of the organization. The male members are put under the control of a senior male member and the girls under a senior female member.

The main objective of the youth organization is to organize the festivals like the *ali-aye ligang* (sowing and spring festival), *bi hu* (spring, autumn, and winter festivals), *porag* (community festival), etc. and also to help the individual families in distress for performing large-scale ritual functions and any other problems that affect community life. Whenever a family needs collective help in dealing with a problem, it requests either the boys' or the girls' group according to the nature of job required in solving the problem.

The common major problems of Mising families are related to cultivation and performing large-scale rituals. Many families due to death or diseases of family members fail to complete cultivation or harvest in time. In such situations, *ya:me-mimbir* are requested for help and in response to this, either boys or the girls and in some cases, both come forward to render free service for a day to a family. Similarly, collective labour is necessary in preparing ancestral worship for which *ya:me-mimbir* are requested. Thus the families of a Mising village depend very much on *ya:me-mimbir*. Apart from rendering help, the organization plays an important role in maintaining discipline among the youths themselves. The leaders keep eagle's eye on the behavior of their fellow members. If any one of them indulge in deviant behavior including sex, the leaders warn and take action against the deviant if necessary. Thus discipline and moral character of the youths in the village is maintained.

In recent time, however, the institution of *ya:me-mimbir* has become almost defunct and non-existent. In its place, various clubs, student organizations, literary and cultural organizations, etc. have cropped up among the Mising youth. They are getting busy in their studies as well as other organization activities. As such, they find no time to render help to the needy families or individuals of their villages. Moreover, the Mising families now-a-days get their works done by hired labour. Under these circumstances, the most democratic and useful youth organization has decayed and died in Mising society.

Summary

The Mising are originally a hill tribe belonging to the group of tribes called *Adi* of Arunachal Pradesh, and they are believed to have migrated in 13th century AD to the plains in different periods of time and settled at different places, mainly the banks of the

river Brahmaputra. The Mising are believed to have blood relations with the Miyongs, Pasi, Padams, and other Adi tribes living in the Abor hills of Arunachal Pradesh. In the 1976 constitutional amendment, Mising were declared as a scheduled tribe (plains). In Assam, they form the second largest plain tribe population and are spread in the districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, and Kamrup. Agriculture is the lifeblood of the economy of Mising. They grow different varieties of rice. The Mising are clan-based society having as many as 51 exogamous clans. They strictly follow the clan organization. The Mising have patrilineal and patriarchal system of family structure. They preferred to live in joint family system. Mising women play a very active role in the economy of the family. They rear various domestic animals and produce various traditional handloom productions for their own use and for sell.

Though Mising introduce themselves as Hindus, the types of beliefs and practices pertaining to what they call *Ui* meaning spirits do not fall into any sect of Hinduism or any other form of world religion. They practice animism and believe that the universe was created by a mystical power defined as *Sedi-Melo*. The staple food of the Mising is rice with meat or fish and leafy vegetables. As they are fond of hunting and fishing, they use different tools and techniques for that. Unlike many other hill tribes, they do not eat dog, beef, monkey, snake, etc.; rather they eat chicken, pork, mutton, and duck meat. Apart from their two festivals called *ali-aye-ligang* (seed sowing) and *po:rag* (community feast of reunion), the Mising also observe the three *bihus* of Assam along with their non-Mising communities. Thus the Mising are in dual cultural system maintaining their own as well as those of other non-Mising culture. It indicates the process of sanskritization in the cultural system of the community.

Chapter III

MISING RELIGION AND WITCHCRAFT

History of witchcraft among the Mising

The Mising religion has been mentioned as Animism. Even though in reality the type of beliefs and practices pertaining to what they call *Ui* meaning spirits do not fall into any sect of Hinduism or any other form of world religion. The Mising believe that the universe was created by mystical power defined by *Sed:Di-Me:Lo*. In Aadi and Mising society, there is one creator *Se:Di: Me:lo* according to the information received from Mising *Aa: Bang*. In the beginning, there was no water, land, or living beings, only a blurry misty environment called “*Kowyoom*”. It is worthy to mention that the Aadi Mising language had no script. That is why *Aa: Bangs* are unwritten in nature and it still passes on through oral traditions. As per Genesis and human history narrated in the *Aa:Bang*, “*Kowyoom*” is an early stage of creation. It was a great emptiness before creation started, beyond vision, beyond knowledge, infinitely infinite, unspeakable (Padun, 2005).

The early form of creation *Kowyoom*, is transformed with questions such as – Is water present? The answer is ‘absent’, Is land present? The answer is ‘absent’. Thus in *Kowyoom*, this ‘absent’ is present, and this presence of absence is *Kowyoom*. Just like generation of electricity from positive and negative charges, the beginning of ‘*Kowyoom*’ takes place from the vibration of ‘absent’ and ‘present’ energies. “The infiniteness of infiniteness started throwing out an ethereal vibration of friction. This then shattered the eternal silence and filled the emptiness with waves of ethereal vibrations.” After seven stages of this ethereal vibration, *Se:Di:* and *Me:Lo:* come into being. *Se:Di:* is considered as Nature and *Me:Lo:* as male. To describe the unspeakable form of *Kowyoom*, the names of *Se: Di:* and *Me: Lo:* are used. In *Aa:Bang*, the words *Na:No* (mother) and *Ba:Bu* (father) is used to indicate nature and male respectively. Mising people always consider

nature equivalent to female. These two words are not father-mother of sensory humans; they are male and nature in symbolic meaning (Padun, 2005:5).

According to Padun (2005:13-14) the traditional folklore has started from this form of *Kowyoom*, otherwise everything would have ended right here. The Aadi-Mising have been taking it as a source of religion as well as literature. A Vibration automatically started from the core of this vast emptiness. This emptiness attained wholeness through this heavenly vibration. A tiny element of lightening emerges among this emptiness and this current passes through the visible and invisible. But this lightening was the final scene of this place. This stage of transformation is called *Ka:si*. This lightening then moved in rapid pace, speeding towards the infinity which is beyond the reach of thought and imagination for a description. This moving stage is called *Siyang* or *Si:an*. This flow of *Si:an* gradually attained more force and expansion to create a valley like deep bottom. This stage is called *Aa:bo* or *An:bo*. After a time this river or sea like bottom is filled with a mysterious mist like covering. This stage is called *Bo:mug* or *Aa:mug*. After this the covering gradually became clear and condensed into cloud like form. This stage is called *Mukseng*. All the stages mentioned above from emptiness, lightening, mist all these after a time turned solid and gradually became hard. This is called *Se:di*. The *Se:di* stage is the established proof of imagination and the ultimate stage for verification of perceptions. All the descriptions of *Aa:bang*, investigations of evolution has reached its peak point in *Se:di*. (Investigations or research into the process of creation from great emptiness and the creation of living beings is done by taking the *Aa:bangs* into consideration) *Se:di* is greater than the greatest because *Sedi drimyango myano* – one which encompasses the entire universe, who is the source of the universe, the creator, the caretaker of all things in the material world (Padun, 2016:122).

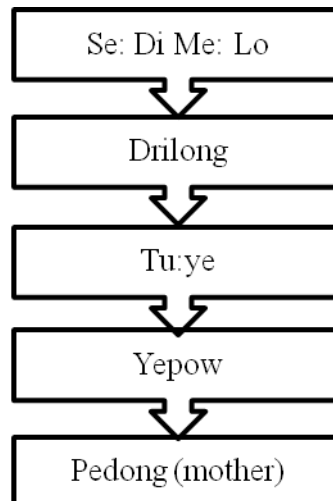
Fig 3.1: Showing the transformation of *Kowyoom*



Source: *Mising N:Tom,Mibo-Mi:ro A:bang* (Padun, 2005:6)

The stages mentioned above are various transformation of *Kowyoom* from *nirakaar* (shapeless) to *Mukseng*'s *saakaar* (with shape) form. *Niraakar* form cannot be associated with male or female gender. Hence, the names *Se:Di* (Na:ne/female) and *Me:Lo* (Ba:bu/male) are used while describing the process of creation.

Fig 3.2: The transformation of *Se:Di-Me:Lo*



Source: *Mising N:Tom,Mibo-Mi:roA:bang*(Padun,2005:7)

This supernatural story of transformation ends with *Pedong*, who is the spiritual mother of millions of living and non-living beings. *Pedong* is the nearest to material world from the development of life. In this stage, various Gods, demons, spirits are created. *Pedong* is the first mother of humans, insects, plants, and hills-mountains in the material world. It was *Pedong* who first gave birth to living beings with consciousness. That is why Aadi-Mising consider *Pedong* as the first-mother of human race. Sometimes, *Do:ni-Po:lo* (sun-moon) is given the same stature in line with *Se:Di-Me:lo*. So, the Mising consider themselves as children of moon-sun. In Mising belief, sun is female and moon is male. Sun is considered to be mother and moon to be father and both are worshipped. The Mising feel proud of taking birth from a being of heavenly power *Pedong*'s youngest children called *Tani* or *Do:ni*.

The Mising believe that during this genesis, some brothers of human race turned into evil spirits and harassed the humans to fulfill their unsatisfied desires. Hence, the customs exist in Mising society to give offerings to the spirits and the dead to seek their blessings. It is worth mentioning that various God-Goddesses are created from *Se:Di-Me:Lo*. The benevolent God-Goddesses are nearest to *Se:Di* in terms of creation. Malevolent God-Goddesses are not created from *Se:Di*, and most of them are said to be born from *Pedong*. Therefore, God-Goddesses created during transformation of *Se:Di-Me:Lo* and born from *Pedong* are divided into two categories based on their nature- benevolent and malevolent Gods and Goddesses.

Table 3.1: List of benevolent and malevolent Gods and Goddesses

S.N.	Benevolent Gods	Malevolent Gods
1	<i>Do: ying Botou</i> is the spiritual guardian and guide to the human race. He taught the humans to fight against nature and against evil forces, gave knowledge to resist against the forces of destruction and ill intent. He	<i>Briri-Botou</i> is the God of rivers, ponds, lakes, sea. He rushes water down the mountains, waves take the shores of the river along with it, causes suffering or death to people who offend him near water bodies. His shape is like a horned serpent or dragon like. His horns

	is spiritually well wishing of humans.	apparently dig the shores of the water bodies. His ride is the swan and Mising avoid consuming it.
2	Yi:dum Botou is the God of wind-storms. He has another name <i>Do:yi:</i> i.e. wind storm. He is spiritually connected to <i>Pedong</i> mother.	Dri:mu Botou is a God who stays among the snow at the mountain top. All the snow clad mountains are his property along with the plants and wildlife on it. Any unwelcomed intruders are frozen to death.
3	Kongki Botou is the creator of human body. He's a sculptor and it is believed that sometimes people are born blind, hunchback or with other deformities because of his absent mindedness.	Nomgu Botou is the controller of diseases, poverty and pain. He's believed to reside beneath the surface. All wild animals, birds, insects are his servants and he uses them to spread disease and poverty among humans when he becomes unsatisfied with the humans. His servants spread diseases, spoils crops which results in draught and poverty. Disease and poverty are the mains reasons of human pain.
4	Boki Monou is the Goddess of song, dance, happiness, festivals etc. All these art forms were her gifts to humans. Some <i>mibo</i> are said to be inspired by her.	Lou:mug Botou is a God who comes to earth in the form of Storm, thunder, lightening. Tornado etc. He travels the world in the form of dark clouds. He is always terrifying and merciless.
5	Bomong Monou is Goddess of light and heat. She is actually identified as	Banji-Botou is also known as <i>Banji-Banmang</i> , he is a bloodthirsty death God.

	the sun. She is forever illuminating, forever radiating and forever young. Her light, heat and beauty creates unity, peace and togetherness in the hearts of humans.	He is a God who is fond of war and always carries weapons. He causes conflicts and war in society through his merciless and demonic nature.
6	Ki:nou Monou is the Goddess of fertility, productivity and fulfillment. She is also known as <i>Ki:nou Na:nou</i>. She resides inside the Earth's soil. Usually in cultivation fields and hence mother of prosperity, the eradicator of poverty and hunger.	La:dang Botou is a water God who drowns people. It is believed that he splits the head of people who drowned with an axe and consumes it.
7	Misum Botou is God of death. Owner of valuable properties and cookware's of precious metals. According to the <i>Aa:bangs</i> he is the first one to ever experience death.	Ni:ji Ni:pong is a Goddess who shrieks at night and causes mental trauma in humans. She is conniving but cowardly. She causes death by excessive bleeding during female menstrual cycle, causes miscarriage in pregnant women or even death during childbirth
8	Gu:mrin Botou is the family God, savior of the clan. He protects the clan from calamities, bad luck and hard times and stands guard. Without his protection there will be internal strife and quarrels in the clan.	MoudounMonou also known as <i>Moudoung Suseng</i>. She is scheming Goddess who has tricks of murder, robbery in her hand. She causes tragic incidents or murders when humans are nearby or even wars among clans, villages, countries.

9	Bisi Botou is a blacksmith i.e. God of weapons and equipments. He is the one who taught the humans about the use of various metals.	Polung Sobo is mithun like imaginary God. According to legends, all plants with thorns and harmful properties came from his body. He is a road block in human progress through his poisonous and thorny plants.
10	Doundou Sobo is massive statue of a mithun (animal) in its spiritual form. From his bodies various parts of the fertile earth has been created along with various plants and edible vegetables. All the plants necessary for humans have emerged from the body of <i>Doundou Sobo</i> .	Karpung Kardug - <i>Karpung</i> is female and <i>Kardug</i> is male. They were beautiful brothers and sisters who fell in love with each others. But they were expelled from the society and sent to live in the sky. But their beauty still kept radiating from the skies and spreading light to the earth. There are several folklores around <i>Karpung Kardug</i> in Mising society. The word <i>Karpumpuli</i> comes from here.

