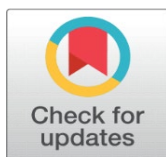
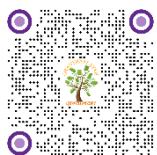


# CHRISTIANITY AND THE MISHINGS OF ASSAM: MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER, CONVERSION DYNAMICS, AND SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the encounter between Christian missionary enterprise and the Mishing community of Assam, northeastern India, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Drawing on oral testimonies, fieldwork conducted across Majuli, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, and Dhakuakhana districts, and on published and archival secondary sources, the study analyses the historical trajectory of missionary activity among the Mishings, the socio-economic and religious factors that rendered communities receptive to conversion, and the multidimensional impacts of Christianisation on Mishing culture, social organisation, and religious identity. The article argues that conversion among the Mishings was neither a simple act of cultural capitulation nor a straightforward adoption of a world religion, but a complex and negotiated process shaped by caste exclusion, economic marginality, flooding-induced vulnerability, the institutional resources of missionary agencies, and the internal contradictions of the Mishing religious landscape. The findings contribute to broader debates in the anthropology and sociology of religion concerning religious change among indigenous communities in South and Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Mishings, Christianity, Missionary Activity, Conversion, Assam, Northeast India, Religious Change, Tribal Religion, Donyi Polo, Socio-Cultural Transformation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The encounter between Christian missionary enterprise and the indigenous communities of northeastern India represents one of the most consequential yet under-studied chapters in the region's modern history. Among the many tribal communities of Assam, the Mishings — a plains-dwelling Tibeto-Burman group inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley, particularly the riverine districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, and the island of Majuli — occupy a distinctive position in this encounter. Unlike the hill peoples of Nagaland or Mizoram, where Christianity achieved near-total demographic penetration, the Mishings' relationship with Christianity has

been partial, contested, and profoundly revealing of the social and material conditions that shape religious change.<sup>1</sup>

This article traces the history of Christian missionary activity among the Mishings from its origins in the 1830s to its accelerating pace in the closing decades of the twentieth century, and examines the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that determined conversion patterns. It further analyses the consequences of Christianisation for Mishing social organisation, gender relations, linguistic heritage, and religious identity — including the reactive revivalism of the indigenous Donyi Polo movement. The article argues that conversion among the Mishings is best understood not as a unidirectional process of Westernisation or cultural displacement, but as a complex negotiation between missionary institutional power, community-level agency, and the structural vulnerabilities of a marginalised riparian community.<sup>2</sup>

The study employs a mixed-methods approach combining historical analysis of primary and secondary sources with ethnographic fieldwork, including structured and unstructured interviews with community members, Christian converts, and religious leaders across the principal Mishing-inhabited areas of Assam. The analysis is situated within comparative frameworks drawn from the sociology and anthropology of religion, post-colonial studies, and the emerging literature on religious change in tribal South Asia.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONVERSION, AGENCY, AND STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY**

The sociology of religious conversion has moved decisively beyond earlier models that treated conversion as either straightforward enlightenment or coercive imposition. Contemporary scholarship emphasises the importance of structural factors — poverty, social exclusion, disease burden — alongside the agency of converting communities in selectively appropriating the resources and meanings offered by missionary organisations. Scholars such as Gauri Viswanathan, Robin Horton, and Lamin Sanneh have each, from different disciplinary angles, drawn attention to the capacity of indigenous actors to shape, resist, and transform the Christianity they encounter.

In the South Asian context, the relationship between caste exclusion and Christian conversion is particularly well-documented. Dalit and tribal communities have historically found in Christianity a symbolic and institutional resource for contesting their marginalisation within Hindu social hierarchies — a dynamic that resonates strongly in the Mishing case. The intersection of caste discrimination, economic precarity, and the inadequacy of existing religious institutions in meeting community needs created conditions of receptivity that missionary agencies were well-positioned to exploit, in the sociological rather than pejorative sense of the term.<sup>3</sup>

The Mishing case also speaks to what might be termed the ecology of conversion: the ways in which environmental vulnerability — in this instance, the chronic flood-induced precarity of life along the Brahmaputra — interacts with religious change. When existing spiritual and social institutions fail to provide adequate resources for coping with recurrent material catastrophe, communities

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Vazhayil Thomas, *Christians in Secular India* (New Jersey, 1984), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

may rationally seek alternatives. This ecological dimension has been undertheorised in the conversion literature and merits sustained attention in the Mishing context.

