International Journal of Social Science Research (IJSSR)
Volume- 3, Issue- 6 | November - December 2026 ISSN: 3048-9490

Social- Organisation of the Mishing Community: Marriage, Family and Village

Subhalakshmi Kutum
M.A in History, Dibrugarh University

Abstract

The Mising or Miri community is the second-largest tribal community in Assam. This community has its own rich cultural heritage and distinct traditions. The original homeland of the Misings is believed to be in the Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Historically, they migrated from the Siang region to the plains of Assam in search of better living conditions. The social life of the Mising community is based on traditional customs, cultural values and mutual cooperation. Marriage is considered an important social institution that strengthens relationships and social bonds between two families. Mutual cooperation, respect and a sense of responsibility among family members are highly valued. Both joint and nuclear families are found in Mising society. The village is also an important part of their social organisation. Villagers participate collectively in various social activities, festivals and traditional ceremonies. These social institutions play a significant role in preserving the identity, heritage, culture, customs and traditions of the Mising community.

Keywords: Marriage of Mising, Social organisation, Culture

Introduction

The Mishing tribes are the indigenous people of Assam and belong to one of the largest tribal populations of Assam. The Mishing community, constitutionally known as Miri, was historically traced to the "Man- Tibetan branch of the Mongolian racial stock". According to the "Hemkosh" Dictionary, the meaning of the word 'Miri' is 'a tribe of mountain people who have lived in the plains for a long time' (CHOUDHURY, 2024). Primarily settled along the bank of the Brahmaputra, the Mishing were believed to have migrated from the hills of present-day Arunachal Pradesh, known for their cultural identity through their language (Agom) and also for agrarian practices. These indigenous people have a distinct social organisation of their own. They have developed their own culture, traditions, beliefs and practices that have a close relationship with nature, natural spirits and ancestral beliefs. They follow various traditional customs and rituals that have been passed down through generations (CHALIHA, 2025). The Mishing people have differed from other tribes in terms of their marriage customs and rituals, family structures, villages and social organization, although many similarities can also be found. These social systems help them to maintain a disciplined, honest and simple, peaceful

*Corresponding Author Email: subhalakshmikutum@gmail.com
Published: 26 November 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i6.301436
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life. The research covers aspects of the social systems like villages, family and marriage of the Mishing people.

1.01-Marriage System:

Marriage is a social institution that has been practised in India since ancient times. Marriage practices differ from one culture to another. The Mishing community also celebrates its marriages through various traditional rituals and customs. At present, marriage ceremonies in the Mishing community are generally conducted in two ways- the first way involves organizing marriage ceremonies by following purely traditional Mishing rituals and customs and the other involves mixing traditional Mishing rituals with a number of other ritual practices that have been adopted over time due to modernisation but were not originally part of Mishing marriage traditions.

The Mishing community is found in the riversides in many districts of Assam- Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Majuli. Marriage rituals and practices in the Mishing tribe differ from one another depending on the types of marriage. There are various types of marriage in the Mishing community.

Marriage systems can mainly be divided into 4 types-

1. Da: ro Midang

2. Dugla La: nam

3. Kumna La: nam

4. Sola La: nam

1. Da: ro Midang – the word 'Midang' means an auspicious marriage. This is a type of arranged marriage in which the parents of both parties meet before the marriage and then fix the date of the marriage. The consent of both parties' parents is given equal importance. However, both the bride and groom have the liberty to choose and reject each other. The consent of both the bride and groom is equally important. After both parties consent, the further rituals for marriage take place. "The groom's family presents gifts to the bride's family a bag filled with certain special items, such as hundred beetle leaves, about forty beetle nuts and a coin of silver. Traditionally the bag is supposed to be opened by the bride's uncle but in case of the absence of an uncle anyone related to the bride can open it" (DIHINGIA, 2022). Here, the Mishing traditional customs and rituals are strictly followed.

2**. Dugla La: nam- in this type of marriage**, both the bride and the groom usually elope together and then get married without the prior consent of the parents. This was not originally a part of the system, but as it started to happen frequently, it became an important part of the marriage system. The couple usually takes this step if the parents do not consent to their union and this may also happen if there are financial differences between the families. After the groom elopes with the bride, some elderly people are sent to the house of the bride and this is known as 'Dugtad'. In this case, the people who visit the bride's house for the 'Dugtad' usually face humiliation in most of the cases. After the 'Dugtad' process is successfully completed then the

next step is takes place, in which the groom's family and villagers usually welcome the bride to the groom's house by following traditional rituals.