Source: *Mising Ni:Tom, Mibo-Mi:ro A:bang* (Padun, 2005:14-18)

Benevolent God-Goddesses do not require any offerings, and they are busy with creation. They do not want any return from created material world. They have no desire towards created material things. Among benevolent Gods *Do:ying Bote`*, *Yi:dum Bote`*, *Boki Mone`*, *Gu:min Soyin* are main. On the other hand, the malevolent Gods are jealous in nature. Competition for land, greed for property, and malicious attraction towards material things all these have turned these Gods jealous towards humans. To save themselves from jealousy and revenge of malevolent Gods and spirits, the humans offer payer and sacrifices. This was the point where religion and religious rituals started. But no direct offering is presented to *Se:Di-Me:Lo*, *Do:ee-Po:lo*, and *Pedong-Na:no*: considering them to be benevolent Gods. These benevolent Gods are naturally kind and bestow their blessings upon the humans, being the source of all energy. The names of the

benevolent Gods are only taken to offer blessings during ritual offerings for malevolent Gods.

Among malevolent Gods, *Ro:bo* or *Taro* is main. He is violent, jealous, and revengeful in nature. According to *Aa:bang*, *Ro:boor Taro* was the elder brother of *Ni:bo*, i.e. Tani or human race. *Ni:bo* was clever than *Ro:bo*. Therefore, he managed to grab all the property by cheating *Ro:bo*. This resulted in a conflict between the two brothers. To resolve this quarrel, all the Gods gathered together for world's first *Kebang* or meeting. Even there, *Ni:bo* managed to get all the property via trickery. *Ro:bo* decided to leave the human society and took refuge among the plants, mountains, rivers, and in the jungle. Since then, those things of nature were considered to be *Ro:bo's* property. To hide from the humans, he wove an imaginary web called *Do:ying Sabron* which kept him hidden. Since that time, *Ro:bo* stayed beyond the eyes of humans as a spirit God. *Ni:bo* became the unrivaled master of the material world. But *Ro:bo's* revengeful thoughts remained with him forever. Therefore, whenever the humans enter the forest and does something to displease *Ro:bo*, they are punished accordingly. He does not have a body of his own but takes various human forms and tricks humans into the woods and sucks their blood.

Ro:bo's children are *Epom* or *Ya:Pom*. They are malevolent formless spirits. There are *Ya:Pom* of both genders. They reside among vines, plants, rivers, and mountains. All the birds and animals of the jungle are their property. They seek retributions if humans put hands on their property. They kidnap human children, keep the human soul temporarily hostage, and negotiate for offerings and sacrifices in exchange. To maintain connection between the immaterial *YaPom* and bodily humans, *YaPom* selects certain humans and lures them away to the jungle. These humans are taught some tricks of the *YaPom* knowledge, and they serve as a connection with the human society. They are called *mibo*. Some other significant malevolent Gods are *Banji-Bote*, *Nomgu Bote*, *Karpung-Kardug*, *Polung Sobo*, etc. To please these homeless, immaterial, and malevolent Gods, the Mising perform ancestral ritual offerings.

The Mising's belief in soul and nature still keeps an ancient tradition like ghosts and spirits alive. According to Payeng (2014), Mising believe in the existence of soul (*urom*)

after death, which are the causes of emergence of witchcraft. Many believe that the soul (*urom*) does not leave the human world soon after death for the land where the departed souls live eternally. The soul remains around its earlier home in this world and still suffers from hunger and thirst. Thus people's everyday activity is governed by supernatural beings. When people die of unknown diseases or accidental death in a family, people blame the witch that can rear souls in spirit form to harm others.

It was believed that witches are ghosts or evil spirits who reside in the woods. But nowadays, witches are considered to be human-beings who learn witchcraft by themselves and use it to attack people and cause harm or even death. The people who are suspected to be witches are put under trial in the pretext of eradication of witches. They undergo a process under a system riddled with superstitions and devoid of logic, and they are sentenced to severe punishments after a very brief trial which most of the time ends up as a death penalty. To execute the faulty judgments of such so-called trials, witch-hunting is done. It is in reality the ultimate example of inhumane, illogical, and savage superstitions. The reason behind the emergence of the witch incidents of contemporary times lies in this. First, the witch targets a particular person to perform witchcraft and they are attacked with spells or other methods. The target can be of different categories. There may be a person who has enmity with the witch and the witch wants to take revenge. When a witch is jealous of a person can trap him/her. A witch can cause death of someone to claim their property afterwards. A witch can take revenge on someone on behalf of another person who employed the witch. Sometimes just out of curiosity innocents are also targeted. According to Doley (2017) after selecting the target, a part of the body of the targeted person such as hair, nail, skin, etc. are secretly collected. Items used by the targeted person like clothes, bed sheets, mosquito nets, etc. are also collected. All these are mixed with *sindoor* and put in a small box after applying spells on it. Some say that first the witch puts the items in a *Tabeez* before putting it in a box. After that, the box is secretly buried underneath the bed of the targeted person or underneath the path used for daily commute. A live fish is placed in a pot and a spell in the name of the targeted individual is placed on it and kept in a secret place. Sometimes poisonous substances laced with spells are mixed with food and drinks and fed to the target. Sometimes only spells are used to attack. Some use spirits that are under their control for

attack. The soil of the footsteps of the targeted person is collected and magic is applied on it. Along with all these and on special occasions such as Saturday night or the night of the new moon, the witches perform weird dance rituals in secret locations while being naked (108-109).

Such rituals and actions are believed to be performed by the witches to attack the targeted individual and it is said that it results in targeted person getting sick and even dying in the end. The Mising refer to the witch incidents as *moru/morunam*. In Mising society, witchcraft has its own form and applications as mentioned above, which can be looked into. Although its real form and inner workings cannot be known in detail, some information is available from statements made by people who practice witchcraft and comments made by close observers as well as exorcists. It is believed that some villagers with ill-intentions whether by their own design or getting influenced by others learn witchcraft from a person who has already practiced witchcraft. The novice accepts the person as his master and he is taught the spells, rituals, and others aspects of witchcraft. After acquiring his witchcraft skills, the novice experiments his skills by using it on a living being. Usually, a live tree is chosen and if the tree dries up or dies, the spell is considered to be successful. In this manner, the novice becomes more confident to try it on human beings whenever the opportunity presents itself. Witchcraft is practiced by both the novice and veteran witches separately whenever they can.

We see that the witch incidents in human society have a long and old history. These incidents have been happening in various societies across the world. The 16th century English society was rife with beliefs about ghosts, spirits, witches, etc. Similarly, many other countries around the world had to face various social and human issues created by superstitious beliefs related to witches.

When we look at the witch incidents in Assam, it is observed that such incidents are deeply rooted in Mising society, especially among some tribal societies. When the statistics of the witch incidents of past few years are looked into, it is observed that few tribal societies such as Tea tribes, Rabha, Bodos and the Mising are some of the worst-

affected tribes. The witch incidents which keep occurring from time to time have created many complex social problems in these societies and have emerged as a social challenge.

The Role of priests in Mising religion

The Mising believe that malevolent Gods and spirits reside in invisible form throughout the material world, and they express their own wishes just like the humans. They are formless devoid of any shape. The God-Goddesses and spirits roam around in their own space freely. Since the world of the Gods is invisible, it is inevitable that sometimes there would be conflict. Whenever humans enter the realm of spirits and break the rules or make them unhappy in the slightest, the spirits give out punishment accordingly. To fight against the evil powers and angry malevolent Gods, the *Tani* tribe (Mising) pray some peace-loving domestic Gods called “*Gu:Min So:Yin*” to work as guards. As already mentioned Mising are believed to be born from *Pedong*’s youngest son *Tani* or *Do:ni* and they feel proud to be called themselves as *Tani*. Therefore, to fight against malevolent Gods, a certain class of protectors is formed in *Tani* society (Padun, 2016:123).

People from that class are blessed with heavenly powers as compared to mere mortals, and they possess supernatural powers given by spirits. Such powers develop in them from an early age, and they are able to make predictions about the future. Boys with such abilities are kept under special watch in order to become spiritual guardian or priest later. These boys undergo training from a young age to master the practical application of their natural abilities. This priest class is called *mibo* or *mi:ro*. Its literal meaning is – ‘mi:’ means human and ‘bo’ means father, i.e. father of the human race. Young *mibos* work under the older *mibo* as apprentices *mibo* to learn their craft. The main jobs of the young *mibo* are to memorize the *Aa:Bang shlokas*, to learn about medicinal plants, to remember the items required in a religious ceremony, to learn the symbols used in magic spells, to remember the habits and behaviors of different spirits, to remember what kind of offerings and sacrifices the spirits may demand, and finally to remember the rules of the offerings and sacrificial ceremony.

According to Padun (2016) the ability to establish connection with the Gods is dependent upon the *mibo*’s inborn powers. Therefore, they are forced to perform some habitual

work. Trainee *mibo* practice the habits of the spirits so that they possess the bodies of the *mibo* after finding similarities and use them as a medium. *Mibo* enter the realm of the spirits through their familiar spirit and try to find the reason of diseases or misfortune and find solutions for the same. If a *mibo* is called, they use their magical powers and *Shlokas of Aa:Bangs* i.e. through songs they call upon the Gods for a visit. The familiar spirit enters into the body of the *mibo* and helps locating the spirit of the victim. It tries to convince the evil spirit to mend its ways or resolve its anger through sacrifice of domestic animals. The familiar spirit leaves the body of the *mibo* once all work is complete, and the *mibo* returns to his normal state from unconsciousness. The *mibo* uses his *Dokne*: to speak with his familiar spirit, and he sings *Mibo Aa:Bang* to convince the evil spirit while swinging a long sword called *Yoksa* in his hand (123-124).

Mising people view the *mibo* as a religious minister or religious priest, who plays an active role in saving people from epidemics with the help of special knowledge or skills that he possesses. Hence, he places himself above the society. Thus he becomes an important religious, political, and social figure in the Mising community. Only male members can become *mibo*, and female members are not allowed to become *mibo*. It is important to add that there is a hierarchical system of Mising priests. *Mibos* are placed in first position. As they have supernatural powers, they have supreme authority. *mi:ro* can be classified as second priest group. *Mi:ro* works as a junior assistant of *mibo* and learns techniques to identify magic–mantras’ symbols and character of evil spirits, memorize *Ah:bang* hymns, and remember various food stuffs required for religious rituals and knowledge about various medicinal plants. Unlike *mi:ro*, *mibo* has supernatural powers and is able to contact evil spirits. *Mibo* supervises *mi:ro*’s work and progress. *Mi:ro* must be a male member and may become *mibo* after successfully completing his training. Only few members successfully attain the miboship. The third and lowest rank in the priest hierarchy is *saraniya bhakat* and *kesa bhakat*. They are known as self-styled priests in the Mising society. They do not have any supernatural powers. Their knowledge is also very limited. Their knowledge and functions are different. *Saraniya Bhakot* is also called *mangolik bhakat* or *pokka bhakat*. They must take blessings of the *Satradhikar* of the *Shatra* before performing *mangolik* religious rites and rituals. Without the blessings of *Satradhikar*, they are not allowed to do so. *Saraniya bhakot* is derived from Neo-

Vaishnavism. This is a movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva who gained popularity and can be defined by two twin institutions associated with it known as the *Satra* and the *Namghar*. Both these institutions are intimately associated with each other and form the part and parcel of the social, cultural, and religious life of the Assamese society. These *Satras* are headed by a *Satradhikar* who is regarded as the sole guardian of the institutions. The *Namghar* is known as the prayer hall where the idol of God and the sacred scripture is kept.

Before the Mising came into the fold of Hinduism and influenced by Neo-Vaishnavism in early 15th century, they had their own religious culture. They mainly believed in *Sakta Dharma* (belief in *shakti* of the universe) and sacrificed birds and animals to their malevolent spirits. *Mangolik Bhokot*, also called *pakka bhakat* as, perform religious functions such as *urom posum*, *dodgang*, and *nojaniya ui* through a specific rule and regulation, and they are mostly invited for any kind of *mangolik* religious rituals and functions. They regularly perform *Nam-Kirtan* (religious songs) in the *Namghar*. Malevolent spirits are evil spirits who roam around jungles, trees, rivers, and mountains. So their religious functions are performed in river banks and in the jungle. For example, *pe:jab ui*, *yumrang ui*, and so on. Other self-styled priests are *kesa bhakat* who are priests of malevolent religious functions. Unlike *pakka bhakat*, they sacrifice birds and animals to their Gods and Goddesses. They are performers of *yumrang ui* (jungle religious functions and rituals). There is a difference between these two. Unlike *pakka or saraniya bhakat*, *kesa bhakat* do not take blessings of the *Satras* and do not follow certain rules and regulations during religious functions. *kesa bhakats* are not allowed to perform *pakka* rituals or benevolent functions and are barred to enter the village *Namghar*. Both males and females can participate as *bhakat* (both *pakka* and *kesa*), but because women are not allowed to take blessings from *Satras*, they prefer not to become *saraniya bhakat*. On the one hand, there is restriction for women in some *Satras* and are not allowed to take blessings and on the other hand, there is flexibility to become *pakka bhakat*. Since there is no need to take blessings of *Satras* to become *kesa bhakat*, some women can be found as *kesa bhakat*. This category of people also provides special treatment with forest plant medicine and cure people from diseases and epidemics. Unlike *mibo* or *mi:ro*, this category people practice hereditary system of local medicine. After the death of the

parents, their knowledge is transferred to their son or daughter or to other close relatives. They mainly provide local medicine for urinal malfunctions, bone-related issues, stomach pain, back pain, and other parts of body pain. They also make *tabeez* for those who do not have child and for those who want to make their lives prosperous. It is important to understand the role and functions of *pakka* and *kesa bhakat* in religious rituals and ceremonies. Mising are seen using two types of methods to ward off misfortune for family and society as a whole. There are two types of ceremonies, *mangolik* or auspicious and *omangolik* or inauspicious ceremonies. As mentioned earlier *mangolik* or auspicious ceremonies are performed only by *pakka* or *saraniya Bhakat*. These ceremonies are also known to be benevolent religious functions, as they are performed for benevolent spirits. The *omangolik* ceremonies are performed to satisfy the malevolent spirits. These ceremonies are inauspicious in nature and performed by *kesa bhakat*. In the following it is discussed in detail about the auspicious and inauspicious ceremonies of Mising.