### 3. CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Christianity is among the oldest of India's living religious traditions. According to long-established tradition, St Thomas the Apostle arrived on the Malabar Coast in 52 CE, establishing the first Christian communities on the subcontinent.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding debates about the historicity of this account, the Syrian Christian communities of Kerala represent one of the earliest and most enduring Christian presences in Asia. Christianity in India thus antedates, by many centuries, its association with European colonial expansion.<sup>5</sup>

The arrival of Vasco da Gama's fleet at Calicut in 1498 inaugurated a new and far more politically charged chapter in the history of Indian Christianity.<sup>6, 7</sup>

The Portuguese, inspired by papal injunctions and driven by a conflation of commercial and evangelical imperatives, pursued an aggressive programme of baptism along the Konkan coast. Their methods — including the use of coercion against existing Syrian Christian communities and the enforcement of Latin rites — differed markedly from those of later Protestant missions. The British East India Company, by contrast, actively discouraged missionary activity in its territories for much of the eighteenth century, viewing it as a potential irritant to commercial relations with Indian rulers. It was only with the Charter Act of 1813 that Protestant missionaries gained formal access to British India, triggering a sustained expansion of evangelical activity across the subcontinent.<sup>8, 9</sup>

The two principal divisions of Christianity in India — Catholic and Protestant — reflect this historical differentiation. Protestant denominations, particularly the Baptists and Anglicans, came to play the dominant role in northeastern India, in contrast to the Catholic strongholds of Kerala, Goa, and the Konkan coast. The missionaries' investment in education, healthcare, and literacy — whatever the instrumental motivations — produced institutional legacies of considerable social significance that persist to the present day.<sup>10</sup>

## 4. THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY TO NORTHEAST INDIA

### 4.1. EARLY CONTACTS AND ROMAN CATHOLIC PRESENCE

The earliest documented Christian presence in northeastern India dates to 1626, with the arrival of Portuguese Jesuit missionaries Fr Stephen Cacella and Fr João Cabral, who were travelling overland towards Tibet.<sup>11, 12</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. I (Bangalore, 1967), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Vazhayil Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> M. S. Sangma, *History of American Baptist Mission in North-East India*, Vol. I (Delhi, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Rowena Robinson, *Christians of India* (New Delhi, 2003), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> M. S. Sangma, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

In a letter composed in Bhutan in October 1627, Cacella recorded his passage through Goalpara and Kamrup districts, offering one of the earliest European accounts of the Brahmaputra valley's social landscape.<sup>13</sup>

These early Catholic<sup>14</sup> contacts did not produce lasting communities in Assam proper. The first stable Christian settlement in the northeastern region appears to have been established at Rangamati, followed by Bondashill in the Cachar district<sup>15</sup>, situated on the left bank of the Barak River<sup>16</sup>. These early communities were Roman Catholic in denomination.<sup>17, 18</sup>

#### **4.2. THE SERAMPORE MISSION AND WILLIAM CAREY**

The modern era of Protestant missionary activity in India and in northeastern India is conventionally dated to 11 November 1793, when William Carey arrived in Calcutta.<sup>19</sup>

Carey and his Serampore colleagues brought to missionary practice a new emphasis on vernacular translation, indigenous education, and the systematic documentation of local languages — an approach with profound long-term consequences for the tribal communities they encountered. The Serampore College, founded in 1818, trained Indian evangelists and served as the institutional hub of this expanded missionary enterprise.<sup>20</sup>

Following the Charter Act of 1813, the Serampore Mission extended its activities into the northeastern frontier.<sup>21</sup> A mission and school were established at Guwahati in 1829 under James Rae, and William Robinson subsequently undertook extensive touring in the Nowgaon (Nagaon) district, laying the groundwork for further expansion up the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>22, 23</sup>

#### **4.3. THE AMERICAN BAPTIST MISSION**

The most consequential missionary presence in northeastern India was that of the American Baptist Mission (ABM), which arrived in Assam in 1836. The ABM's initial motivation was explicitly strategic: Assam's geography was valued as a potential corridor into China's interior at a time when Chinese seaports remained closed to foreign missionaries.<sup>24</sup>

Rev. Nathan Brown and Rev. Oliver Cutter, both veterans of the Burma mission, arrived at Sadiya on 23 March 1836, in a town of approximately four thousand inhabitants.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> E. A. Gait, *History of Assam* (Guwahati, 1905; repr. 1926), p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> M. S. Sangma, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> S. K. Bhuyan, *Early British Relations with Assam* (Shillong, 1949), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> M. S. Sangma, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> H. K. Borpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India* (Delhi, 1986), Introduction, p. xii.