3. **Kumna La: nam**- 'this is also a type of settled marriage, but the performance is' (KULI) not frequently performed. This type of marriage is also known as a blessing marriage. It takes place when there are financial differences within the family or when the groom faces financial issues in celebrating the marriage. In this case, the consent of both the couple's parents is equally important. When the groom faces financial difficulties in celebrating the marriage, then the groom, along with his family, relatives and friends, seeks blessings and permission to marry the bride from the bride's parents, elderly people, and the villagers.

4. **Sola La: nam**-this is another type of marriage. 'Sola La: nam' means forced marriage. In this type of marriage, the consent of the bride and her parents is not taken. If the groom likes the girl or the lady, then the groom resorts to kidnapping the bride and forcing her to marry him.

1.02 Condition of marriage

1. Marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited. Any type of marriage within the same clan is not allowed, as it is believed that they belong to the same 'Gu: min So: yin' (forefather).

2. The offspring of a father cannot marry, as they are regarded as brothers and sisters.

3. Inter-caste marriage is prohibited but not totally absent. The marriage takes place after the purification rituals and acceptance of society.

2.01 Family

The society runs the family under the patriarchal system. The head of the family is the elderly male, the father of the house. The family line of descent is traced through the father only. The people believe in living together as a joint family under the same roof and having their food from the same kitchen. The father, the sons and their families and the grandchildren live together under the same roof, following the orders of the father. The aged were given full authority. The family earnings lie in the hands of the family authority.

When the sons get married, they can still live under the same roof. They also build a nuclear family. The separation of the family takes place on different grounds. Some decide to separate because they have several children, which creates more burdens etc. The sons also separate after the headman of the house dies because of mutual misunderstandings between the sons. The son who builds a separate house usually builds the house with the help of his other brothers. As they build separate houses for themselves, the earnings of the nuclear family lie in the hands of the head of that individual household.

After the father dies, the mother and the eldest son become the heads of the family. The family authority moves into the hands of the eldest son. Even after the separation of the family, the entire family authority still rests in the hands of the eldest one. The brothers usually seek advice or guidance for their behaviours and other important traditional rituals of the family.

The male and female members of the household divide their works and accept their responsibilities without any complaints. The boys of the house usually learn their tasks by observing the works of their father and elder brother. The boys usually look to their father and elder brother for guidance in their lives and also in their problems. Even after the separation also the younger ones go for his father or elder brother's advice in importance matters such as marriage, funerals and many other Mishing rituals.

The women's main work is to do the domestic household work. The women also help with cultivation. The women work on harvesting, planting paddy, etc. Along with that, women also rear silkworms for fabric. The women also work on their handlooms weaving clothes for themselves and their families. The girls usually learn the women's tasks by observing their mothers and other elderly women of the house. Women wake up early in the morning and take care of the domestic animals. They rear pigs, chickens, ducks, etc. to support the family financially. The chief duties of the women are serving guests with 'Apong' and raising children. The girls of the house usually wake up early and clean the boundary of the house and the ground of the changhar. Cows and buffaloes are usually taken care of by the men of the house.

2.02 Property Distributions

The properties of the father, which are known as paternal properties are inherited by the sons equally. After the father's death and also when the father becomes too old and the sons start establishing their nuclear families, the father's properties are distributed among the sons. If the head of the household dies and his wife is still alive, the wife also has the inheritance right to live in her deceased husband's house and inherit a piece of land. She has the right to stay at any of her sons' houses equally if her sons have built nuclear family houses. The mother's properties or maternal properties, such as clothes, jewellery, looms, utensils, and their family ancestries, are equally distributed among the daughters, daughters-in-law, and female children. Domestic animals, their ancestral house pillars, other musical instruments and other instruments such as 'Le: nong', Marbang', etc.

2.03 Right to Inheritance

According to the Mishing tradition, the properties were divided into paternal and maternal properties. The inheritance rights to these properties are governed by the following conditions:

1. All the sons of the father inherit the properties equally after the father's death or when they start building their own nuclear families.