Auspicious Ceremonies

Urom Ceremony

This ceremony is performed to satisfy the spirits of the grandparents for two generations. In *urom*, a boar is offered in the name of every grandparent. This ceremony has some particular rules. According to those rules, the chief of the family and his wife will kill the boar with Sun-Moon as the witness using a *Ko-mat* (a piece of bamboo). The priest of the village and the public help them in the slaughter. The priest lights earthen lamps before the meal or after the meal to pray to the spirits of the dead, on behalf of the family. In this prayer, it is requested that no harm should befall each member of the family, and they should do well financially. It is mandatory that every member of the family bows before the lamp. In the end, a feast is arranged for everyone where relatives, neighbors, and friends are invited as witnesses. While slaughtering the boar, a small mould of soil is made in the yard. On this mould, 5 *tora* leaves are spread and the boar is placed on top of it. The mould is surrounded by 5 or 9 *ekhora* plant or *pibo* plant. After that, the boar is slaughtered by priest in front of the invitees while chanting and making the sun and moon witness. That day, the chief of the house and his wife wear special dresses. The male

wears *gonor ugon* on his body and *mibo galuk dhoti*, while the female wears *mochang ege* and marked *madoli* and *gaam kharu*.

Taleng Ui

This auspicious ritual is performed in two ways. One is performed in the yard of the grain storage house and the other in the fields. This ritual is performed seeking the blessings of the Gods for the well-being of all the members of the family and to reduce poverty. The blessings of sun, moon, stars, earth, and clouds are requested in this ritual. This ritual is also called the ritual of high Gods for that reason. This too has some particular rules. This is conducted not in the residence, but in the yard of the grain storage house. For this ritual, a female pig is required for the Earth, a red cock for the sun, a white cock for the moon, and a blonde hen for the Stars. Along with that to please Fortune and other Gods, a special dish of Fish is prepared. Another edible item is produced from rice flour and bananas. There are provisions for drink as well in the quantity of 5 pots of *apong* and 2 pots of White *apong* to go with the food. It should be mentioned that all those delicacies are gathered to please the Sun and other Gods. There are specific priests for this ritual and they only perform this ritual, after arriving at the house of the host and wearing the clothes gathered by the host. After the completion of all the rituals, 5 *bhakats* are served with food and all the people of the house bow in front from of the ceremonial lamps before having food. The ceremony in the field is also done in a similar manner.

Navagraha or Nine planet ceremony

Our solar system has nine planets. These nine planets are considered as Gods. Therefore, this ceremony is performed to please the nine planets. The priest along with 9 *bhakats* are invited and fed by slaughtering a female pig. Along with the meal, the *bhakats* are given *dakshina* of 2 Rupees. The priest lights the ceremonial lamps and makes the nine *bhakats* sit in a line and give blessings to the members of the family. *apong* is also served to the *bhakats* along with food. Finally, food is arranged for everyone and they are given farewell.

Inauspicious Ceremonies

Kecha Dangoria Ritual

This is performed very far from the house underneath a big tree. If any member of the family is suddenly seen to be suffering from bad luck or illness, he is believed to be under attack from evil spirits. Then, to please that evil spirit, three *bhakats* are invited, and using a red cock, the priest performs the ceremony underneath a tree in the jungle. But this ceremony too is performed following special rules. *Nagin apong* is served in this ceremony.

Gupini Ceremony or Opeswary (angel) ceremony

In Mising society, the angels of heaven are also considered to be Gods. Whenever 13/14-year-old girls suffer from illness or misfortune, this ritual is performed to please the angels. This ceremony is performed next to the river at 12 noon underneath a shed inviting three girls of similar age. The three *Gupinis* are made to sit in a line wearing white clothes and are fed with raw rice flour, sugar, milk, and banana. Some amount of money is presented as *dakshina*. A female priest blesses the girl who is suffering and requests assistance from the angels and finishes the ceremony.

Juria Ceremony

This ceremony is performed when it is believed that some outside evil power has misled a member of the family or there is a sudden illness. This ceremony requires a red cock and a hen which are sacrificed through the priest to please the evil spirits. According to the rituals, the priest lights the ceremonial lamp and the person under duress bows in front of it seeking blessings from the evil power. Finally, a meal is arranged for the person along with two *bhakats*.

Pejap Ui (duck offering ceremony)

This ceremony is performed by sacrificing a black duck next to a pond or river when it is suspected that the person has angered the water God and the priest completes the sacrifice

along with few *bhakats* in front of a ceremonial lamp. Since duck roams around in ponds and rivers, it is believed that water God would be pleased with duck sacrifice.

Borali Fish Ceremony

Borali fish is also a water dweller like duck. It is considered to be the vehicle of water God. Therefore, two or three *bhakats* are invited through the priest and a meal of Borali Fish is fed to them near a river after following specific rituals. It is considered that if the *bhakats* are pleased, the water God too would be pleased and the ill-lucks of the sufferer would be removed.

Asi: Ui (Water God's Ceremony)

People believe that Gods reside in water as well. Therefore, whenever someone falls sick or it is prophesied that water God is angry, they arrange for this ceremony on the banks of a flowing river. A small square raft is made of banana stems. Four thick threads are burnt on four corners, and it is filled with flowers of various colors. After the sick person bows in front of it, the priest blesses him and lowers it into the downward stream. There is no arrangement of food in this ceremony.

Do: Bir Ceremony

The Mising perform this ceremony in public as well as in privacy. The public *do:bir* is performed in particular day of the year. On that day, all homely affairs are prohibited. All outsiders are forbidden to enter the village that day. Starting from the east side of the village, all the people of the village gather and start beating the houses with sticks while chanting praise of the Gods and move towards the west side of the village. Every house offers some donation to the people for getting rid of evil. This ends at the west end of the village, and the total collection is used for a public feast later, and the following is gathered a female pig for Earth, a red cock for sun, a white cock for moon, a blonde chicken for the stars, and a dark chicken for the clouds. All the animals are sacrificed by the chief of the village at a particular spot where a mould of soil is made surrounded by *ekora* or *pir* plants, while the others chant the praises of the Gods. This is followed by a public feast from all those sacrifices along with *apong*. After the day of the public feast, it

is forbidden to use agricultural utensils or work in the fields for 3 days or 5 days. Only after those designated days are over, they start working in the fields or house. Similarly, one can perform the *do:bir* ceremony individually.

Today's 21st century society has seen a wave of transformation. People from Mising community are converting into different religions. Age-old customs have been put aside, and they are getting attracted towards other religions. After the arrival and spread of Neo-Vaishnav religion in Assam, the influence of *Naam Dharma* has increased. Now-a-days, most Mising households are seen doing yearly *Naam Kirtana*, turning it into an auspicious ceremony.

So, it is seen from here that the Mising have not stayed under the umbrella of a single particular religion and moved towards different religions. In between the past and the present, the social system is seen to be transforming.

Summary

The Mising believe that the universe was created by a mystical power *Se:De* (female). The transformation of human history ends with *Pedong*, the stage where millions of living and non-living beings were born. *Pedong* is the first mother of humans and, therefore, the Mising feels proud to be born from *Pedong*. Throughout this chapter, it is clear that the role of woman is bold in the process of creation of the universe. This is the reason why the female is regarded as the sun, the all sources of energy of the universe.

Though Mising women are given pivotal role in the creation process, oral history regarding the origin of witchcraft indicates that women are held responsible for all source of evil power, as from *Pedong (first mother of human)*, all demons or malevolent spirits came into being. Hence, women are accused of evil power like in western world. Before Srimanta Shankardeva spread his Neo Vaishnav religion, the people of Mising Community being assimilated with Assamese art and culture, they did not completely discard their own cultural practices. They still maintained their own unique identity. They are seen using two types of methods to ward off misfortune for family and society as a whole. The Mising women are not given equal status as man, and they are restricted to

participate in some religious functions. We find women subordination in the priest hierarchy. They are considered as sin. *Mibo*, the supreme religious figure, who occupies the top position of the priest hierarchy, guides the religious rites and rituals. Women priests occupy lowest rank in the hierarchy, and few responsibilities are given to them. Male priests are allowed to do *mangolik* (auspicious) religious rituals, as they are blessed by the *Satra*. *Mangolik* priests can also perform *omangolik* (inauspicious) rituals, but women cannot be *mangolik* priest hence they cannot perform *mangolik* rituals. This indicates the subordinate position of women in the society as their social and religious functions are controlled through male authority.

Chapter IV

WITCH HUNTING AMONG MISING: SELECTED CASE STUDIES

Introduction

The study of contemporary witch hunts in India is problematic as the phenomenon is “highly” sensitive. It is difficult to get participants to talk about events to the researcher due to fear of retaliation or ostracism, and there is an extreme level of secrecy involved during the actual incidents of witch-hunts. In other words, the researcher has to rely on all methods available to have an access to data, including interviews, observation, and case study methods. The case study method particularly suited to study the phenomena where the researcher has little control over events, and in-depth study of a particular case can provide crucial explanatory results (Babbie, 2001:285). The study of particular cases of witch hunts will be useful in analyzing how the concept of “dual deviance” works.

Case 1

The victims included were Rajkumar Doley* (40 years), his wife Bornali Doley* (age 33), their son Moni* (8 years). Rajkumar was a farmer and had a small fishery business which he took through tender. His wife Bornali worked in the local primary school as Anganwadi Head. Rajkumar maintained a good relation with his family members before his marriage, but after marriage, he lived a separate and carefree life. According to the villagers, the behavior of Barnali was aggressive and she used to misbehave with the family members. As a result, a gap arose between the families. When *Po:rag* festival was celebrated from 1st to 5th March in 2012 in Borduwa Luit Chapori village, the villagers tried to revive their relationship with the relative. On the other hand, Rajkumar and his wife refused to keep the relationship with their family and also to take any responsibility at *Po:rag*. On the last day of *Po:rag* festival, i.e. 5th March 2012, Rajkumar’s eldest brother’s son, Apple Doley*, died when he was sleeping. The main fact of the witch-hunting incident occurred on that very day. The other members of the family claimed that Rajkumar and his family was the cause of Apple Doley’s death. As per some information,

Bornali's father's family used to practice "*buttu onam*" (black magic) in their village. So Rajkumar along with Bornali was accused of the death and she was claimed as a "witch" (*buttu*). The saying that "she was a witch" became concrete after Apple's death.

After fifteen days of the incident, Rajkumar went to Garamur police station to claim his status that he and his family were not responsible for Apple's death. He filed an F.I.R. against his family members stating that his family members were trying to frame them as witch. The then Officer-in-charge of the police station, Deben Nath*, called him and advised him not to bother much about the issue.

The police came to investigate the matter and they tried to settle the matter among the villagers. But the family members tried to frame Bornali as "witch" by hook or by crook. They also tried to convince the villagers to fulfill their desire. The women of the village were convinced to spread the news as they would believe much in superstitions. As a result, the news spread like wildfire.

The villagers then arranged a meeting and called *mibo* (local priest) to find whether she was a witch or not. On that very night in presence of the family members and the villagers, the *mibo* tried to find out whether she was the cause of Apple's death. After completion of all the activities by *mibo*, he claimed that there was the existence of an evil spirit within the family, which was the cause of Apple's death. *Mibo* added that the existence of the evil spirit should be abolished at any cost as early as possible or else the villagers would have devastating problems among themselves.

The rumor that Bornali was the culprit and Rajkumar was her helper became true. The villagers isolated them from the society, and they were afraid that Bornali and Rajkumar might harm them. They were neglected and were treated very badly by the villagers. Rajkumar then told the villagers to remove the evil spirit from his family. So the villagers hired a priest from southern part of Dhemaji gaon near Dergaon to check whether there was the presence of evil part.

After the arrival of the priest, he said if there was the existence of evil spirit, it would automatically surrender before him. The work was executed at *Namghar*. He told them to

gather hundred different items to perform the rituals. On the very night, he started his ritual activities using those items, and he shouted for more than three times. But there were no symptom of the presence of evil spirit. However, many of the villagers were not satisfied. So they claimed that they would bring Bornali and her family and she would find the evil spirit. After they were brought, they were tortured by the priest in the name of removing the evil spirit. She was tortured for almost half an hour in front of the villagers. Due to excessive torture (snatching her hair and beating rigorously), Bornali became unconscious, and she was admitted to Garamur Health Centre the next day. Rajkumar and his family started considering the villagers as their enemy. So he used to keep hand-made weapons such as bow, arrow, sharp axe, sharp knife, etc. with him and challenged the villagers that if they tried to harm his family, he would not excuse at any cost. He also challenged the youths of the village and told them not to come to his house. So the youths were in bad terms with him.

They used to keep various suspicious items with stones, *sindoor*, Hanuman idol, and various book of tantras and mantras. These activities made the villagers ascertain their belief on him. They also thought that he had some power as they did not see any sign of fear in him. The villagers could not take them easily. But some people who were aware of this did not believe such stories. They opposed this and claimed that an injustice was done over Bornali and her family. The conscious people were in good terms with them, and they used to take food with Bornali and her family. Since these people were with Bornali and her family, the villagers could not take it easily and conspired to kill Bornali and her family. The villagers started giving training to the youths in the bank of the river, Subansiri, at night and planned to kill Bornali and her family. The whole plan of murder was unknown to most of the villagers.