<sup>21</sup> M. S. Sangma, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Vol. II, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> H. K. Borpujari, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

Sadiya's position on the northeastern frontier, near the foothills of the Mishmi Hills and adjacent to territories inhabited by the Mishings and other plains tribes, made it a natural point of entry for missionary work among these communities.<sup>26</sup>

After years of limited success at Sadiya, Jaipur, and Namsang — a period punctuated by the Khamti attack on British forces in 1838 and the subsequent disruption of mission operations — the ABM transferred its principal station to Sibsagar (Sivasagar) in 1843.<sup>27</sup>

Sibsagar's advantages of centrality, connectivity by both river and road, and its proximity to the dense populations of the Brahmaputra valley made it the most productive base for subsequent evangelical expansion.<sup>28</sup> By 1844–45, eleven mission schools were operating in the Sibsagar district alone,<sup>29</sup> with a further five in and around Guwahati.<sup>30</sup>

The establishment of the first Baptist Association in 1851, with its inaugural session at Sibsagar, institutionalised the mission's presence and provided an organisational framework for future growth. The upheavals of 1857–58, which reduced the Sibsagar mission to a single resident missionary, proved a temporary setback rather than a permanent reversal.

## **5. MISSIONARY ACTIVITY AMONG THE MISHINGS: CHRONOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY**

### **5.1. THE MISHING PEOPLE: A BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE**

The Mishings (also written as Misings) are the second-largest plains tribal group in Assam, with a population concentrated along the banks of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, and Dibrugarh, as well as on the river island of Majuli.

Ethnolinguistically, the Mishings belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family and are closely related to the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, from whom their oral traditions trace descent. Historically semi-nomadic, they have largely settled in riverine villages whose economies combine wet-rice cultivation, fishing, and weaving. Their traditional socio-religious life is organised around animist practices, presided over by ritual specialists known as Mibus, and increasingly interpenetrated by Vaishnava Hinduism mediated through the Satra monastic institutions of the Brahmaputra valley.

The Mishings' social position in Assam is structurally marginal in several respects. Their plains-tribal status has historically excluded them from the ritual hierarchy of caste Hinduism, while also differentiating them from the hill tribes who fall under separate constitutional provisions. Their riparian habitations expose them to chronic flood damage — Majuli, the world's largest river island, loses significant land area to erosion each year — producing recurrent cycles of dispossession that have historically outpaced government resettlement and rehabilitation.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

## 5.2. THE BEGINNINGS OF MISSIONARY WORK, 1836–1930

The Mishing people entered the missionaries' field of attention virtually from the inception of the ABM's northeastern operations. Nathan Brown's establishment of a mission camp at Sadiya in 1836 placed the ABM in direct proximity to Mishing communities of the upper Brahmaputra plains.<sup>31</sup>

Missionary stations were subsequently extended to North Lakhimpur (1834) and Pthalipam (1895), progressively enclosing the principal zones of Mishing habitation within the missionaries' institutional network.<sup>32</sup>

Despite sustained effort across seven decades, conversion among the Mishings remained minimal before Independence. It was only between 1921 and 1930 that the first documented mass conversion event occurred, involving thirty-eight individuals — a modest but symbolically important cohort that signalled the beginning of a sustained, if slow, transformation.<sup>33</sup>

Several factors account for the tardiness of this initial breakthrough. The Mishings' dual embeddedness — in the Satra-mediated world of Vaishnava Hinduism on one side and in traditional animist practices on the other — gave them a degree of religious plurality and social resilience that made straightforward conversion a less compelling option than it was for more socially isolated communities. Moreover, the missionaries' primary linguistic and educational investments in this period were directed at Assamese and other groups, with comparatively limited work in the Mishing vernacular.

Missionary agencies sought to overcome this barrier by recruiting Mishing youths into theological colleges, training them as indigenous evangelists, and investing in vernacular literacy — a strategy that would bear fruit in subsequent decades through the progressive development of a Mishing-language Christian literature.

