
RESEARCH PAPER

River Song: Caste and Cultural Assimilation in the Brahmaputra River Valley, Assam

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In this paper, the author argues that the lens of assimilation which is often used to understand cultural change within the Mising¹ community in the Brahmaputra River Valley, Assam overlooks state developmental initiatives that attempt to pathologize and exploit the reproductive rights of tribal women. This paper specifically focuses on the ideas of menstrual pollution ascribed to the bodies of Mising women embedded in coercive menstrual management and family planning awareness campaigns. More broadly, the paper focuses on state discourses of purity and pollution that shapes the location of the Mising community outside Hindu caste hierarchies despite their adoption of Assamese Hindu religious and socio-economic practices.

Introduction

Adaptation which is generally understood as a process of change by which an organism or species becomes better suited to its environment (Oxford Dictionary 2018), is an essential mechanism in understanding cultural change. The Misings are a hill tribe descended from the adjacent state of Arunachal Pradesh who migrated to Assam. Post their migration to the Brahmaputra river valley in Assam, the Misings have displayed remarkable changes in their linguistic, social, religious and economic structures. Foremost, they have adopted Assamese as their lingua franca due to socio-economic interactions with the majority Assamese speaking population (Taid 2016). Second, there has been considerable ethnic and social admixture with the Assamese population as a result of which the Misings have adopted social institutions like marriage, religious institutions like Vaishnavism and intensive agricultural practices as opposed to their former methods of shifting cultivation (Borpujari 1990). Inhabiting the state of Assam as the second largest ethnic group after the Bodos, the Misings have sought to overcome their migratory nature through assimilation with the non-Mising communities in the region. However, the tribe has maintained its cultural distinctiveness especially amongst the river island communities through retention of animistic practices in addition to Vaishnavite religious practices, tribe specific economic mainstays such as weaving and fishing as well as particular festivals and modes of attire. As a result, it is essential to understand assimilation spatially. Further, it is essential to contextualize the assimilation debate within state narratives of the Mising being Assamese while being denied educational, economic and social accessibility to resources such as the Assamese Hindu communities have

been able to acquire. It is in this regard that the concept of assimilation is sought to be studied with special regard to the power structures inherent in state rhetoric on tribal communities and development.

Aims of the study

This paper focuses on the location of the Mising community outside Hindu caste hierarchies despite their adoption of Assamese Hindu religious and socio-economic practices. As a result, tribal communities such as the Misings have been initiated into debates of purity and pollution wherein they face marginalization within the Hindu caste paradigm through their location outside it. The author specifically focuses on the ideas of pollution ascribed to the bodies of tribal women (of the Mising tribe) in juxtaposition to the menstrual restrictions placed on the body of dominant caste women, both within the Lakhimpur District of the Brahmaputra River Valley. The question raised is how does the lack of menstrual taboos among the Misings get embodied as their pollution? Further, by tracing state developmental initiatives in Assam that attempt to pathologize and exploit the reproductive rights of tribal women through coercive menstrual management and family planning awareness campaigns, this paper will attempt to focus on the ways in which the assimilation debate serves the state rhetoric that marginalizes tribal communities in India.

Methodology

The author's first academic interaction with the space was through fieldwork in December 2016 for the Masters Dissertation in Archaeology titled *Adaptation and Change: A study of the Misings of the Brahmaputra River Valley*. The author undertook fieldwork with the help of an organization Centre for Northeast Studies which had recently started a Boat Clinic Program that covered all the districts in Assam to provide immunization camps, family

planning awareness and menstrual sanitation awareness to the river islands. The Mising tribe inhabits the *chars* or river islands of the Brahmaputra River Valley. These *chars* are semi-permanent sand bars that arise from the river beds throughout the Indus-Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna floodplains (Lahiri-Dutt 2014). The Brahmaputra River Valley abounds with these *chars* which are constantly shifting as a result of which residential space is undefined by strict boundaries. The idea of a permanent home is short lived as populations migrate from one *char* to another. There are some that gain permanent status housing several generations as a result of which identities are more associated with a village way of life and the term *gaon* is used to designate this space, thus making a distinction.