When the researcher talked to the villagers regarding the murder of Bornali and her family, they narrated the whole story and also mentioned some of the accuser names, who were involved in the murders of the family. When the researcher attempted to contact with them regarding the murder, most of them were out of village. The rest of the group were; Litikai Patir* (17 years), Atul Doley*(19 years), and Bijoy Doley* (18 years) (all names were pseudonyms). Bijoy was the nephew of Rajkumar Doley and son of Anil

Doley. Bijoy was completely involved in the murder that night. They narrated the whole incident. The whole family members were murdered and at present, the case is under investigation, but the culprits were released by the police due to lack of proper evidences. Though the witnesses gave their statements regarding the witch-hunt, they feared that they might be in danger if they went against the murders. As a result of which the case seems to reach its climax, but the innocent family did not get proper justice for the brutal murder. [*original names have been changed for security reasons]

Analysis of the above Case-Study:

In the Borduwa Luhit Chapari incident, there was an extensive involvement of the *mibo* from the beginning. The *mibo* was involved in the identification of the witches through rituals and presided over the “trials”. The incident is very similar to the European and Colonial American witch hunts where the accused women were searched for physical evidence regarding their pact with the devil. Extreme violence that involved torture and murder were used to get rid of the accused witches. Here Rajkumar’s family was suspected of witchcraft after the death of his brother’s son. Barnali, the prime suspect was believed to be practicing witchcraft as her father used to play *buttu onam* (black magic). This incident creates more suspicion on Barnali. The various suspicious items with talisman, vermilion, Hanuman idol made the villagers ascertain their belief on her. Barnali and her family’s attitude was also a major concern for the villagers. The villagers thought that she had some power as they did not see any sign of fear. The villagers could not take them easily. Barnali and her family started considering the villagers as their enemy, and they used to keep hand-made weapons like bow, arrow, sharp axe, etc. with them to challenge the villagers. Aggressive behavior as well as misbehavior towards her father-in-law, family members, and other villagers was also a reason for disappointment among the most of the villagers, who believed that only a witch can have this kind of aggression. Bever (2002) has an interesting theory as to why women were more likely than men to act out their aggression in ways associated with witchcraft. He argues that women are naturally less physically aggressive and therefore more likely to engage in indirect or covert aggression, the expression of which may be seen as witchcraft. A woman, who is more expressive unlike other women in society, which do not fit in the

definition of the society, is more likely to be considered as witch (955-988). This incident illustrated the concept of 'dual deviance'. The moral entrepreneur (*mibo*) and his followers (other villagers) saw nothing wrong in punishing the witches through torture and murder as they felt that it was necessary to bring back peace in the village from the epidemics. At level one, the moral entrepreneurs wanted to restore health and stability in the family and its members, and the only way they could achieve this was through killing the witches. The second level, involved the police personnel and the non-tribal community members, who viewed the witch hunt as murder while the *mibo* and his followers were viewed as co-conspirators in the murder (deviants). At the end, there were the police personnel who saw the accusers as the deviants and the accused women as the victims. It is interesting to note in this context the general attitude of the police towards tribal people and their problems.

Case 2

The victim Dipan Patir*, age 35, had been accused of witchcraft during 2016 in Bordua village. Presently, he works as a shopkeeper. Earlier, the people accused him of practicing witchcraft. He narrated how the *mibo* and villagers tortured him and he spent a miserable life during the time of allegation. He was beaten and made to sit with fire burning around him and was given animal and human excreta on the pretext of abolishing the evil spirit. The villagers arranged a meeting. *Mibo*, a local healer who had been invited from Dhemaji declared the roaming of evil spirit in the village in front of the villagers. He immediately ordered the villagers to take the culprit and punish him. Dipan was taken to the village *Namghar* and was repeatedly asked to confess the practice of witchcraft. When he said to the villagers that he had done nothing wrong and the allegation was wrong, they started punishing him. *Mibo* started beating him rigorously and asked them to arrange human and animal excreta for purification. When he did not confess to his mistakes, other members of the village started harassing him and his family, and they were isolated from the village. At present, they are allowed to come to village.

The key informants said that one of the relatives of Dipan gave him *suwali mohini tabeez* (to attract girls) from Gengraimuk, Majuli. The *tabeez* was very powerful and it would work if used on new moon day (Amavasya) or full moon day (Purnima). According to the villager, the *tabeez* is used mainly to attract girls and to marry them. People who are not getting married and those who are not satisfied with their sexual relationship in their marriage, they would take such *tabeez* from local Ojhas. Dipan was married at that time but did not have any child. So Dipan started selling such *Tabeez*. People often came to him to take such *Tabeez* and he also provided some special medicine. The villager started spreading rumors about Dipan going to the jungle in the midnight to perform his rites and rituals and was giving a feast to his witch (*buttu*) by sacrificing an animal and human blood. He would even dance in front of candles and chant the mantra. He would collect pieces of cloth, hair, or soil for performing witchcraft and thus he was trying to attract girls whom he wanted to marry. As per information it is said that he wanted to marry a girl, named Kunja*, from Boralimora gaon. But the girl eloped with another boy from the same village. After she got married, she tried to forget their past and maintain good relation. But Dipan wanted to punish the girl, and he went to his relative to collect *suwali mohini tabeez*. After a year of her marriage, her husband died while sleeping. People suspected Dipan's hand in it and tortured him severely. To escape the torture, he confessed his deeds in front of *mibo*'s present [*original names have been changed for security reasons].

Analysis of the above case-study

This is also a case where the *mibo* was involved in the identification and punishment of the witches. Dipan's case is a perfect example of the second category of witch hunts: "calculated attacks" (See chapter VI for a detailed discussion on the category). In calculated attacks the accuser and the accused have prior conflicts and the accusers used the prior conflicts to manipulate accusations against Dipan. The accusers knew that Dipan was innocent of witchcraft and this is a crucial feature in "calculated attacks" that separates this category from surprise attacks. In Dipan's case the accusers followed a pattern of calculated events in the witch hunt. The events started with conflict with neighbors over the boundaries of their land. The neighbors took advantage the death of

Kunja's husband. People suspected Dipan's hand in it, as he wanted to take revenge against her. The villager started spreading rumors about Dipan going to the jungle in the midnight to perform his rites and rituals and was giving a feast to his witch (*buttu*) by sacrificing an animal and human blood. There was a trail against Dipan and the death of Kunja's husband justified the witch hunt. In the end, Dipan's accusers got what they wanted: the control over the plot. The accusations against Dipan were used to serve the concealed motive of the accusers and the allegations of witchcraft helped them in fulfilling their intentions. The *mibo* and villagers tortured him and his family during the time of allegation. He was beaten and made to sit with fire burning around him and was given animal and human excreta on the pretext of abolishing the evil spirit. The *mibo* started beating him rigorously and forced him to eat human and animal excreta for purification. He was repeatedly forced to confess the practice of witchcraft. To escape the torture, he confessed his deeds in front of the *mibo*'s present. As Dipan did not show aggression, he escaped any fatal consequence, but he had already suffered a lot both mentally and physically.

Case 3

During 2013-14, Anita* from Balijan was the victim of witch-hunting and now she is suffering from mental illnesses. People alleged that she was practicing witchcraft. She used to worship Lord Shivas twice a week (Tuesday and Saturday). In the month of October, her nephew died while sleeping. Anita belonged to a priest family as well as medicine practitioner who saved people from diseases, epidemics, etc. It was said that Anita's grandmother used to do witchcraft. Neighbors told that during her nephew's (Angsu*) death, the *buttu* of Anita came to his bed in the form of a catlike animal. Neighbors also said that Anita was performing *buttu-yadanam* rituals (rituals which are performed by the witch) by sacrificing an animal and human blood. Again, it was told that in the initial stage of witchcraft, the witch owner must sacrifice his or her own family members. To satisfy his or her *buttu*, he or she must give pujas to *buttu* by giving human and animal blood. Whenever he or she is unable to give blood to the *buttu*, it may kill the owner of *buttu*.

A meeting was arranged in *Namghar* and *mibo* was called from Jonai, the eastern part of Majuli district. *Mibo* further investigated the issue and declared that Angsu's death was not natural. He was killed. After chanting mantras, he announced Anita's name and he said the existence of evil spirit, which should be abolished at any cost as early as possible or else the villagers would have devastating problems in future. The villagers, mostly women, took the lead role during witch-hunting. Anita was harassed in the name of witchcraft and purification of her body. The villagers isolated Anita and her family from the village. Their property was taken away forcefully by their relatives. Also, Anita's family was not allowed to use village road, *Namghar*, water pump, village pond, etc. People were afraid of making a contact with her family. After a year, Anita's son died. Her husband Apai Doley* abandoned her. Her mental condition became severe and she started suffering from mental illness. Then she got married to another person from Bali goan, and he died too. Now she is suffering from mental illness. [*original names have been changed for security reasons]

Analysis of the above case-study

In this case also it was an involvement of the *mibo* from the beginning. The *mibo* was involved in the identification of the witches through rituals and presided over the "trials". The victim was harassed in the name of witchcraft and purification of her body. This witch hunt case of Balijan is a perfect example of the culculated attack category of witch hunt. The villagers had suspicion on Anita, as her grandmother used to play *buttu onam* (black magic). The death of family members accelerates the process of conflict between accused and accuser. Once again this incident illustrated the concept of dual deviance. At level one, the moral entrepreneurs wanted to restore health and stability in the family and its members, and the only way they could achieve this was through killing or punishing the witches. In calculated attacks where the accuser knows that there are no real witches. The death of the family member further reinforces their beliefs. At the second level, there were the other villagers who saw the accusers as the deviants and the accused woman as the victim. The villagers isolated Anita and her family from the village. Their property was taken away forcefully by their relatives. Also, Anita's family was not allowed to use village road, *Namghar*, water pump, village pond, etc. According to Nathan and Kelkar

(1993:117) “the women who are accused are mostly childless widows, who have a life interest in lands that will pass on to their nearest male relative after their death. By accusing them of practicing witchcraft, those men inherit the land immediately. This persecution is part of a wide assault on women’s traditional rights and part of a successful attempt to establish a patriarchal order, an attempt to force women into a particular gender role that is considered appropriate. It is also a way to discredit the women who have an inside track with the household spirits.”

At the moral entrepreneurs were able to convince her husband in the act and he also abandoned her after her son’s death. She did not die like Barnali, but moral entrepreneurs made her suffer from severe mental illness which is more painful than death.

Case 4

Tare Doley* was one of the victims of witch-hunting in Baliyan village, Majuli. He had been harassed in the name of witchcraft. In October 2015, he was called to the village meeting, but allegation was not proven. *Mibo* was called and he proved that Tare doley was practicing *buttu*. The villagers decided to take him to the bank of Brahmaputra river where he was punished. The villagers dug a hole and buried him inside it leaving his head outside on the surface and gave him extreme pain and punishment. He was tied and pulled through sandy soil of river bank. After so much of torture, he finally declared himself as a witch.

The allegation of his witchcraft started from the death of a young girl, who was his relative. Tare Doley had a reputation in *ojhapali* (master of medicine healing) in the village. When someone falls ill or is affected by unknown diseases, the villagers contact him. The villager suspected Tare's hand behind the death of that young girl. On the researcher’s insistence, the villagers stated that the girl was very beautiful. One day while playing, she fell down and had some pain in her legs. That day Tare was invited and he gave some medicine. Next morning, the girl felt extreme pain on the whole body and some days later she died. The villagers also added that even the doctor could not recognize the disease. After the incident, his brother’s son, Nampai Doley*, also died while he was sleeping. Now the allegation became more concrete. One of the villagers

told me that the rule of witchcraft is to sacrifice human and animal blood to satisfy the *buttu* (witch). First, the witch sacrifices one or two family members of his/her own family, and then he/she targets other people to satisfy his *buttu*. The *buttu* is a tool to achieve property and success and to kill the enemy. That is why some people wanted to rear *buttu*. Tare Doley was on bad terms with his elder brother, Punki Doley*. They quarreled over their lands, and since then their family did not even take water from them. Other also told me that Tare wanted to take revenge on his brother and Tare killed his brothers' son through his *buttu*. [*original names have been changed for security reasons]

Analysis of the above case-study:

In this case also, we can see a clear example of taking revenge that emerges from conflict over land in the family. As Tare Doley himself practiced local medicine and healing methods, the immediate death of the young girl and his brother's son death from unknown diseases, made it an easy task for the moral entrepreneurs *mibo* and his followers (villagers) to detect and spell the name of the accused. However, the victim Tare Doley was able to survive the incident as he did not show aggression towards the moral entrepreneurs in this case unlike that of Barnali, where the whole family of the victims met with dire consequences which are death sentence for all.

Summary

This chapter discusses some contemporary and sensitive cases of witch-hunts in the study area. Surprisingly, we find that, in every case, there is the involvement of the *mibo*, who play active role in saving people from epidemics or diseases with the help of special knowledge or skill that they possess. He is the determining factor in deciding and punishing the innocent victims. *Mibo*, who considers himself as religious minister and the one next to God, claims that he can identify witch and purify the victim. Thus he was given the responsibility to find the witch. The more shocking thing is the way the *mibo* understands the involvement of witchcraft and the way he identifies the victim because there is no logical procedure followed and, in every case, it appears to be a pre-planned execution in the name of witch-hunting. However, the positive note is that whenever there is the involvement of police, the case takes a different turn as the police personnel

see the accusers as the deviants and the accused men and women as the victims. Most of the cases are not reported to police because, in some cases, the moral entrepreneurs are more powerful to suppress the voice of the victims, and in some other cases, the victims fear to be socially ostracized, which is purely the example of lack of awareness.

Chapter V

Women as Witches in Mising Society

The Status of Women among the Mising

In a society, the position of women depends upon the status of culture and civilization. The Mising people believe that women play a pivotal role in the creation of the universe. In science, the sun is all sources of energy. Likewise, the Mising people also believe the sun to be the mother of all creations and refer it as *Aa:ne-Do:ye*, i.e. “Mother-Sun”. Infront of the incomparable possession of energy that the “Mother-Sun” has, the *Aa:bu-Po:lo*, i.e. “Father-Moon” appears inferior. Hence, according to the beliefs of the Mising about creation, women power is believed to be the creator of all landscapes of the planets, i.e. *Pedong-Na:ne*. Also, the rivers flowing from the hills to the plains guide them to their destination and, along the way, make the land fertile for cultivation and provide fuel for life. These rivers are also referred to as their mother.

Although those beliefs about women persisted in ancient times, the scenario at present is quite different. Instead of portraying them as a repository of respect and devotion, they are treated as a pitiable being. It can be understood by looking at the day-to-day activities of a Mising women and how the male members dominating the society treat them in return. They have to wake up around 4 o’ clock in the morning then grind rice and prepare meals for the whole day. They have to feed their livestock, prepare breakfast for their kids, walk a considerable distance to fetch water from wells and rivers, and contribute to agricultural works in the field along with the males. At times, performing agricultural tasks are as challenging as the males like cutting with spades. In addition, farming *sali dhan* (a type of paddy) during winter, cultivating *ahu dhan* in waist-deep water during rainy season, cooking in the afternoon and evening, arranging firewood, looking after their domestic animals like hen, pigs, etc., preparing *apong* (a rice brew), taking care of their guests, weaving clothes for their family, etc. are major responsibilities by Mising women. It is also normal to see the Mising women carrying loads of heavy

woods on their head on their way back home in the evening. Hence, according to Tennyson's formula "*Men for the field and women for the hearth*", which means that men for outdoor activities and women for indoor chores is not completely applicable in the Mising society (Taid, 2015:131).