## 5.3. EXPANSION AFTER INDEPENDENCE: GEOGRAPHY AND INSTITUTIONS

The pace of conversion accelerated significantly from the late 1970s onwards, as missionary organisations extended their networks into remote Mishing-inhabited villages across Majuli, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dhakuakhana, Jonai, Telam, Silapathar, and Tarajan of Bharali.<sup>34</sup>

The institutional vehicle for this expansion was primarily educational. Missionary schools — of which St Paul's High School at Jengraimukh in Majuli, established in 1987, is a prominent example — provided communities with valued access to modern schooling while simultaneously serving as focal points for evangelical activity.<sup>35</sup>

By the 1990s, missionary presence in Dhakuakhana had extended to remote villages such as Bokulguri, Bahirbogori, Tekeliphuta, and Japanchuk, where

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<sup>31</sup> M. S. Sangma, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> L. N. Pegu, 'Impact of Hinduism and the Religion on the Mishing Religious Beliefs', in *Souvenir Doksiri* (Guwahati, 2005), p. 95.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>35</sup> D. Nath, *The Majuli Island: Society, Economy and Culture* (Delhi, 2009), p. 94.

churches, schools, hospitals, and non-governmental organisations were collectively established.<sup>36</sup>

In Dhemaji district, the principal areas of Christian activity include Begenagara, Telam, Okajan, Jonai, Simenchapori, Gugamukh, and Dekapam. Approximately ten percent of the Mishing population of Dhemaji has converted to Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

**Table 1**

<b>Table 1 Key Centres of Missionary Activity in Mishing-Inhabited Areas</b>			
<b>Area / Locality</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Approx. Decade of Activity</b>	<b>Key Institution Established</b>
Sadiya	Lakhimpur / Tinsukia	1836–1840s	Mission camp; primary school
North Lakhimpur	Lakhimpur	1834 onwards	Mission school
Pathalipam	Lakhimpur	1895 onwards	Mission school
Jengraimukh / Kumarbari Lakhimigaon	Majuli	Late 1970s–1987	St Paul's High School (1987)
Bokulguri, Bahirbogori, Tekeliphuta, Japanchuk	Dhakuakhana	1999 onwards	Church; school; NGO; hospital
Begenagara, Telam, Okajan, Jonai, Gugamukh, Dekapam	Dhemaji	1990s onwards	Churches; missionary schools
Jonai area	Dhemaji	1990s onwards	Churches; religious institutions

**Source:** Compiled from fieldwork data and published secondary sources (Pegu, 2005; Nath, 2009).

## **6. FACTORS DRIVING CONVERSION: AN ANALYTICAL ACCOUNT**

### **6.1. CASTE EXCLUSION AND SOCIAL MARGINALISATION**

Perhaps the most structurally significant factor driving Mishing conversion is the experience of social exclusion and ritual denigration within the dominant Hindu social order. As a plains tribal community, the Mishings occupied an ambiguous and often degraded position in the caste hierarchy — associated, in the stereotypes of upper-caste Assamese society, with pork consumption, alcohol use (particularly the traditional rice beer Apong), and practices deemed incompatible with Brahminical purity norms.<sup>38, 39</sup>

This denigration was not merely symbolic. The religious heads of the Vaishnavite Satras — the monastic institutions that have exercised significant cultural and spiritual authority across the Brahmaputra valley since the Bhakti movement of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries — paid little substantive attention to the spiritual and material needs of Mishing devotees. As one analyst has observed, Satra Gurus were more concerned with collecting religious taxes (dharadhuna) from Mishing households than with providing meaningful religious guidance or pastoral care.<sup>40</sup>

The contrast with Christian missionary practice was stark and was directly experienced by potential converts. Jiban Doley, a Christian convert from Dhakuakhana, articulated this contrast clearly when interviewed:

<sup>36</sup> Field interview: Jiban Doley, resident of Dhakuakhana, aged 45.

<sup>37</sup> Field interview: Tanin Borang, resident of Dhemaji, aged 40.