2. If the father died at a very young age, the properties were managed by the eldest son, who ran the household and took care of the family. The properties were equally distributed among the sons under the guidance of the elder son when the younger sons reached the appropriate age and got married, establishing their own nuclear families.

3. If the head of the house does not have any sons, he adopts a son from his own clan. After the head of the house dies, all the properties are inherited by the adopted son, along with all the rights.

4. According to Mishing tradition, daughters do not have any right to paternal properties. They may receive a share of their maternal properties, but usually, they cannot demand any property rights.

5. If the father has more than one wife, then all the wives' sons inherit the father's properties equally.

6. If the father is alive, then no sons can claim property rights. But if the son is married and lives separately, then a small piece of land may be given by the will of the father.

3.01 Village Organisation

The village organisations may be categorised into the following divisions:

1) Murong

2) Do: lung Kebang

3) Mimbir Ya: me

4) Rigbo ginam

5) Abir ginam

1) Murong

Murong was an important social institution in the past. The Murong was comparable with the dormitories of the other tribes. The Murong was built for the youths to stay and to guard the village against enemies. But in the present time, the Murong house is built only in the Po: rag festival celebration. The tradition of guarding the village against enemies by the youths has already been abandoned. Village get-togethers, and youth meetings are held in the Murong house to make social decisions.

2) Do: lung Kebang

It is an important social institution in the village. Here, the elderly people of the village and the village headman play an important role. The elderly villagers and youths gather in the Murong and have discussions on the village's social problems and take decisions for the wellbeing of the villagers. Important decisions were taken here.

Another reason for holding the Kebang is to discuss serious crimes committed by any village person. There was no courts or jails. The serious crimes and punishments were discussed by the headman of the village and the jury. The elderly people sit as juniors in the meeting. The village headman is the ultimate authority of the village. Many punishments were given, depending on the crimes committed by the person. Sometimes, people were also punished by being ordered to pay huge compensation. The biggest punishment imposed by the powerful social body means the jury, is to excommunicate (yodnam) in the village. Membership of the Do: lung Kebang is equally open to all. The person who calls for the Do: lung Kebang usually invites all the people of the village. If the person is not satisfied with a jury member, then he may replace the particular jury member with someone they trust as a member of the jury.

Basically, women are not allowed in the Kebang, but if a woman who is a victim calls for women's participation, then a few women may be present, but there will be no women members in the jury. In some villages, the village Kebang takes place in the village Namghar.

3. Mimbir Ya:me

This is an important and very powerful social organisation of the village. 'Mimbir' means the unmarried girls, and 'Ya:me' means the unmarried boys, so the Mimbir Ya:me means the youths of the village. These organisations usually take care of the village. If a family is building a house and is not capable of hiring labourers then these youths come out and do all the work. In return, the family organises a feast for them as a thank you. Festival organisations like 'Po: rag', 'Ali-A:ye Ligang', Bihu etc. are taken care of, along with the renovation of the Murong house.

4. Rigbo ginam

If the family headman calls for this organisation for paddy harvesting, then the girls harvest the paddy bundles and store them in the headman's storehouse. In return, the headman organises a feast for them. If the family is poor and cannot organise a meat feast or even a vegetarian feast, then the youths are also satisfied with 'Apong'.

5. Abir Ginam

Abir Ginam is the same as the Rigbo Ginam. Abir ginam means rendering physical labour. If any economically weak family cannot afford the cost of labour, they may invite their youths' friends for paddy harvesting. In return, they may not receive any payment but are offered Apong and edible things to eat in their house. This means that the Mishing people understand each other's problems.

Conclusion

The strongest feature of the Mishing tribe is the unity and mutual understanding between them. The people understand each other's problems. They are happy to help each other without expecting anything in return. The village organisations play an important role in protecting and uniting the village people together. The youth organisation is one of the most important organisations, which takes care of every important aspect to keep the village people united. The Mishing community follows the patriarchal system, with males dominating every important aspect of the society. The village headman and the head of the family are always male. Even after the death of the family headman, the single mother cannot individually hold the family authority. Even when all the children are very young, the mother needs the support of the eldest son to manage the family. The Mishing people believed in staying in a joint family, but because of many grounds already discussed above, the situation leads them to build separate houses. In many villages, we still find many households where people live together in the same house and eat from the same kitchen as a joint family.

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