Even though the women contributing so significantly to the family's economy should be given a higher status however, it remains a distant dream for them. In exchange for the hard work, they perform to feed themselves and others, Mising women are treated as objects by men to use their wage on after they get drunk and in general treat them as slaves or inferior to them. This male chauvinism forces the women to live a miserable life without any complaints. In the "*kebang*" (meeting) held in villages, there are no female members in the jury. Even their presence in such meetings is not welcome. The males believe that the opinion of the females is not important in the society. In *porag*, a festival held by the Mising, there are some duties which are performed by the Mising women. To allocate them certain responsibilities, a committee is formed for the women under a female head called *borani* who is elected by the male members. *Tiribora*, the committee's head, supervises their functions. In *dobur puja* festival, women are not allowed to take part though the festival is agriculture related and women work as hard as the men in the fields.

In the distribution of parental properties, the females are neglected as successors, where the male members are mostly preferred. Only the maternal properties like bangles and other ornaments are passed on to the females.

In Mising culture, there are two words associated with their house: one is "*ri:sing*" which means "the head-side of the *chang ghar* (pile house)" and the other is "*koktok*" which means "the foot-side of the house". *Koktok* is also a place for cleaning dirty dishes and others. The female members are only allowed to be in the *koktok* but not in the *ri:sing*. This rule further explains the fact of gender discrimination in Mising society. Thus the males are given superior position where as the females are given inferior position. Mising people are still lagging behind in women empowerment. One of the main reasons for such mentality among Mising is lack of education.

Economic and social aspect of Witchcraft

The practice of witchcraft has existed for a long time as a global phenomenon. Amidst its global footprint, the practice of witchcraft has been prevalently in India, especially among the rural and relatively isolated precincts, which also happen to be the abode of indigenous tribal people. The latest report of the National Crime Records Bureau (a body under the Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India) reports that 2290 women were “hunted” in India between 2001 and 2014, on alleged charges of practicing witchcraft (Srivastava, 2015).

Table 5.1: Witchcraft killings between 2001 and 2014 in different states of India

Year	Jharkhand	Odhisia	Andhra Pradesh	Madhya Pradesh	Haryana	Chhattisgarh	Bihar	Other states	India
2014	47	32	02	24	00	16	06	29	156
2013	54	24	15	11	00	07	00	49	160
2012	26	32	24	10	00	08	13	06	119
2011	36	39	28	15	05	17	00	100	240
2010	15	31	26	18	57	08	02	21	178
2009	37	28	27	23	30	06	02	21	174
2008	52	23	23	16	25	15	00	21	175
2007	50	28	33	14	30	08	00	14	177
2006	29	36	26	13	34	10	11	27	186

2005	26	25	75	13	28	09	01	20	197
2004	26	22	24	14	00	11	00	14	111
2003	19	26	37	26	00	09	00	23	140
2002	26	39	23	24	00	04	01	34	151
2001	21	30	20	13	00	14	01	27	126
Total	464	415	383	234	209	142	37	406	2290

Source: National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB)

Dissection of these numbers reveals that prominence of such incidents has been rampant in the states of Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal (Singh, 2011). These numbers which have been officially logged in as well as the non-records are expected to be far more than this number. Furthermore, these figures include only those instances where parading, balding, and flogging of witches, forcing them for excreta eating, inserting sharp things in vagina, burning, chopping off body parts, committing rape or any other form of violence (other than murder of the alleged witches) have been completely left out in these figures.

Assam, a state in North-eastern India, is a hub for different ethnic groups and also the practice of witchcraft or black magic which dates back to hundreds of years too. Especially, Mayong in Morigaon district of Assam, used to be known as the “Indian capital of Black magic”. However, witchcraft is not limited to Mayong. It is unfortunately prevalent amidst several communities and tribes across the Brahmaputra valley. The Mising are one of the tribal communities of Assam badly affected by cases of witch-hunting. Kuli (2014:89) believes that now-a-days witch-hunting emerges as one major

social problem in the Mising villages in upper Assam. It is widely believed that the witches, who are mostly females, manipulate the perceived evil supernatural powers to cause detrimental and inauspicious events (like destruction of crops, ill health of villagers, disease of animals, death of nearby residents especially children and male members), etc. Then traditional customary practice of “weeding -out” the cause of perceived evil, by eventually killing/murdering the alleged witch, is witch-hunting. The Mising believe that the women are held responsible for the creation of all sources of evil power. All demons and malevolent spirits are believed to be born from a woman that is *Pedong Na:ne* (first mother of human). In case of any kind of misfortune, such as an accidental death or outbreak of unknown diseases, the people blame the women that can rear evil spirits to harm others. Since ancient times, the Mising are lagging behind literacy, and their weak socio-economic condition results in the illogical and irrational beliefs and practices, which contribute to committing extreme form of violence i.e. witch-hunting.

Mising people are very religious, and the priest *mibo* can be considered as next to God. The *mibo* is very powerful with huge public support and whatever he says is obeyed. A *mibo* can claim to be possessed and receive divine powers, and thus identify witches. The villagers believe these priests and give them the responsibility to find the witch when a misfortune occurs. The so called witch hunter would feign some rituals and take the names of people already suspected by the villagers by calling it divine knowledge and confirm the suspicion of the villagers. Since people are already in an agitated state, they would become angry at the suspected witch, and are ready to give out any punishment. In such situations, the trial conducted by him is public and met with no opposition. The opinion of the suspect becomes irrelevant, and the suspect is convicted with almost no due process or trial since the outcome of the trial is already determined. After the suspect is convicted of being a witch, various punishments are given. The witch is forced to eat human excreta and urine as it is believed that such things would act as a deterrent against the spells and powers of the witch. People stop going to the house of the witch and the family is socially boycotted (*yotpagnam*). The witch is forbidden to enter any others' house. The witch is tied with rope or buried till half for few days. The witch along with

the family is expelled from the village. Various physical and mental tortures are given. In some cases, even death penalty is given.

Table 5.2: Types of Punishment for Witchcraft

Types of punishments	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Beating and half dump of body	No	Yes	No	Yes
Forcefully given excreta, urine to drink	No	Yes	No	Yes
Beheading	Yes	No	No	No
tied and pulled through sandy soil	No	No	No	Yes
Boycott of family	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The above table shows the different types of punishments common during the witch-hunting process among the Mising. In some places, the witch finders use some special methods to investigate witches and the process is unknown. One of them is *basoni suwa* process which has different sub-groups like *houka basoni*, *nokh basoni*, *mantra basoni*, etc. They convince people that they can find the persons practicing witchcraft. Since these witch doctors do not rely on any practical knowledge, they just end up pointing fingers at people whom the villagers already suspected due to various reasons. Since the villagers receive a false sense of confirmation of their suspicion, they end up blaming the people suspected of witchcraft for all the sickness or misfortunes. And like this, innocent

people are branded as witches through a senseless, illogical process and get punished. Even people suffering from cancer and other diseases are proclaimed to be affected by witchcraft by these witch doctors. Apart from these, there are frauds who take advantage of simple and ignorant nature of people in many places nowadays, by claiming to be incarnation of *krishna-balram*, *shiv-parvati*, etc. They accuse people of witchcraft and set up kangaroo courts to pronounce judgment upon innocent people.

Due to unavailability of modern medical facilities in rural areas, people consult the local traditional healers and midwives instead of consulting doctors during illness. When the victim consults a doctor, he has the probability to recover, but generally in Mising society, the victim goes to the local medicine healers or *mibo* and the recovery from the disease becomes difficult. When the disease reaches its extreme condition, then only they consult the doctors and it becomes almost incurable. After death of a sick person, the society claims the death due to witchcraft. Monopoly of men to become *mibo* contributes to men's societal dominance over women in the society. Further, patriarchal family structure, unequal status with men in ritual functions and festivals, non-claiming of property after getting married, unable to make financial decision in the family and village matters, all contribute to establish women's subordination and to help men's societal dominance. *Mibo* takes the advantage of lower status of women and spreads the seeds of superstition. *Mibo* uses religion as a tool to obtain power, position, money, and so on. They are involved in identifying the witch and decide the punishment of the witches.

As it is mentioned earlier, all the top positions are occupied by *mibo* and *mi:ro* in the priest hierarchy and only male members can be qualified for those posts. *Mibo* remains the supreme religious figure, and he supervises the work of other priests. Though in lower positions both male and female may practice religious rites and rituals, there are lots of restrictions to become priest for women. For instance, in some religious functions women are barred, such as *dobur puja* (the most important agro-religious function).

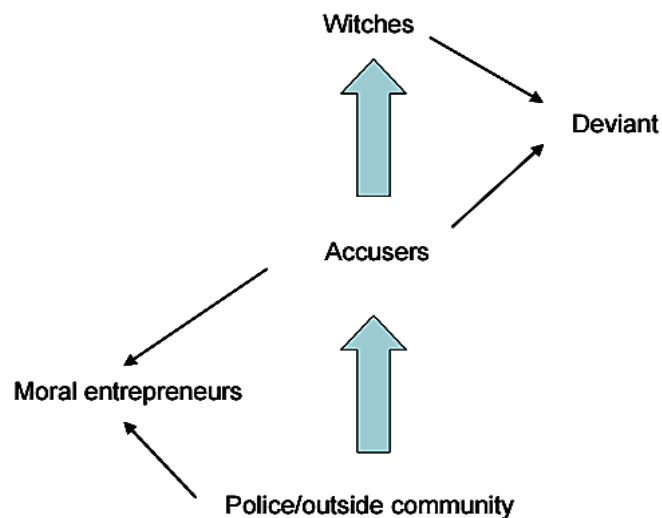
Scholars studying witch-hunt in India find that the gendered nature of conflict leading to witchcraft acquisition can be linked to epidemics and major diseases such as Malaria, Cholera, Small Pox, and the resultant death of family members or livestock which might

all be blamed on witch (Chaudhuri, 2014:15). Mostly women from a rival feuding family, women with property without male relatives (widow or a single woman) are labeled as witches, and they are then held responsible for accident or death (Mishra, 2003). Karlsen also (1998) comments on witchcraft accusation in the New England and according to her 78 percent of the accused were females. The accused women were ‘suspected by association: they were husband, son, other kin, or public supporters of female witches’(Karlsen,1998:47). In many times the absence of capable guardian may be the ideal target for witch hunts. Among the accused women, most of them were married, widow and childless widow who have a life interest in land (i.e a right to control the land and its production that will, after their death, pass on to their nearest male relatives). Among the Mising the more reliance on *mibo* further contributes to establish men’s societal dominance over women, either by dismissing women from higher position in society or by demeaning their knowledge and labeling it as malicious. Women who are pursuing medical activities to cure the villagers from diseases become a threat to the male medical healers as well as the male dominated society. So they try to get rid of the women medicine healers from their positions by any means.

These people then use ‘witchcraft’ as an instrument to get rid of him/her, by confirming his/her involvement in witchcraft, by recognizing the suspected witch, and then justifying a hunt against her. The labeling comes from a neighbor or kin. The threat of such a witch labeling increases when the woman has high economic status. The accused woman is imposed with fines for practicing witchcraft. These fines are taken in different forms such as giving a feast for the villagers, money or giving up of some fixed asset such as land. Sometimes, the punishment may be banishment. While studying on witch-hunting in Adivasi community, Nathan and Kelker (1993:117) argue that witch-hunting usually occurs in conditions where the women possess an economic status which is comparatively higher status which becomes a threat to the male-dominated society. The witch-hunt provides a convenient opportunity for the men from dominant lineage to eliminate any woman who opposes them politically (1993:117). The cases (discussed in chapter VI) find that most of the accusers and participants during the witch-hunt were male members. The *mibo*, the moral entrepreneur, who is a male, plays a crucial role in legitimizing witch-hunt by confirming the presence of witchcraft, identifying the accused

witch, and then justifying a hunt against him or her. The moral entrepreneur and his followers (other villagers) find nothing wrong in punishing the witches as they feel that it is necessary to bring back peace and save the villagers from further damage or dangers. The police personal and other non-tribal people view the witch-hunt as deviant, wherein a certain level of brutality and inhuman torture are involved, and in some cases witches are killed. The following figure indicates the patterns involved during witch-hunting.

Fig. 5.1 Patterns of witch-hunting



[contd....]

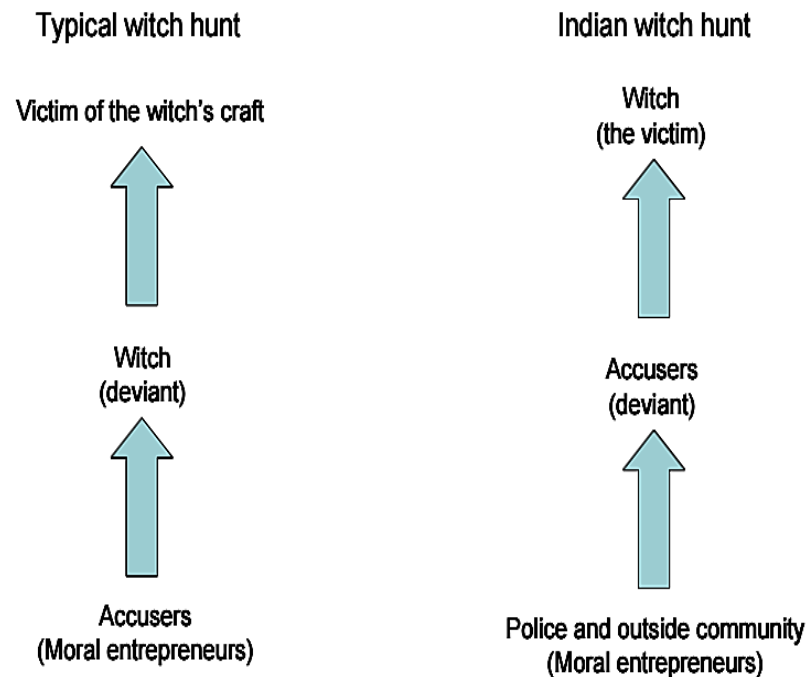


Fig.5.2 Pattern of witch-hunt

The Mising have patriarchal system of family structure. The father is the family's head and all the descendent depend upon the father only. In the society, a woman's status shows an important reflection of the standard of the social justice. The status of women is often defined according to their level of education, employment, income, health, and fertility. In the Mising community, the women play a substantial and crucial role because they manage of the household. Mising women are hard working, but they have unequal status compared to men. They play a more active role than men in family activities including all agricultural work, but they cannot claim property right after getting married. And they do not make any financial decision in the family and village matters. For doing the same work, women in Mising society get paid fewer wages compared to their male counterpart.