<sup>38</sup> L. N. Pegu, op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

*The missionaries love us and respect our culture. So, we accept Christianity as our religion.*

This testimony, while modest in its formulation, captures a dynamic that recurs across conversion narratives from the region: the experience of being seen, valued, and respected — rather than exploited or dismissed — by a new religious institution constituted a powerful draw for communities accustomed to social invisibility.<sup>41</sup>

## 6.2. ECONOMIC MARGINALITY AND PHILANTHROPIC OUTREACH

The economic dimensions of Mishing vulnerability were no less significant than the social ones. Mishing-inhabited districts — particularly Majuli, Lakhimpur, and Dhemaji — are among the most flood-affected areas in Assam, a state that itself ranks among India's most disaster-prone regions.<sup>42</sup>

Annual flooding along the Brahmaputra and its tributaries destroys crops, displaces households, erodes agricultural land, and undermines the livelihood security of riparian communities with a regularity and severity that successive governments have proved unable to address effectively. In this context, the material resources of missionary organisations — food relief, medical care, educational provision, and institutional employment — constituted genuinely life-altering resources for communities at the margins of survival.<sup>43</sup>

This philanthropic dimension of missionary activity requires careful analytical treatment. It is neither accurate to dismiss it as straightforward material inducement (implying passive recipients incapable of meaningful religious agency), nor is it adequate to idealise it as purely altruistic humanitarianism unconnected to the project of conversion. The sociology of religious conversion in conditions of structural vulnerability suggests that material and spiritual motivations interact in complex ways — communities simultaneously appreciate the resources on offer and undertake a genuine re-evaluation of their religious identities in light of missionary teaching and community example.<sup>44</sup>

## 6.3. THE LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The spread of Christianity among the Mishings was facilitated not only by external pressures but also by specific internal limitations of the existing religious landscape. Mishing traditional religion is broadly animist in character, centred on the propitiation of natural and ancestral spirits through ritual practices presided over by Mibus (traditional priests). Several features of this religious system created particular pressures on converting communities.<sup>45</sup>

Most significantly, the performance of major rites — including post-mortuary ceremonies — requires the sacrifice of large numbers of animals, with substantial associated costs. For poor households chronically affected by flood losses, these obligations constituted a serious economic burden. The compulsory character of many ritual observances meant that families frequently accumulated debt or postponed ceremonies for years, generating guilt, social censure, and spiritual

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<sup>41</sup> Field interview: Lila Doley, resident of Jengraimukh area.

<sup>42</sup> Field interview: Tamin Borang, resident of Dhemaji.

<sup>43</sup> Field interview: Janok Doley, resident of Borpomua Gaon.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> D. N. Nath, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

anxiety. The relative simplicity and low material cost of Christian ritual practice offered a compelling practical alternative.

A further structural constraint was the exclusion of certain family members from the performance of traditional religious rites. By contrast, Christian worship in the Baptist tradition is fully inclusive: all members of a family, irrespective of gender, age, or ritual status, participate in services and ceremonies on equal terms. This inclusivity had particular salience for Mishing women, whose religious agency was constrained within the traditional system.<sup>46</sup>

The role of the globalisation of communications in creating new religious horizons should also not be overlooked. As satellite television, mobile telephony, and internet connectivity extended into previously isolated Mishing villages, communities gained exposure to a wider world of ideas, institutions, and possibilities that expanded the imaginative horizons within which religious choice was made.

## **6.4. MISSIONARY STRATEGY AND INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES**

The success of missionary organisations in converting Mishing communities also reflected the strategic intelligence and institutional resources they brought to the enterprise. The decision to invest in vernacular education — including the translation of the Bible into Mising language and the development of Mising-language literacy materials — was of fundamental importance.

This investment in linguistic dignity distinguished Christian missionary practice from the experience of Satra authority, which operated in Assamese and Sanskrit and made no corresponding concession to Mishing linguistic identity. The development of a Mising-language Christian literature not only served evangelical purposes but contributed materially to the codification and standardisation of the Mising language — an enduring cultural contribution acknowledged even by those who do not share the faith.<sup>47</sup>

The missionaries' ability to enter Mishing society was also facilitated by the community's ambiguous institutional position: the Mishings were neither fully incorporated into the Vaishnavite Satra system nor organised around a strong traditional religious institution of their own. This religious interstice — a space between institutional affiliations — made them more accessible to missionary outreach than communities with more consolidated religious identities.

## **7. SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS OF CHRISTIANISATION**

### **7.1. SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND GENDER**

The adoption of Christianity has had significant and multidimensional effects on the social organisation of Mishing communities. In the sphere of gender relations, the inclusive practice of Christian worship — which encourages the equal participation of men and women in all religious activities — has created new spaces of agency for Mishing women. In a social context where traditional ritual exclusions had constrained women's spiritual and public roles, this shift carries genuine sociological significance.