Beyond the lens of assimilation

The debate on assimilation as a lens to understand cultural change has seen multiple criticisms transnationally across disciplines in the social sciences. Foremost, the critique by indigenous studies scholars has been that it assumes the inevitable need for indigenous communities to integrate with what is termed- the majority or mainstream culture. This is problematic because it negates the particular historical path through which different ethnic communities interact with one another and articulate their own identities. Second, assimilation debates assume that despite hybridity and adoption of cultural practices, indigenous communities in particular do not have a distinct culture. This leads to state measures to prohibit certain cultural practices as has been seen in the case of indigenous peoples in Canada, USA and Australia wherein various cultural practices such as the potlatch have been attempted to be banned by the state governments (Tuhiwai Smith 2005). This is seen in the case of India wherein tribal communities like the Misings struggled for their language to be recognized as a language and not as a dialect as the Assam state government and the federal government asserted that since a majority of them spoke Assamese, Mising was a dialect. Finally, assimilation debates often obscure the process through which cultural change occurs within tribal and indigenous communities as a result of which the inherent power structures in the assimilation debate are overlooked (Lawrence 2010; Smith 2005; Tuhiwai Smith 2005).

In the following sections, the author attempts to trace the ways in which the assimilation debate falls short and the consequent need to move beyond it in tribal and indigeneity studies.

Contagion and pollution

The Boat Clinic program first brought the author in contact with the islands. While interacting with the medical staff, it was observed that a civilizational rhetoric of hygiene was imposed upon the Mising community inhabiting the *chars*. Srirupa Prasad (2015) reflects on the emergence of hygiene as a proselytizing principle for the creation of dichotomies between the domestic and national realms. The author situates this dichotomization within the public-private divide wherein the river island with its fluid boundaries inhabited by the Mising

community is analyzed as the public space. In opposition, the mainland area of North Lakhimpur town then forms the private space inhabited by mostly dominant caste Assamese Hindus, which articulates the need to be guarded and controlled. In this context, the river island emerges as the 'contact zone' (Ahmed 2004) which is seen to be 'teeming with microbes' (Prasad 2015: 1). Prasad articulates the concept of contagion as an infection that spreads from the contact zone to other areas.

Sara Ahmed's (2004) understanding of 'contact zones' and Prasad's (2015) reiteration of it in context of contact zones of contagion is especially interesting in light of the near inaccessibility of the river island from the town. Ahmed (2004) understands the contact zone as one wherefrom emotion flows. In the context of the paper, this is useful as the point from which contagion spreads outwards. In turn, contagion itself creates boundaries between bodies affected by contagion and those that are seen as holding the potential to be contaminated. In this case, the former alludes to the bodies of Mising women of the *chars* whose embodiment of pollution is seen as a result of the absence of menstrual taboos. The latter then refers to the bodies of Savarna² women (the Assamese Hindus of North Lakhimpur Town) which are regulated through menstrual restrictions.

The medical staff of the Boat Clinic express the need to contain the idea of contagion embodied by the Misings. Their aims of spreading awareness regarding menstrual management is reflective of colonial discourse on modern hygiene which is seen as the norm for 'bodily health, moral sanctions and cultural prescriptions' (Prasad 2015: 6) but also as an embodiment of these norms. This is reflected in the way in which educated Indian thinkers adopted colonial discourses on health and hygiene in their proclamations of nationalism, self-rule and modernity. Gandhi's ideas on hygiene, the body and Swaraj can be seen within this paradigm. Shailaja Paik (2014) points out Ambedkar and Phule too who stressed on the importance of hygiene to Dalit women in their path to self-awareness. Thus, by wording the benefits of hygiene to the *Mising* community, the medical staff attempted to internalize hygiene within the community.

What is the link through which the nation state extends to the unit of the family? This is another question raised by Prasad (2015) that is significant in the homogeneity of hygiene discourse within the family in large part derived from affective awareness campaigns. Hygiene seemed to be the keyword amongst the author's relatives in North Lakhimpur Town and the only shield against the fear of contagion. When the author was attempting to find a family to stay with on the islands, there was a constant reiteration by Savarna relatives that "the Misings live unhygienically in small spaces shared with their livestock". Prasad (2015) uses the term 'alimentary anxieties' which can be used to refer to the patterns of food consumption that were associated with pollution as well. In this sense, the consumption of pork seen as ritually impure was often talked about as breeding disease within the animal itself. The unsanitary conditions of pig rearing were listed as causes of deteriorating health and disease among the Mising.