In Mising villages, the women perform major duties during festivals, beginning from collecting firewood to preparing *apong*. Yet they are not given equal status as men in

ritual functions and festivals and have no financial decision-making power in the family. Hence, women are more dependent on husband and other male members. When a woman pursues a job and contributes to the income of the family, it creates problems among kin and the neighbors, even with her husband. Husbands do not want to be economically dependent on their wives, and aspire to be the sole owner of their property. Plans to get rid of the women from the family also a cause of gender-based witch-hunting in some tribal communities. Also, when the family property increases, it creates trouble and causes jealousy within the neighbors and kin. When the kin and the neighbors are able to prove that she or her family members are involved in witchcraft, it becomes easier for them to make a personal agenda in their property.

Witch hunting incidents generally begins with the family member's death or affected by unknown disease. It is belief that in the initial stage of witchcraft, a witch must sacrifice his or her own family members.

Table 5.3: The steps involved in witch-hunting in the village under study

Steps	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Death of family member	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Instigation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Whispering campaign	Yes	No	Yes	No
Involvement of <i>Apong</i>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Trail	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Witch hunt	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The table mentioned above indicates the steps involved during witch hunt. In the four case studies all steps were involved throughout the witch hunt. The accusers were their own relatives and the relatives spread rumors in the village of the accused practicing witchcraft. Such rumors and conspiracy let the huge group of people in the village to go against the “witch”. Then local politics and the role of *mibo* made a trap for the victim’s family by confirming the witch.

In patriarchal structure, the authority of men is traced to their superior powers in the sphere of religion and ritual. While women do participate in matters of ritual and religion, they nevertheless have a certainly inferior position in this sphere. Participation in these rituals gives men their authority; exclusion from the same rituals deprives women of the authority. If they participate in these rituals, the general idea is that it is only for evil powers, hence the witchcraft. Such practices challenge the existing order of male authority in the patriarchal society.

Table 5.4: The different variables of witch-hunt drawn from the selected case studies

Variable	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Location	Borduwa-lohit Chapori	Borduwa-lohit Chapori	Balijan	Balijan
Year	2012	2016	2014	2015
Gender of the accused witch	F	M	F	M
Religion/ tribe of the accused witch	Mising	Mising	Mising	Mising
Prepresence of family conflict	Family conflict before witch hunt	Yes	No apparent family conflict before the	Involvement of family conflict over land

			death of her family member.	
Presence of village conflict	Yes	Yes	No	No
Presence of Epidemics/ Diseases/Death	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Marital status of the accused witch	Married	Single	Married	Married
Character of the accused witch	Aggressive behaviour towards paternal family and other villagers	He started to practice <i>suwali mohini tabeez</i> and gave to villagers	Eloped with other man	He was practicing local medicine healing
Was accused witch a local medicine healer	No	Yes	No	Yes
Character of the accuser	The villagers always suspicious of her behaviour, as the death of her family member cemented more	Villager accused him of killing her ex-girl friend's husband as a revenge.	Villagers suspected of rearing of witch, as her grandmother used to practice witchcraft.	After the death of her brother's son villagers confirm of his witch

	suspect on her			
Gender of the accuser	F	M	F	M
Relationship of the accused witch and accuser	Family members, neighbours and fellow villagers	Family members, neighbours and fellow villagers	Family members, neighbours and fellow villagers	Family members, neighbours and fellow villagers
Presence of witch finder	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Witch trail	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Method of hunt	Villagers murdered whole family and cut into pieces	Accused was given human excreta and urine to drink as it is believed that it works as deterrent against witch	Thrown out the village	Accused was given human excreta , urine to drink as it is belief that it works as deterrent against witch
Victim of the witch/supposed witchcraft	Family member died of unknown disease	Victim's ex-girl friend's husband died of unknown disease	Family member died of unknown disease	Family member died of unknown disease
Character of the witch	Aggressive behaviour towards villagers	Dancing in the jungle at mid night	Witch can cause harm	Dancing in the jungle at mid night

Character of the village where the witch hunt /accusation took place	Village situated far away from district headquarter and nearest police station	Village situated far away from district headquarter and nearest police station	Village situated far away from district headquarter and nearest police station	Village situated far away from district headquarter and nearest police station
Legal action involved after the attack or accusation	Legal action was taken, but because of unavailability of witnesses culprits were released from the jail.	No	No	No

The above dataset that drawn from the selected case studies indicates there are lots of similarities in the variables. It informs that witch hunting generally begins with family member's death or affected by known disease. Then local priest/witch finder play an important role in the daily spiritual guidance of the villagers and represent a benevolent power that is contradictory to the malevolent power of witch. Men alone can become ojhas or spirit healers cum witch finders. Thus witch finders have power and public support and act as rule enforcers and rule creators.

Summary

Though the Mising people also believe the “Mother-Sun” i.e. *Aa:ne-Do:ye* to be the mother of all creations, and women power is believed to be the creator of all landscapes of the planets, i.e. *Pedong-Na:ne*, and portray them as a repository of respect and devotion, a woman is treated as a pitiable being. It can be understood by looking at the day-to-day activities of a Mising woman and how the male members dominate them.

Even in the distribution of parental properties, the females are neglected as successors. Also, in the division of their living place, the concept of *koktok* and *ri:sing* clearly explains the fact of gender discrimination in Mising society where the males are given superior position whereas the females are given inferior position. Women are also not given equal status in the religious rituals and functions. Monopoly of male members to become *mibo* further deteriorates women position, as men control major religious functions and women role become meager. *Mibos* who considered themselves as superhuman, who save villagers from disease and illness with his special knowledge they is believed to possess. Over reliance on *mibo* during illness, make them very demanding and powerful and often charges a good amount for that. And as he is considered a versatile, he is given authority to detect witch, which is the cause of misfortune in the village. It is easy to pick any one from the village as a witch, as lower or poor are more prone to victim of witch, i.e. women. He also supervises the punishment of the witch, as he go against the poor and weak.

Chapter VI

Witchcraft Accusation and Local Politics

Nature of village participation

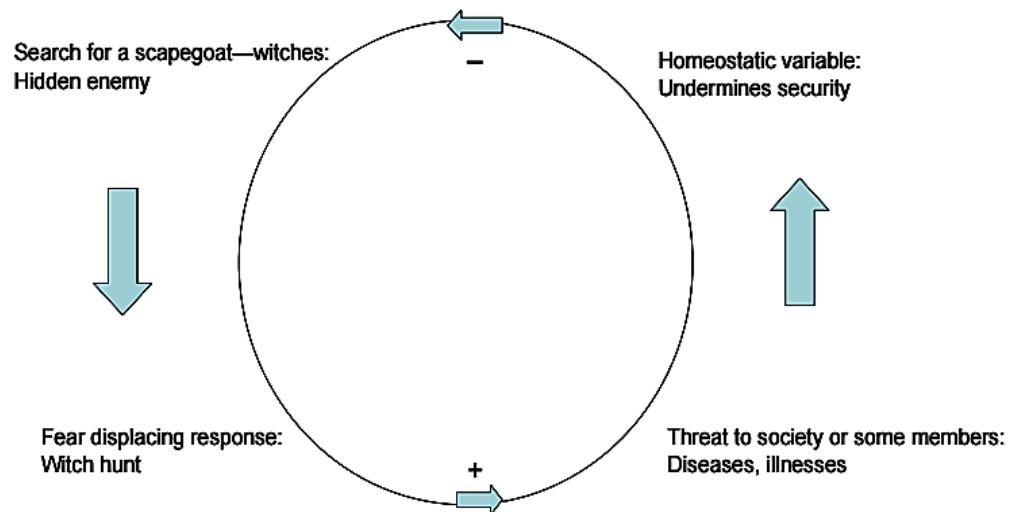
When we look at the participation in witchcraft at village level, several questions come to our mind. Who are the people involved in witch-hunting? What are the reasons behind the witch-hunts? These are the major concerns of the study. To get these answer let me allow discussing some important functionalist analysis of witchcraft. A number of functionalist anthropologists and sociologists interpret and discuss about witchcraft and they explain the positive functions of witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard (1976) observed that understandings about witchcraft could help to define values and morale standards in a society. Witchcraft is the socially relevant cause, since it is the only one which allows intervention and determines social behavior. They are foreshortening the chain of events in a particular social situation and selecting the cause that is socially relevant and neglecting the rest (1976:25). Ideas about negative characteristic of the witch can also be a way to guide behavior and belief in witchcraft served as a social control mechanism.

Anthropologists and sociologists studying the phenomenon of witch hunts have used a variety of theories from deviance literature to study witch hunts (Jensen, 2007). The most popular among them are functional theory and scapegoat theory. While the functional standpoint refers to deviance as the “normal” response to “abnormal” social conditions, scapegoating refers to the punitive or negative treatment of people or groups who are held accountable for crisis or problems they did not cause (Jensen, 2007: 53). Although the concept is widely used to explain the early modern witchcraze and the persecution of various populations at different times in history, scapegoating as a concept is rarely discussed from a anthropological standpoint. A scapegoat is an individual, group, or category of people used as an object of blame in a social system. In scapegoating, the target takes the blame for the crisis that is threatening the group as either “as an

intentional diversionary tactic or as a cathartic displacement of anger and frustration” (53).

The ideas that a society creates about witches can be seen to support norms and values in that society, and when analyzed along with a structural model of the society, can also provide insights into the organization of the culture and society. Scapegoating typically occurs when the members of one group feel threatened but are unable to retaliate against the real source of the threat. Scapegoating provides a mechanism for venting rage, frustration, resentment, fear and other emotions. It is a mechanism for placing or putting the blame for one’s troubles on some individual or group incapable of offering resistance. Hence, people vent their frustrations on some weak and despised group i.e. women, minority, elderly people, the poor and so on in scapegoating. Ideas about negative characteristic of a witch can lead to encourage the people to co-operate, share resources, and display their anger towards the witch.

Fig. 6.1: Showing scapegoating model of witch hunt



Source: (Jensen, 2007)

In instances of witch-hunting, the notion of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' is quite bewildering, i.e. who is the victim and who is the perpetrator?-does not come out very clearly (Konwar and Swargiari, 2015). In fact, the cognition of victim and perpetrator is quite antagonistic among the 'insiders' and the 'outsiders'. Here 'insiders' include the people who live in the village/community/society/place, where the incidence of witch-hunting takes place; whereas 'outsiders' are those, who are unknown to the accused witch and are not the residents of the concerned place.

For 'insiders', one who brings harm to the community-is the 'perpetrator' and the person who suffers the burnt is the 'victim'. By this analogy, the accused witch is the 'perpetrator' and the individual who are inflicted with ill-effects of the evil powers of the witch, is the 'victim'. In order to curb the cause of the misfortune and to prevent any further damages, the 'insiders' resolve to ex-communicate, oust or kill the witch. Contrastingly, for the 'outsider', the witch who has been ex-communicated, ousted or killed is seen as the 'victim' and the people (insiders) who are involved in this act has perceived as 'perpetrators' (Konwar and Swargiari, 2015).

Chaudhuri (2007:62-71), while studying on witchcraft accusation in Jalpaiguri Adivasi community, argues that witchcraft accusation can be classified into two ways- calculated attack of witch-hunt and surprised attack of witch-hunt. In calculated attacks, witch-hunts were preceded by clearly defined motives on the part of the accusers. These motives went beyond getting rid of the witch who was responsible for the curse in the community. These motives on the part of the accusers could be anything from maligning the reputation of the accused individual to serving personal motives, from revenge to settlement of dispute over property to settling a personal score against the accused and his/her family. In this category of witch-hunt, attacking the witch to get rid of witchcraft satisfies a smaller agenda. The real cause for the hunt is a pre-existing conflict that has nothing to do with the witchcraft (2007; 64).

In surprised attack of witch-hunts, the victims and their families are unaware of the witchcraft accusations against the accused women prior to the attack. The attack takes place without any apparent preparation on the part of the accused. The lack of preparation

could be due to the fact that the accused and her family did not have prior conflict or because they had no history of witchcraft accusation (2007: 67). At the center of witchcraft, In almost all cases, the identity of the witch is that of a local village woman whose reputation can be easily maligned through accusation of witchcraft. Nadel (1970) observed that the absence of the accepted morale which makes the “Nupe” suspect witchcraft. The woman who behaves as the “Nupe” is one whose character belies the common precepts and ideals of conduct; she is ill-conditioned, eccentric, ‘atypical’-what Margaret Mead would call a ‘deviant personality’. In other words, the suspicion of witchcraft fastens upon ‘abnormality’; not the physical abnormality, say, of cripples, hunchbacks, or strikingly ugly people, which is merely a matter of ill- luck; nor the mental abnormality of lunatics, which is the handiwork of spirits; but the abnormality of social and moral deviants (1970:171).

The role of gossip, rumor, and conspiracy during witch-hunt are very important. These strategies play a crucial role to mobilize people against the victim. In a matter of few hours, the entire village starts blaming the victim for the misfortune. Collectively, these play an important role, both at the beginning of stressful period in the community and later during accusation and gathering support for the witch-hunt. Rumors and gossip through conspiracies play a crucial role in displacing reality in the mind of the people in the community. In the cases, the “accuser group” goes all over the village successfully convincing the other villagers who had no motive for killing the woman and her family. Rumor and gossip established “a rationale of how witchcraft works” that becomes true reality. There is a power play involved in the displacement and replacement of reality and its construction.

Most witchcraft accusations stem from fights between women and men through ‘*gharuwa kajiya*’ (everyday household quarrels), conflicts between relatives, or neighbors that are non-serious in nature, to start with. Since the houses are in close proximity, occupants are frequently involved in each other’s lives, and these daily interactions also attract conflicts. These petty conflicts, get transposed into a conspiracy of calculated attacks of witch-hunts during the accusation of the women, in which men play a prominent role in instigating the hunt.