<sup>46</sup> Field interview: Janok Doley, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Field interview: Jual Pegu, Jonai area, aged 45.

Christian converts in Mishing areas have also been observed to maintain distinct personal behaviours and standards of living that differentiate them, to varying degrees, from non-Christian neighbours.<sup>48</sup>

This differentiation is a double-edged phenomenon. On one hand, it reflects the real material improvements that missionary-associated education and employment have brought to converted communities. On the other, it has generated new forms of social division — between Christian and non-Christian Mishings — that have, in some areas, disrupted the traditional unity of the village community.

## 7.2. CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND SELECTIVE RETENTION

Contrary to the assimilationist anxieties sometimes expressed by cultural conservatives, Mishing converts have in large measure maintained their traditional language, food habits (with the significant exception of Apong, the consumption of which is discouraged in Baptist practice), customs, and social institutions alongside their new religious affiliation.

This selective appropriation — what scholars of indigenous Christianity have termed 'vernacular theology' or 'inculturation' — reflects the agency of converting communities in negotiating the terms of religious change. Rather than wholesale replacement of one cultural system by another, what has emerged in many Mishing Christian communities is a hybrid religious-cultural practice in which Christian liturgical life coexists with, and is shaped by, the categories and rhythms of Mishing social existence.

A striking illustration of this pattern is the Mishing Christian adoption of certain traditional festivals and communal practices into a Christian framework — reinterpreting their significance rather than abolishing them. Such reinterpretations are consistent with the broader history of Christian inculturation in Asia and Africa, where the vitality of indigenous Christian communities has often been inseparable from their creative engagement with pre-Christian cultural materials.

## 7.3. IMPACT ON VILLAGE UNITY

The most immediately visible social cost of religious conversion has been the fracturing of village unity. Historically, the Mishing village functioned as an integrated unit for agricultural, religious, and festival purposes, organised around communal institutions such as the Murong (community centre) and the Namghar (prayer hall, adopted from Vaishnavite tradition).<sup>49</sup>

The emergence of churches as alternative institutional centres, alongside the pastors who officiate in them in place of traditional Mibus, has introduced a new axis of social differentiation into village life. Christian Mishings now observe a distinct calendar of festivals — Christmas, Easter, All Saints Day, New Year — that does not fully align with either the traditional animist or the Vaishnavite ceremonial cycle. These divergences create logistical and relational complications in the management of collective agricultural and social activities.

The scale of this fragmentation should not be overstated. In many areas, Christian and non-Christian Mishing households maintain amicable relations and continue to cooperate in shared economic and social activities. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Field interview: Janok Doley, *op. cit.*

potential for inter-community tension is real, and the management of religious diversity within Mishing villages represents a genuine challenge for community leadership.

#### **7.4. LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT**

One of the most significant and least ambiguous contributions of Christian missionary activity to Mishing cultural life has been in the domain of language and literacy. The translation of the Bible into Mising — along with the development of associated grammars, primers, and liturgical materials — constituted a foundational contribution to the standardisation of a language that had previously lacked a written tradition.

The development of Mising-language literacy created new possibilities for cultural expression, historical documentation, and community self-representation that have been taken up with considerable vigour by Mishing intellectuals and cultural organisations, irrespective of religious affiliation. In this sense, the missionary linguistic legacy has transcended the community of believers to become a resource for the wider Mishing cultural renaissance.

#### **7.5. THE DONYI POLO REVIVALISM**

Perhaps the most sociologically interesting consequence of Christian missionary activity among the Mishings has been the reactive revivalism of the Donyi Polo movement — the indigenous religious revival centred on the worship of the Sun (Donyi) and Moon (Polo) as cosmic deities and ancestral symbols.

The spread of Christianity, by demonstrating the viability of organised, institution-based religion as a vehicle for community identity and advancement, paradoxically stimulated efforts to organise and systematise Mishing traditional religion on comparable institutional lines. Donyi Polo organisations have constructed prayer halls, codified ritual practices, developed vernacular religious literature, and asserted the movement as a positive cultural and spiritual identity — not merely a residual category for the non-converted.