Kancha Ilaiah (2009), refers to the notions of pollution associated with the washing of soiled clothes by the low caste community of the *Chakalis*.³ Ilaiah reiterates that the spiritual culture of Hinduism considered the washing of soiled clothes of human bodies including Dalits as pollution. He describes the barriers of pollution created between Dalits and dominant and non-dominant castes as constricting the flow of 'skills, values and knowledge systems to have any meaningful social intercourse' (Ilaiah 2009: 69). This is exemplified in the ways in which non-dominant castes in Assam are employed in Savarna households to undertake the activities of cleaning, but the line of contagion is drawn at the shrine of household gods. Ilaiah further stresses on the doubly embodied nature of pollution within the *Chakali* woman who washed clothes as the female body was seen as polluted itself. Seen within Ilaiah's framework, Savarna women's bodies were thus attempted to be cleansed of their pollution through bathing and menstrual segregation. In the same way, the author's body was emphasized by Savarna relatives time and again as being contaminable, physically and spiritually when a desire was expressed to stay at a Mising home on the *char*. On the contrary, the author's body was seen as contaminating during the menstrual cycle which indicates the duality perceived in women's bodies and the differences accorded to women based on social hierarchies of caste.

Caste and tribe

Virginius Xaxa (2008) argues for a distinction between caste and tribe due to the latter's invisibility from caste hierarchy. The Miri as the Mising were derogatorily called was a marker of their location outside the Hindu caste paradigm. The term retained within it the image of the "unsanitary, effeminate Mising living in his cane home with his livestock in proximity" as stated by respondents during fieldwork. In regard to this idea of de-masculinizing the Mising male, Ilaiah (2009) points out the process through which the *Chakali* male is effeminized in regard to segregation of labor by dominant castes in Andhra Pradesh. This is interesting in terms of the fact that the very emasculation of the Mising male by the Assamese Hindus renders a power dynamic between Mising men and women that is overlooked. This is due to assumptions made by dominant communities about gender equality within tribal communities or what can be termed 'the myth of matriliney' (Nongbri 2003).

Tiplut Nongbri (2003) brings up her critique of theories viewing tribes from a dominant caste purview. Such a purview assumes that tribal societies are free from inequality. She further points out the absence of an intersectionality between the natural environment and gender relations in Tribal Studies in Sociology and Anthropology which further widens the gap between ethnics and non-ethnics. This becomes especially true for a study of tribes within physically isolated spaces such as the *char* which often translates into social isolation in dominant caste discourse.

The notion of civilization through a stress on hygiene then becomes extremely significant in the cohabitation of the Mising tribe and the Assamese Hindu community across fluid physical boundaries. In this sense, a stress

on the physical inaccessibility of the river islands is reminiscent of colonial ideals of isolation of tribes and the need for mobile forms of public health awareness. Xaxa's (2008) outlines that the State agenda for tribals comprises of 'protective safeguards, mobilizational strategies and developmental measures to uplift and for the progress of tribal people' (Xaxa 2008: 8). This is significant in the statements of Boat Clinic staff that when they first began their hygiene and family planning awareness campaigns, the area was relatively more inaccessible due to changes in river channel patterns. Levels of hygiene awareness among the Mising were seen to improve with the gradual influx of the ideas of the Boat Clinic. The role of the ASHA workers who were from the community itself and who were trained by the medical staff to spread door-to-door awareness was constantly reiterated. Healthcare through rural medical programs (Rural Health Mission) and educational programs (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) stressing on the teaching of English appear as the most visible mobilizational strategies. The argument made by NGOs and state health schemes regarding the Misings' lack of knowledge regarding menstrual management is similar to colonial discourse on modern education cited by Shailaja Paik (2014) and Lata Mani (1987) that ultimately hinges on the way in which knowledge is defined. As is seen in the colonial Sati reform debate, hierarchies of knowledge were similarly presented to remove agency from the woman.

Throughout conversations with the Mising community, there was an emphasis on the biological nature of menstruation. When the author narrated personal experiences of menstrual segregation, the women would laugh and state, "we do not practice menstrual restrictions like you Assamese". One Mising woman once pointed to the author's caste privilege indirectly and stated, "you are asking these questions because you do not visit the *namghar* while you are menstruating while we just let it happen". When further questioned they would talk about how "their ritual practices revolved around the worship of forces of nature and menstruation was as natural as the earth and the water that formed an intricate part of their lives". In listening to these conversations, the author noticed the generational divides in women's opinions on the natural versus social aspect of menstruation as well as their opinions regarding menstrual management as younger women would often echo the views of the Boat Clinic.