In almost all incidents of the witch-hunting among the Mising as well as other communities, gathering support against the witch was often both planned and sometimes voluntary. While some of the villagers were persuaded to participate in the witch-hunt through *apong* (traditional homemade wine) and sometimes through small amount of money, the bulk of the villagers joined the hunt without persuasion and almost no financial transaction. Some people participate voluntarily i.e. village young boys (see case study 1). Though they did not have a personal grudge towards the victims' family and do not have any intention of killing the victim but in subsequent period, they get into the process of witch-hunting. The aged people of the village tempt them to do so which leads to deviant behaviour.

Some of the villagers participate in the hunt because of economic hardship. They do not have any personal grudge but are forced to involve. In Table no. 6 we can find that more than 50% families of the two villages do not have land. The bulk of poverty is found among those with no land or insufficient land to feed them. This predicament is a result of both population growth and the failure of the government to create sufficient employment opportunities in rural areas. Inheritance custom, which calls for a sharing of property among a deceased person's children eventually leads to the fragmentation of farms into even smaller holdings. As a result the situation creates a favorable environment for gathering support from the villagers for preparing the hunt. As half of arable land remains in the hands of the big landholders and these landholders give their lands to the landless villagers on the basis of share crop system (landowner allows tenants to use the land in return for a share of the crops produced on their portion of land). Thus the share cropping system has created the powerful land owning interest. The accusation of witchcraft generally starts from quarrel over land and other property. In most witch hunting cases land owners involvement is very important. They provide the new dimension to the case. The role he has taken is very important during witch-hunting. One of a villagers said "we were participate the hunt, only because they wanted us to join in the witch hunt. We are poor and they are giving us land to cultivate. We have no other choice". Thus when the land owners itself involved in the witch hunting as accuser, it became easier for them for gathering support. The land and economic transaction with the

villagers make them powerful and thus has made favorable condition to join the hunt often forcefully or voluntarily.

***Apong* and *Tamol Pan* as mobilizing tools of Witchcraft politics**

Apong

Apong, an indigenous alcohol abstract from rice has ritual significance for the Mising community in everyday life and is offered to guests as a welcoming drink. *Apong* is mainly of two types—*po:ro apong* and *nogin apong*. The word *po:ro apong* comes from two Mising words *apong* and *aro*. Here, the word *aro* means real or pure. Hence, it means epitome of *apong*. *Po:ro apong* has special importance for every religious functions and ceremonies in Mising community. *Nogin apong* is also popular among Mising though it is less used in religious rituals. *Fotika*, a kind of toxic drink is also consumed by the Mising. This is also a means of drawing the support of the people by offering good quality *apong* and making them happy.

Tamol Pan

Tamol pan is an indispensable part of Assamese society. It also holds an important position in the Mising culture. *Tamol pan*, as it is popularly known, is a combination of two ingredients namely, *Tamol* which implies areca nut or betel nut and *Pan* which means betel leaf. Offering *tamol pan* after meal to the guests is a very common culture of Assamese people. It plays a vital role in every socio-cultural and even religious and marriage ceremonies. There is no binding on the consumption of *tamol pan*. Men and women of any age can consume it.

Apong plays a crucial role to mobilize village people. Whispering campaigns are carried out against the accused woman i.e. using gossip and *apong* to incite people to join a hunt, which is a deliberate act of recruitment. Villagers persuade the women who mostly believe in witchcraft and who have pre-existing conflict with the victim. These women try to manipulate their husband and other villagers in joining the witch-hunt through *apong* and *tamol pan* to manipulate their decision and join the hunt. They also try to manipulate the young boys age group of 14-18 years, who have less idea of moral

judgement. Village women leaders make whispering campaign against the witch. Thus the women with men in the village become the part of the conspiracy behind continued accusations.

Summary

The village level politics and the pre-existing conflict between the family members and neighbors play a tremendous role in the participation of witch-hunting. The witchcraft practice is used as an essential tool in conflict related to family matters. In calculated attacks, witch-hunts were preceded by clearly defined motives on the part of the accusers. In some cases, we find that, attacking the witch to get rid of witchcraft satisfies a smaller agenda, whereas the real cause for the hunt is a pre-existing conflict that has nothing to do with the witchcraft. In surprised attacks, the attack takes place without any apparent preparation on the part of the accused. The role of gossip, rumor, and conspiracy during witch-hunt plays an important role to mobilize people against the victim. Collectively, these are strategies that play an important role, both at the beginning of stressful period in the community and later during accusation and gathering support for the witch-hunt. There are also other mobilizing tools of witchcraft politics such as *apong* and *tamol pan*. In some cases, they include the young boys with help of *apong* and *fotika* to join the witch hunt. In some other cases, the village women leaders make whispering campaign against the witch.

Chapter VII

Findings and Conclusion

The practice of witchcraft which has existed for a long time has become a global phenomenon. Despite all the developments, there is an increase in the infliction of atrocities in India under the pretext of witch-hunt, and the shocking fact is that there is an ever-increasing incidence of atrocities day by day. The most common form of pulling off the “hunting the witch” incident is to take out money forcefully with the fear of social ostracization through grave humiliation. Due to low levels of nutrition, literacy, and income, some people are victimized in the name of cultural freedom. Gender discrimination has been aggravated due to literacy because mostly all the problems connected with this have their root to this fact. It has taken away women of the freedom to raise their voice, argue, resist, and protest against injustice. In addition to this, the patriarchal society has made them submissive and economically dependent on their male counterpart, whether be it their father, brother, husband or son.

Another factor of witch-hunting in India is the denial of property rights to women. In fact, some of the incidents show us the reality that, in a community, when a woman possesses some property or if her husband or son working in a far place sends her money, she easily comes into the notice of the *ojha* or the influential group. And if any unfortunate thing happens, i.e. if the crop of some tree or plant is affected, or if anybody’s health is not well or if there is any case of death, etc. in the surrounding of her house, she is labeled as a witch. To label the woman, this has become a very successful procedure because she will easily give out the money under such circumstances to extricate herself. Witchcraft charges are therefore fabricated and, with complete connivance of the village headmen, the punishment is pronounced. The way of targeting the families are such that that even the victim’s family will support the *ojha* but not the woman who has been implicated and subjected to the cruelty. Lack of medical facilities in rural as well as tribal areas also worsens the poor health of the mother and her children.

In this situation, people depend on the local *ojhas* who function as local remedy man as well, and are popular as “*Bongas*” in the eastern part of India.

The data from my dissertation does point out the fact that witch-hunting is a common incident in a community that is isolated from the mainstream population and geographically, a few miles away from the nearest police post. However, reaching a police station which is at a few miles away, takes time considering the community with a few means of transport. In most of the cases, any sort of help from the police arrives after the hunt is over. As no one dares to reveal the truth for the fear of social boycott; culprits escape easily due to lack of proper evidence.

As seen in the data, accusations on the witch come from the relatives or fellow villagers of the accused, but not from strangers. The data show that all witch accusations come out from incidents of disease and illness. Like any other society, the people in Mising society also suffer from various diseases, but they are subjected to village medicine and religious rituals instead of treating them with scientific medicine. This leads to further deterioration of the condition of the sick and even death in some cases. Such methods are superstitious. They worsen the health condition of the sick person which worries the person and the relatives. At last, they are guided by somebody who claims to be a well-wisher and who recommends them to a village medicine healers/*mibo*. The helpless relatives are forced to oblige at this level. The *mibo* acts as if he would cure the sick person, but most of the time, they rely on chance for which they end up making it even worse. The *mibo* tries to hide his inability and declare this condition to be the consequence of the work of a witch which brings about this sickness. The *mibo* becomes successful in convincing the villagers and the superstitious relatives of the involvement of witchcraft. Therefore, a strong connection exists between witch-hunts and illness. However, my dissertation is a qualitative dissertation and cannot answer the question how the rates of diseases and rates of witch-hunts in a community are related. To answer this question, one would need a quantitative analysis of epidemic rates and rates of witch-hunt. This analysis is presently outside the scope of this dissertation.

There is a connection between the credibility of being a suitable target and the victim's low social status. The findings suggest that both men and women may be victims of witchcraft. Women, because of their lower position occupied in their social life, they have a higher chance of being accused of witchcraft. The denial of parental property, restriction on the participation of religious functions and rituals, unable to take decisions into the village and family matters indicate women subordination in the Mising society. The findings on property ownership and increase in witchcraft accusation are mixed. Though lots of data do suggest that some witchcraft accusations are motivated to gain a plot of land by the accuser, some witchcraft accusations are made on individuals who do not own any land. The findings on the connection between lack of male guardians and increase in chances of being a suitable target provides little evidence that witchcraft accusations have any relevance to the marital status of women.

In a community where there is a strong belief and fear in the power of real witches, everyone is under the threat of being accused as a witch. The target in both the types of witch-hunts is either picked up randomly or as per the motive of the accuser as to what purpose the hunt would serve. However, irrespective of the motive, it is easier to find support for the accusation of witchcraft in comparison to the women with the following features: a quarrelsome personality, frequent cursing, and some physical features such as skin tone, color of hair, or physical deformity that adds credibility to her image.

This study includes in-depth interviews with the accusers and the accused in the occurrences of witch-hunts for providing an explanation as to why witch-hunts occur. Even more importantly, this study discusses the views of the accusers in detail to know how the accusers justify their actions in a society where witch-hunts are considered to be illegal. This research work provides a meaningful insight into the literature on witch-hunts among tribal people. Most of these findings are only suggestive, requiring the data to be validated and paving way for much more research and also offers numerous exciting ideas for future research.

Concluding observations

While perceiving the things from a logical and scientific perspective, we reach the conclusion that there is no possibility of someone who might cause harm to others through witchcraft. In reality, witchcraft is just a result of “*maying*” (superstition) with absolutely no scientific basis. Therefore, it is important to eradicate such superstition from society. When we look at the social scenario, these witch incidents occur in larger numbers in backward tribes not only among Mising community, but also among Bodo and Rabha, Tea tribe community. The real reason behind this is the widespread superstitious beliefs existing among these tribes. Lack of education and lack of social progress are also some key reasons for this. It is concluded that low literacy rate and illogical thinking brings about such inhuman acts in the society.

In India, Bihar was the first state to enact the Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Practices Act of 1999. In 2001, Jharkhand passed the Anti-Witchcraft Act followed by Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan 2005/2006 laws. Till date, there is no such law in Assam. In order to solve this problem, the general criminal laws are not adequate as it is both a criminal offence and a social offence as well.

The intention of the government agencies has also drawn sharp criticism with Assam yet to pass a law against acts of torture and murder under the pretext of witch-hunting. Official sources convey that a drafting committee was formed by the Assam State Commission for Women and a draft bill named “Bill Conferring Right to Protection Against Witch-Hunting” was submitted to the Government (Social Welfare Department) vide letter No. ASCW-9/2012/8 dated 2/6/2012, but the matter remained under the carpet (AMSS, 2015).

The state government submitted a draft to the high court recently by considering prevention and protection of witch-hunting in accordance with PIA no. 98/2013. It is mentioned in the draft that a bill titled, “Prevention of and Protection for witch hunting bill”, has been made for the prevention and protection of witchcraft, and it will be presented for enforcement in the coming session of the state assembly. It is stated in the bill that the criminals will be sentenced lifelong imprisonment or death, with a varied

range of fine from rupees fifty thousand to five lacs, based on the executed person's deeds (Hussain, 2015, p.1).

Initiative for eliminating witch hunting in Assam

Pahari Project

In 2001, the project *Pahari* scheme was undertaken by Assam Police. The project was initiated in Kokrajhar by the then DIG(P) of Western Range, Kula Saikia, to campaign among the village chiefs and to intensify the drive against the menace as well as elders with an objective of empowering of local women. To enlighten the villagers against this shameful practice, the project *Pahari* scheme has engaged itself in some particular activities. The project has successfully been implemented in more than fifty villages in Goalpara district so far with the co-operation from the village head man concerned and with an objective of empowering the local women. With an aim of creating awareness against the evil practices, this project has been observed of late to be implemented in other districts also.

Mission Birubala

With the help of various NGOs such as Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) in 2011, the mission was initiated by yet another victim of witch-hunting named Birubala Rava. To achieve the mission, he began the campaign from Goalpara, the western part of Assam, to the eastern part, Tinsukia, with the people including many social activists, teachers, doctors. Birubala Rabha (a Sangha member of AMSS) was nominated for "Nobel Peace Prize, 2005" by an international association called "1000 women for the Nobel Peace Prize, 2005". This was in recognition of her hard work along with other Sangha members of AMSS Goalpara to abolish the age-old practice of witch-hunting among the Rabha community of Balijana Block of Goalpara District.

To eliminate this discriminatory practice against women and their family, various women's groups in Assam have demanded a proper legislation. In order to stop this practice, some organizations such as AMSS, TMPK (Takam Mising Porin kebang), Sah Mozdur Santha, ABSU, All Bodo Women Justice Forum Assam Network, etc. are taking

field-based intervention so that the accused women can fight for their justice under IPC/CRPC.

Our main goal is to get a permanent solution to this problem as to how to abolish the superstitions completely from the society. To achieve this, it is important to spread modern education in our society along with an environment of critical thinking. Now Mising student organisation (TMPK) and *Mising Agom Kebang* (Mising Sahiya Sabha) come forward to tackle the issue. They arranged medical camps in the affected villages. They also force the government also take actions to curb the issue and incorporates witch hunting topics in students' lesson so that they know about the idea of the evil practice from their childhood. With the help of Some NGOs and TMPK leaders also arrange awareness campaign through street play, films show in local languages, in the rural areas. *Mising Agom Kebang* leaders also arranged a mass awareness campaign in villages along with public meetings, use of various means of communication and mass media especially through whatsapp and facebook they trying to connect with the people (Doley, 2017:118). It would also be helpful to create organizations and groups dedicated to this cause and lastly to ensure the involvement from various women organizations, student organizations, and all social and cultural organizations of our society. It is the absence of proper health care facilities in most of the tribal and rural areas which worsens the situation. Better health care facilities should be provided to people because they keep on holding their faith on evil spirits, and women fall into the trap of being perpetrators of witchcraft and sorcery if illness and diseases remain untreated. To improve better health care facilities, the state needs to implement most of the existing primary health care schemes. The result may be slow, but this is the strong and permanent mode of tackling the issue. In order to deal with the subject, it is very important to enact a special legislation because the problem is distinct in nature and form. Behind identifying a woman as a witch, there can be malafide intentions like grabbing of property etc., whereas the offence can sometimes be committed out of ignorance. We therefore need a law that can take care of the problem with focus on all its manifestations and forms.