This revivalist dynamic is well-documented in comparative studies of religious change in Asia and Africa: the encounter with a missionary religion frequently catalyses the reorganisation and self-conscious articulation of indigenous religious traditions that might otherwise have persisted in a more diffuse and unreflective form. In the Mishing case, Donyi Polo revivalism has produced a third position in the religious field — distinct from both Christianity and Vaishnavite Hinduism — that provides a vehicle for Mishing cultural pride and political assertion.

The result is a community internally differentiated across at least three religious orientations — traditional animism-cum-Donyi Polo, Vaishnavite Hinduism mediated through the Satras, and Christianity — each of which now possesses institutional resources, cultural materials, and communal solidarities that make it a sustainable and potentially expanding presence in the Mishing social landscape.

### **8. DISCUSSION: CONVERSION, POWER, AND COMMUNITY AGENCY**

The trajectory of Christianity among the Mishings resists reduction to any single analytical framework. It is neither a straightforward story of colonial religious imposition nor of freely chosen spiritual renewal. It is, rather, a process in which

structural power relations — between missionaries and marginalised tribal communities, between caste Hindu society and its excluded others, between the Indian state and its most vulnerable citizens — intersect with genuine community agency in the negotiation of religious change.

The analysis presented in this article suggests several conclusions of wider theoretical relevance. First, the economic and institutional resources of missionary organisations — schools, hospitals, NGOs, vernacular literacy programmes — play a determining role in conversion processes, but not through simple material inducement. Rather, they constitute conditions under which previously foreclosed possibilities of social mobility, cultural recognition, and spiritual meaning-making become accessible to marginalised communities. The conversion decision cannot be disaggregated from this institutional context.

Second, the inadequacy of existing religious institutions — including both the Satra-mediated Hinduism that failed to provide adequate pastoral care and the traditional animist system that imposed unsustainable material burdens — was a necessary condition for conversion, though not a sufficient one. The availability of a credible religious alternative, with demonstrated institutional capacity and a theology of equality, was equally essential.

Third, the consequences of conversion have been more complex and more contested than either missionary proponents or cultural conservative critics typically acknowledge. Religious change among the Mishings has generated new forms of solidarity and social mobility alongside new forms of division and cultural loss. It has contributed to linguistic development and cultural assertion while also threatening some dimensions of traditional communal life. A sociology adequate to this complexity must resist both celebratory and lamentatory framings.

Finally, the emergence of Donyi Polo revivalism as a third force in the Mishing religious field illustrates the dialectical character of religious change: missionary activity does not simply displace indigenous religion but reorganises the entire religious field in ways that produce new possibilities, new competitions, and new syntheses.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The history of Christianity among the Mishings of Assam is a microcosm of the larger story of religious change in India's northeastern borderlands. From the pioneering mission of Nathan Brown at Sadiya in 1836 to the establishment of churches and missionary schools across remote riparian villages in the 1990s and 2000s, the Christian missionary enterprise has fundamentally and irreversibly altered the religious landscape of Mishing society.

This article has argued that the dynamics of this transformation are best understood through an analytical framework that foregrounds the interplay between structural vulnerability and community agency. The Mishings' receptivity to Christianity was not the product of passivity or of naive susceptibility to material inducement, but of rational responses to specific social conditions: caste exclusion, economic marginality, flood-induced precarity, the limitations of existing religious institutions, and the demonstrated capacity of missionary organisations to deliver valued resources — educational, medical, linguistic, and spiritual.

The consequences of Christianisation have been no less complex. Social changes affecting gender equality, village unity, and personal comportment have intersected with cultural contributions to linguistic development and literacy. The reactive revivalism of Donyi Polo has introduced a new dimension of religious assertion and

identity politics that is itself a product of the missionary encounter. The result is a religious landscape characterised by diversity, dynamism, and ongoing negotiation rather than the settled pluralism of earlier decades.

Further research is needed on several dimensions of this story that the present study has been unable to address in full: the specificities of women's conversion experiences and the gendered dimensions of religious change; the relationship between Christian conversion and Mishing political mobilisation; the long-term trajectory of Donyi Polo and its interaction with both Christianity and Vaishnavite Hinduism; and comparative analysis situating the Mishing case within the wider field of tribal Christian communities in South and Southeast Asia.

What is clear is that the encounter between Christianity and the Mishings is neither concluded nor static. It remains a living process whose future directions will be shaped by the same intersection of institutional forces, structural conditions, and human agency that has characterised it from the beginning.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None .

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None.

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