The goddess cult and menstrual pollution

Mitoo Das (2008) reflects on the ways in which the Goddess Cult is roped into an understanding of the purity and pollution of menstruating bodies. The process of menstruation occupies a central place in the worship of the Goddess in the Temple of Kamakhya where the Goddess is worshipped in the form of a yoni shaped cleft in a cave within the temple. The period of *Ambubachi* (July–August) was seen as the Goddess's menstrual period during which time the temple doors are closed to the public. The practice is based on the belief that her separation from the environmental forces during her menstruation period would ensure balance in the world life cycle. The belief is that during *Ambubachi*, a natural spring within the cave

that is seen to house the Goddesses' yoni becomes red with iron oxide, and this is seen as her menstrual blood. During this period, the temple grounds become a haven for ascetics known as *aghoris babas* who are seen to channelize the power of the Goddess which is seen to be in sync with the earth during this time. This is interesting because of the general marginalization of the *aghoris* who are defined as homeless ascetics outside the caste hierarchy of Hinduism. Furthermore, they are often demonized on grounds of their inhabitation of cemeteries, ingestion of menstrual blood and association with practices that are seen as polluting and non-normative. It is interesting how they become a part of the temple landscape during this period but are always positioned in the spaces within the temple boundaries but not within the ritual spaces of the temple which are closed during this time.

The Bauls of Bengal are one among many of the ascetic groups of people that attend the *Ambubachi*. Here, the author would like to note that an interaction with the Baul community was solely during the *Ambubachi* festival in July 2017. Jeanne Oppenshaw (2002) in her study of the Bauls of Bengal highlights the *bhadralok* image of the Baul as a 'madman' as a result of his deviance from Savarna caste and societal norms. This image is further reiterated in colonial discourse which places the Bauls outside the Vaishnavite tradition and cite their 'immoral' practices to justify their categorization as a 'disreputable mendicant order' (Oppenshaw 2002: 22). This reiteration of immorality is significant due to its association with an exclusively Hindu identity in early *bhadralok* writings which was merged with that of the fakir during Islamic reform movements.

The ingestion of menstrual blood among the Bauls is often seen as a practice that challenged *Savarna* caste norms. In West Bengal, the cohabitation of the Bauls in areas of dominant caste inhabitation as well as their mobile nature is often cited as the means through which their pollution could reach dominant caste households. In their own articulations of menstrual ingestion, the emphasis is on the incomplete nature of male bodies that required the ingestion of female bodily fluids to make them whole and nourish them (Hanssen 2002). Women often performed bodily rituals during their menstruation cycle as it was seen to be the peak of female procreative power. However, it is interesting to see how the Bauls have often been described as renouncers, challengers of caste and social hierarchies to often further embed them within the category of the deviant. Hence, the fear that arises from being associated with the Bauls is similar to the way the Mising tribe is seen by the Assamese Hindu community on the mainland. The idea that Mising bodies are polluting to the sacred realm of the Hindu temple is time and again reiterated by dominant caste groups.

Space and place

Doreen Massey's (1994) conceptualization of space and place is significant here for the ways in which the physical fluidity of the borders of the river island are in stark contrast to the barriers of embodied pollution. In her ideas on geography and gender, she articulates the need to consider the geographical variations of gender relations as this is crucial to 'the production and reproduction of

both imaginative geographies and uneven development' (Massey 1994: 2). This is significant for the way in which Mising subjectivities are framed in an image of developmental isolation. The simultaneous need to segregate and control in respect to the perceived isolation and fluidity of the *char* boundaries becomes implicit in conversations with the author's relatives and members of the Boat Clinic program. This control over physical space becomes a metaphor for the control of tribal bodies through structural pollution that is then sought to be contained through health schemes. Massey elaborates as to how the desire to bind the river island within social borders is an attempt to stabilize society and maintain power hierarchies. In the context of the *char*, the boundary was meant to stabilize/contain the meaning/contagion of the river island.