More number of awareness camps, training session, workshops, seminars, conferences, and colloquiums must be conducted for discussion of the issues. For tackling the problem

of witchcraft accusation and consequent atrocities on women, a positive and supportive environment for women is required. Unless there is an improvement in the implementation of the laws for women, this problem cannot be solved. To enhance the status of women, we must improve their economic condition in most of the rural and tribal societies and support them in education and employment. On one hand, when the contribution of women to economic activities is almost equal to men, on other hand, their share in income and the per capita expenditure on women is negligible. It is necessary that there should be continuous and dynamic effort in this direction to facilitate better implementation of the law and to provide an effective solution to this problem.

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Glossary

<i>Adivasi</i> - tribals, indigenous community	<i>Maying</i> - superstition
<i>Apong</i> - a rice brew	<i>Machor</i> - firm-arms
<i>Buttu</i> - witch	<i>Murang ghar</i> - public hall
<i>Buttu onam</i> - practicing of black magic	<i>Midang</i> - marriage
<i>Buttu yadanam</i> - rituals which are performed by a witch	<i>Morunam</i> - witchcraft
<i>Chang ghar</i> - pile house	<i>Nogin apong</i> - a kind of rice brew
<i>Dugbolla-nam</i> - elopement	<i>Puja</i> - rituals
<i>Do:ni-Po:lo</i> - sun-moon	<i>Pedong</i> - first mother of human
<i>Erang</i> - family	<i>Pokka bhakat</i> - priests of benevolent religious rituals
<i>Gamburah</i> - village headman	<i>Ri:sing</i> - upper part of a pile house
<i>Galuk</i> - shirt	<i>Satra</i> - monastery
<i>Kowyoom</i> - an early stage of creation	<i>Satradhikar</i> - sole guardian of the satra
<i>Kesa bhakat</i> - priests of malevolent religious functions	<i>Sindoor</i> - vermilion
<i>Kebang</i> - a public meeting to decide and discuss the problems of the village	<i>Tabeez</i> - talisman
<i>Koktog</i> - lower part of a pile house	<i>Tuli</i> - fish storing basket
<i>Mibo</i> - local priest	<i>Yoktung</i> - dao

Appendix

Interview guides

Ecological and demographic characteristics of the village studied:

1. What is the level of literacy of the village to the best of your knowledge? What is the literacy rate among men? What is the literacy rate among women?
2. How far is the nearest state run hospital from the village?
3. How far is the nearest police post from the village?
4. How far is a local newspaper office from the village?

Reference on witch hunts:

1. What do you think are the major causes of witch hunts in the community?
2. Why do the tribals belief in witches?
3. Who gets identified as a witch in the village?
4. Does disease seem to be a major cause leading to a witch hunt?
5. What role does prior conflict between the instigator and accused parties of witch hunts play?
6. Does internal village politics have a role in instigating an attack?
7. What is the role of the *mibo* in the village? Does he have a role in instigating an attack?
8. Do you think gender is involved in the conflicts, meaning, does the conflict take place between a man (instigator) and a woman (accused), between two women or men? Is it common for men to accuse women of practicing witch craft?

Witch:

1. Who/what is a witch? What is the idea of a witch among the tribals? Does the witch always cause harm or good?
2. Who is considered to be a witch in the village?
3. How do villagers identify a witch? Are there any tell tale signs?
4. What happens after a witch is identified?

Witch hunts:

1. How old are the witches typically? Can you give me a range?
2. Are the accused witches typically single women (unmarried, separated, divorced or widowed? Or are they married?
3. Do they typically have children?
4. What happens during an attack?
5. Do all the villagers get involved in the attack?
6. What is the reaction of the village authorities when there is an accusation of witchcraft?
7. Does the village authority try to mediate between conflicting parties? How do they mediate? How often are impositions of fines a form of mediation?
8. What happens if the accused refuses to pay a fine?
9. What happens if she does?
10. What instigates the witchcraft accusation to turn into a full-fledged attack?
11. Does the attack involve lynching, killing, banishment or ostracism of the accused witch?

12. What is the reaction of the village authorities after the attack? What happens to the accusers?

13. What happens to the accused witch (if she survives the attack)? Does she leave the village?

Diseases:

1. What do you think are some of the common diseases that have been attributed to have been caused by a witch?

2. Because some people think that witches are responsible for causing illness in people, what percentage of attacks is caused due to the prior occurrence of disease in the village?

Land:

1. Who owns the land in the village?

2. Is there a scarcity of land holdings among people?

4. Can women own land in the village? Do they inherit land?

5. What do you think is the rate of witch hunts that have been caused by a property (meaning land) dispute?

Gender:

1. What do you think is the gender of the individual who gets accused of practicing witchcraft? It is always female?

2. What do you think is the percentage of the attacks towards male witches?

3. What percentage of the attacks, do men compared to women, instigate?

4. Is there possibility of multiple instigations (example mixed gender coalitions: man and woman)?

Status of women:

1. Do you know anything about the status of women in the tribal society? Are they economically independent? Do they inherit property (land, house, money etc)?

2. Do you know if there is a traditional system of inheritance among the tribal women, or is this a new development? After the death of a father or husband, who has the first claim on the property: wife/daughter or son/other male relatives?

Interview guide for villagers (accusers, accused, relatives and other villagers)

This particular interview guide is going to be very open-ended. The level of comfort experienced by the interviewee, during the interview, will determine the direction of the interview. The interviewer's aim will be to get a clear picture of witch hunt cases that have occurred, using their narratives. Sometimes certain questions will be dropped, while at other times a lot of additional questions will be asked during an interview, depending upon the cooperation of the interviewee. I have tried to make this interview guide as broad based as possible.

General questions:

1. Has there ever been a witch hunt in this village?

2. When did the last incident of witch attack occur?

3. How often do these incidents occur in your village?

4. What was the age, gender of the accuser and relationship to the accused in the last incident of witch attack?

5. What was the age and gender of the accused? Is she single, married or widowed? If married, does her husband stay with her? Does she have kids?

6. Can you recall any other incidents of witch attacks? If yes then describe those incidents.

On the incident of witch hunt:

1. So tell me why the incident of witch hunt occurred in this village? In other words, what instigated the accusation of witchcraft against the accused?

2. Was there some conflict between the two conflicting parties?

3. Did the parties (instigator and accused) know each other?

Accusation of witchcraft:

1. What did the instigator accuse the witch of doing?

2. Did someone from the instigator's family fall sick?

3. How did the accuser and his/her family realize that witchcraft was taking place?

4. Did they consult a *mibo*?

5. How does a *mibo* know that a witch is behind the illness?

6. How did the accuser and his family identify the witch?

7. What did the accuser and his/her family do after the witch was identified?

8. What role do other villagers play in the identification of the witch?

9. What happens to the accused witch?

10. Is the witch punished?

11. How is the witch punished?
12. What happened during the witch hunt?
13. Who decided the punishment for the witch?
14. Who administered the punishment to the witch?
15. How was the punishment administered?
16. Was it necessary to kill the witch?
17. Does the punishment of the witch result in the eradication of witchcraft from the accuser's family?
18. What happened to the family member who was sick after the accusation/attack? Did she recover?

Characteristic of the witch:

1. Have you seen a witch?
2. Do you believe in witches and do witches really exist?
3. How do you know that the particular person is a witch?
4. How does a witch look? Describe some of her physical characteristics.
5. How does a witch operate? In other words what are her tools?
6. How does a witch harm individuals?
7. How do you get rid of the witch's spell?

Questions for the accused and her relatives:

1. Why do you think you/or your relative was accused?

2. Do you believe in witches?
3. Did you have any conflict with the accuser and his/her family?
4. Describe the accusation?
5. Did you try to defend yourself/your relative who was accused?
6. How did other villagers react to the accusations against you?
7. Was there a trial involved?
8. How conducted the trial?
9. Did you go to the police for help?
10. How did they react?
11. Describe what happened during the hunt?
12. Who led the hunt?
13. What do you think was the real motive behind the hunt?
14. What happened after the hunt?

Questions for the accusers and their relatives:

1. How did you know that the accused was a witch?
2. What did the accuser do?
3. Did you go to the *mibo*?
4. Did the punishment help?
5. What is your reaction to the way the police reacted on the witch hunt?

Lists of participants for interview

	NAME	SEX	AGE
Accused	Dipen Doley	M	35
	Tare Doley	M	49
	Anita Doley	F	43
	Nitu Doley	F	40
Relatives of the accused	Bijoy Doley	M	19
	Atul Doley	M	20
	Phulmai	F	64
	Brojen Misson	M	46
	Apai Doley	M	45
	Tora Patir	F	38
	Kurali Pegu	F	63
	Nampal	M	40
	Bijoy	M	19
	Makil Doley	M	56
Accuser	Muwa Doley	M	61
	Mamoni Patir	F	37
	Migom Doley	M	67
	Rajkumar	M	58
Mibo/Mi:ro			
	Phukan Doley	M	46

Police and legal help	Deban Nath	M	42
	Kalinath	M	48



Plate no.1 *Mising chang ghar*



Plate no.2 Mising woman preparing *apong*.



Plate no.3 Mising kitchen



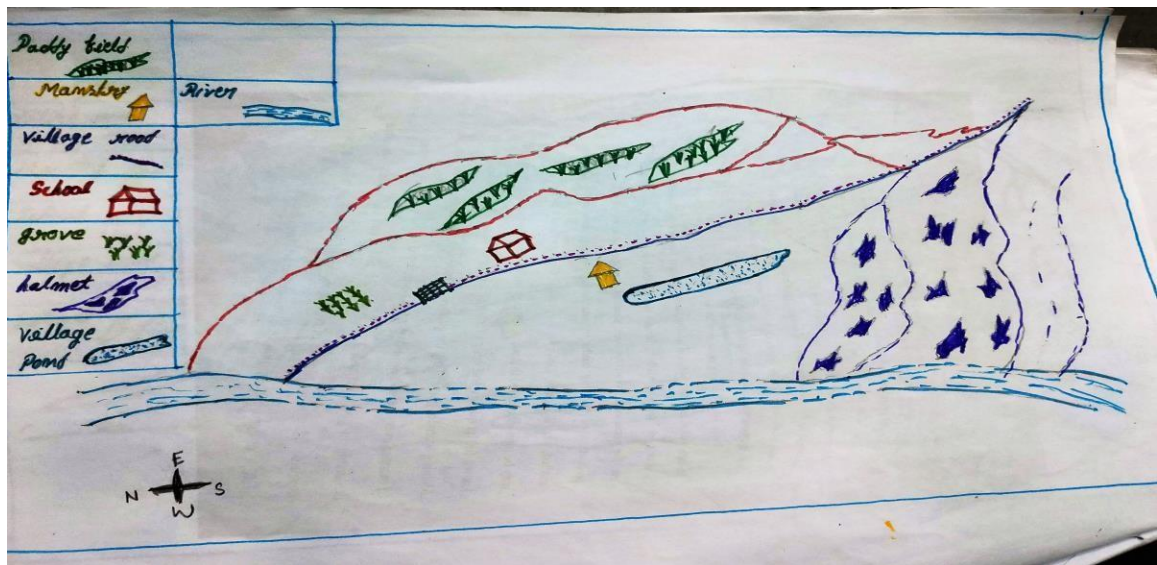
Plate no.4 woman busy in weaving



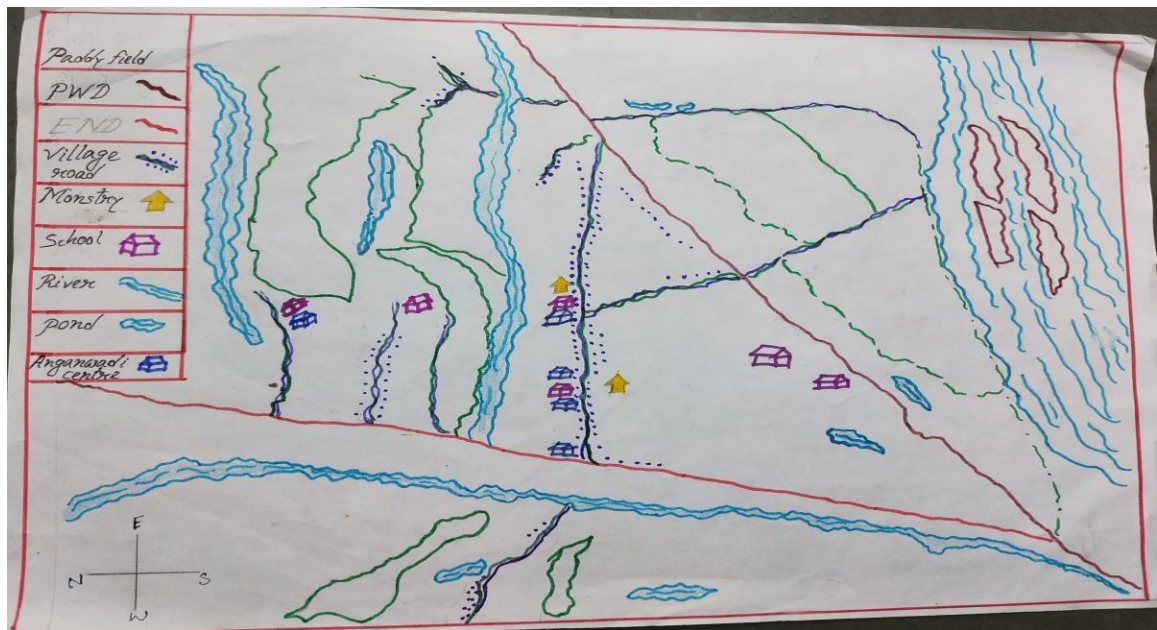
Plate no.5 Mising *keepar* (traditional wooden implement use for grinding rice)



Plate no.6 woman busy in grinding paddy



Map. 2 Baliyan village.



Map. 3 Borduwa Luhit Chapori village.

GENDER, PROPERTY AND WITCH HUNTING: A STUDY AMONG MISING OF MAJULI

by Dinesh Mishong

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