Dichotomies of space and the polarization of gender in this sense can be felt in the island/mainland dichotomy. Massey speaks of the dualism of space and place wherein space is seen to subsume the local and place is seen to represent being (Massey 1994: 9). The local sphere as one of dominant caste woman is constantly the undertone then. In order to then designate 'a place called home' (Massey 1994: 5), the river island must be seen as home by the Mising woman and the state emphasizes it. In addition, the image of mobility attached to the river island assigns the pollution of being mobile to Mising woman. In a broader sense, the island/mainland dichotomy emerges as evidence of the entrenched need for barriers which further serve to segregate tribal from non-tribal bodies in a sense similar to the segregation between 'normative and non-normative bodies' (Massey 1994).

Further, the geopolitics of water in the Brahmaputra River Valley also affects the lives of the Misings who live on the *chaporis* or temporary river islands as they are prone to annual flooding during the monsoon months of April–July. The Government of India has chosen this region to build several hydropower projects especially as it is spatially close to the Indo-China border. On August 12, 2010 Indian Cabinet debates (Vagholikar & Das 2010) on the downstream impacts of dams in the Northeast saw the then Environment Minister concluding that hydropower projects were necessary as they would 1) strengthen India's position in contestations and negotiations over the Brahmaputra's waters with China and 2) make hydropower a viable means for 'developing' countries to reduce carbon emissions as it was a safe source of energy (Vagholikar & Das 2010).

These conclusions indicate how the geopolitics of water affect communities who are most proximal spatially and economically to the water sources in question. Second, they raise the question of who development is for by demonstrating that these communities in question do not figure in state assessments of benefits of development.

Analysis

Rycroft and Dasgupta (2011) reflect on the significance of the term Adivasi meaning 'original inhabitants' (Rycroft & Dasgupta 2011: 1) of a given place as it imbues the idea of indigeneity as compared to the term tribe which characterizes essential difference. Shifting from ideas of caste and tribe to indigeneity helps in making the shift to the

idea that indigenous bodies themselves have the agency to formulate their own collective subjectivities. However, do bodies and their perception change within this shift from a conflation of caste, indigeneity and tribe towards more nuanced and distinctive understandings of Dalit communities? Xaxa (2008) states that in designating tribe as caste, the continuity and distinct nature of the tribe was often overlooked. Following this thought, the author would like to emphasize that despite the affirmative statements of the Boat Clinic's medical staff, the 'sanitary awakening'⁴ (Prasad 2015: 3) among the Misings did retain a distinct consciousness regarding what menstruation meant. It was perhaps the retention of this consciousness and what was read as a form of resistance that was the point of critique for the author's dominant caste relatives. Colonial discourses of backwardness and the need to discipline the bodies of Mising women were reiterated over and over again as in the discussions on menstrual management and in the tone used in discussions on family planning. Prasad talks about this through the disregard of traditional forms of medicine and a shift to allopathic medicines as a marker of health in her discussion on modernity versus tradition. Modernity as defined in opposition to traditional methods (such as the use of cloth instead of sanitary napkins) was accompanied by a mass dispersion of sanitary napkins. The point of emphasis on one method of menstrual management over another had the underlying implication of homogeneity.

The reiteration by the Mising community that there were simultaneous processes of adoption as well as rejection of dominant caste religious and social practices and systems is interesting seen in the context of the contentious debate of assimilation within anthropology that Xaxa (2008) alludes to as well. Within the Mising community itself, differences of class have created differential access to resources and also to relatively physically stable spaces such as the mainland area of Lakhimpur Town. The Misings made distinctions regarding their position vis-à-vis Hindu caste hierarchy. The Samuguria Misings are a good case in point when it comes to cultural assimilation in the form of language.

The area in which this community was studied in two areas in the mainland area 10 km East and West from North Lakhimpur town: i) a village called Bogolomora in the Bihpuria Development Block and ii) a village called Ranganadi in the Phuph Telahi Development block. The community in which the *Samuguria* Misings resided in Bogolomora was comprised of households the *Deori* tribe, Nepali community, Assamese and Bengali communities. On the basis of fieldwork, it was deduced that the nature of the admixture was at the ethnic level as there was intensive inter-marriage within the communities mentioned above as a result of which their articulation of themselves as Nepali and Bengali depended on the ethnicity of the paternal head of the household and the language spoken. During the course of fieldwork, the respondents of the *Samuguria* Mising stated that their origin was in the *Adi* tribe. The three divisions this particular community spoke about was that of the *Samuguria*, *Temar* and *Bonkawal* communities with the *Bonkawals* being further divided into the *Bihiyas* and *Nihiyas* (Pegu 2005). These 3 units out of the

13 branches of the Mising tribe solely speak the Assamese language and have no knowledge of the Mising language. The term *Samuguria* is however utilized while referring to the Mising people who can no longer speak the Mising language and speak the Assamese language solely (Pegu 1998).

According to the origin myth of the *Samuguria* Misings (Taid 2013), the *Adi* tribe is seen to have moved from the hills to the bank of the Siang River and resided there for 3 and a half years. The people residing in the northern part of the river decided to conquer the residents of the southern bank. A *bhur* (canoe) was constructed for this purpose and was devised in such a way that it would look like a pile of logs to allow the attackers to hide in it. Before the attack, a huge feast was organized during which the attacking party got highly intoxicated. As a result, it is believed that they navigated towards the southern part erroneously in the dark hours of the morning and instead reached their own village, committing mass genocide on their own village/clan members. When the attackers came to their senses, they were shocked and in despair due to which they decided to leave their destroyed homes under the leadership of two men, Tabang and Tawa. They reached the area of Sibasagar in then Sapekhati district known for 'man eating snakes' (Taid 2013). They took refuge with one of the ministers of the *Ahom* king, the *Kharguria Phukan* who informed them of the *Ahom* kings' declaration of a reward for whoever killed the 'man eating snakes' (Taid 2013). The leaders Tawa and Tabang decided to take on this challenge as they felt as though they had nothing to live for post the genocide of their own families. They took on the challenge with their men and won it due to which the *Ahom* kings fulfilled their wish of acquiring agricultural land and women to settle down in the area. Tawa received land in the proximity of the *Temar* tree most closely understood as a form of palm and Tabang, the area in the proximity of the *Sam* tree which refers to the *simolu* (*Bombax ceiba*) or cotton tree due to which the two branches were termed the *Temarguria* and the *Samuguria* which literally means at the root of the *Temar* and the *Sam* trees. The *Bonkwals* have a similar story of genocide and subsequent settlement beside the *Temars* and gradual incorporation within the rank of the *Temars*.

The origin story of the *Samuguria* Misings is interesting in light of the derogatory terms that are often used by the Mising speaking tribe on the islands in regard to this community. The term, *jat jua* was initially used by the island community to refer to the *Samuguria*. *Samuguria* respondents stated that sometimes they were not considered a part of the Mising community on account of the loss of language though some other respondents stressed that the community had retained its original culture such as festivals. The island Misings spoke Mising and Assamese while the *Samuguria* Misings who lived on the outskirts of North Lakhimpur Town had no knowledge of Mising and spoke Assamese solely. In this regard, the *Samuguria* Misings expressed that they were often marginalized by the island Misings who called them *jat jua* or non-Mising. The nuanced nature of caste formation and power dynamics within the Mising community and the nature of its location within and outside Hindu caste hierarchies thus becomes prominent within the target area.

Conclusion

Rycroft and Dasgupta (2011) state that ‘the terms of indigeneity appear as more discursive in relation to wider cultural codes and practices’ (Rycroft & Dasgupta 2011: 2) which imbues them with the potential to assume diverse forms. This is evident in the internal hierarchies seen among the Misings. However, the question still remains as to whether the understanding of indigeneity and the aim of inclusivity cited by transnational indigenous movements does not necessarily imply a shift in the lenses that indigenous bodies are seen within. This argument regarding the formation of indigenous subjectivities can perhaps be further contextualized within Floya Anthias’ framework of ‘translocational positionality’ (Anthias 2002). This seeks to view identity formation within locations which are not fixed but are ‘context, meaning and time related’ (Anthias 2002: 6). This could be a useful framework for contextualizing Mising subjectivities as it addresses the question of belonging and the need to belong. In a sense, this is often reflective of external attributions to indigenous communities in state discourse. In the context of the Misings, it is often expressed in state rhetoric that there is a need to incorporate them within notions of state development.

Furthermore, the term assimilation is time and again reiterated to emphasize the similarities in cultural practices of the Misings and the Assamese. However, do the Misings themselves articulate a desire to be called Assamese. Several community members in the age group of 30–50 and mostly men articulated that they needed to be seen as Mising while some older people stressed that they were *Axomiya* or Assamese. In this sense, Anthias’ (2002) term hybridity could be more useful than the term assimilation as it better expresses the positionality of the Mising ‘in the context of the lived practices in which identification is practiced/performed as well as the intersubjective organization and reproduction of conditions for their existence’ (Anthias 2002).

In conclusion, the primary question arises as to how does process of assimilation used as an indicative factor for noting cultural change embed the power structures of caste, gender and indigeneity? This is the question that the author is ultimately concerned with. Shefali Chandra’s (2011) recognition of the roots of the lens of sexuality imposed upon Dalit woman’s bodies is significant in understanding how caste identities are defined. Chandra (2011) brings into focus the construction of caste identities in terms of the non-normative notions of sexuality attributed to the white woman that emerged in nationalist rhetoric. The process through which Brahmanism internalized the dichotomies of aberrant sexuality (attributed to white women) and others as opposed to conjugal sexuality (attributed to Brahmin woman) (Chandra 2011) was significant in the discourse of state politics of difference. The state politics of difference here refers to the ways in which the state treats Brahmin and Dalit/tribal women’s bodies differently through health schemes such as menstrual management in the case of Mising women. In this sense, the Dalit woman’s body conflated with that of the white woman, was seen through the same lens of sexuality. As a result, tribal and Dalit women came to be seen as sexually available and were framed in state discourse

as bodies to be controlled through practices such as coercive contraceptive campaigns that seek to forcibly control reproductive potential of tribal women.

Further, Paik’s argues (2014) that the recurrent strands of state law and education garnered by colonialism further served in entrenching state protectionism. Ania Loomba & Ritty A Lukose (2012) emphasize the idea of rethinking the politics of difference in regard to the state. Seen in light of the abovementioned frameworks, regional specificity of politics of difference in different countries of South Asia presents a point from where historical inquiry of the creation of non-normative and normative sexualities can be seen in regard to the colonial state.

Chandra notes that the underlying tone in the production of sexuality as ‘an essential difference’ (Chandra 2011: 139) is then attached to the bodies of Dalit women. The shift in the creation of white supremacy wherein the Brahmanical tradition became the white supremacist helped in embedding binaries of ‘more than/less than’ (Rao 2003). In this context, Loomba and Roy’s call for a shift of focus is relevant in the points raised regarding the need for a renegotiation of the feminist movement’s stand on institutionalization and the embedded power structures.

The process of assimilation uses polarizing categories of Dalit and dominant caste in order to define the Mising adoption of Assamese culture. It is assumed that the adoption of Assamese culture is necessary for survival as a result of which the internal power structures are often overlooked. An intersectional approach towards caste, gender and indigeneity⁵ is thus essential in combatting the essentializing study of the Mising community. As Xaxa (2008) points out, the reiteration by the Mising community that there were simultaneous processes of adoption as well as rejection of dominant caste religious and social practices and systems is interesting seen in the context of the contentious debate of assimilation within anthropology. Within the Mising community itself, differences of class have created differential access to resources and also to relatively physically stable spaces such as the mainland area of Lakhimpur Town. Thus, the process of assimilation is insufficient to understand the functioning of cultural change on axes of power.

Notes

¹ The spelling Mising is used throughout the paper instead of Mishing in accordance with the phonetic proximity of the former in the Mising language. This form has an additional ‘h’ which has currently been interpreted by Mising linguists such as Tabu Taid (2016) as erroneous on account of its spelling being based on British Administrator J.F Needham’s popularization of the term in his book *An Outline Grammar of the Shaiyang Miri Language*. Needham used the consonant ‘sh’ for ‘s’ in accordance of English translations. However, Professor Taid argues that due to the absence of an allophonic variant of ‘sh’ and the voiceless alveolar fricative in the Mising language, the correct usage would be that of s (Taid 2016).

² The term Savarna is used to denote communities perceived as the dominant caste in the Hindu caste paradigm.

- ³ A Dalit community in Andhra Pradesh whose main source of income is from washing clothes.
- ⁴ The term sanitary awakening was used in a speech by “Spencer Harcourt Butler, a member of the Department of Education in the Governor General’s Council” (Prasad 2015: 3).
- ⁵ The author would like to make a note here clarifying that the use of the different terms: caste, tribe, indigeneity was contextualized within the analytical frameworks used.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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