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**KRISHNA-RUKMINI, IDU MISHMI-BISHMAKNAGAR**

**PHENOMENON: HISTORY OR CULTURAL ASSIMILATION? :**

**A STUDY**

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**Abstract:**

The Madhavpur Ghed Fair, in March this year, brought the Nation's attention to a small marginalised and lesser known tribe, the Idu Mishmis. The event, this year, was marked by a proclamation that Rukmini, the wife of lord Krishna, belonged to the tribe. People try to connect the links and many felt that the programme was an attempt to Sanskritize the tribe. This paper attempts to understand the development of the narrative, the belief system and the place of the Idu Mishmi tribe in the phenomenon.

**Key words:** *Myth, 'Rukmini Haran', Belief system, Kundil, Sanskritisation*

**4.0: INTRODUCTION:**

The Madhavpur Ghed Fair<sup>†</sup> brought the Nation's attention to a small marginalised and lesser known tribe, the Idu Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh. The event proclaimed that Rukmini, the wife of lord Krishna, belonged to the Idu community. People tried to connect the links and

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<sup>†</sup> March 28, 2018 (According to folklore, Krishna married Rukmini at Madhavpur after eloping with her. This event is memorialised with a temple dedicated to lord Madhavrai and by an annual fair held in the village.



many felt that the programme was an attempt to Sanskritize the tribe. However for the Idus, the myth is not a new phenomenon; it has been prevailing since the past many years. For these reasons, the belief and its implications in the context of the fair recently warrant extensive study to get into the crux of the narrative. The community, so far, seems ambiguous on the subject. The source of the belief -- *Mahabharat* and *Purana* -- are mythologies which make it difficult to study scientifically.

According to the *Mahabharat* Rukmini's father, Bhisamak, the King of Kundinpur or Kundina assumed to be in Vidharaba region in Berar. However, according to another tradition, especially in Assam, people believe that the kingdom of Bishmak was actually Kundil situated by the bank of the river by the same name. Probably, the same belief might have made the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Vaishnavite Saint, Sankardev refer Kundil instead of Kundinpur or Kundina in his poetic drama '*Rukmini Haran*' (Saikia, 1988). The poetic drama was based on *Puranas* and *Harivamsa* but Sankardeva localised the literature and infused in it, many Assamese cultural aspects to make it appealing to his people. Since then, this belief has prevailed in many Assamese folk culture and literature.

In the present times the River which flows near Bishmaknagar is called *Chiphu* by the Mishmis. It is also popularly known as Diphu. The same river is known as Kundil in Assam and joins the Brahmaputra in Sadiya.

#### **4.1: HISTORY OF BISHMAKNAGAR:**

Historical dimension of Bishmaknagar is still shrouded in mystery. The Chutiyas associate the place with their mythical supreme ancestor Bishmak. According to their narrative, the supreme ancestor Bhisamak had established a kingdom on the banks of the Kundil River.

Some Historians, however, contest this and hold that the ruins on the Kundil river were not of the Chutiya Kingdom but belong to structures many centuries before them. J. B. Neufville (Neufville, 1828:4), while writing on the Geography and Population of Assam in 1828, refers Kalitas as earlier rulers of the Sadiya and the nearby foothill regions extending up to Brahmakund or Parshuramkund in the Lohit River.

Major Hannay and P. Sakia (Saikia, 1988:432), attribute the Bishmaknagar ruins to be more than 2000 years. P.C Chaudhury, in his book '*The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam*' (Chaudhury, 1959) views Bishmaknagar actually as *Kalita Desa* the one mentioned in



Sankardeva's biography. Scholars like Gait and Sakia (Saikia, 1988:434) contend that the ruins belong to the pre-Chutiya Empire. On the other hand, Gogoi (Saikia, 1988:434) finds similarity between the bricks of Bishmaknagar and the Ahom palace. And therefore regards the fort to be a palace of *Sadiya khowa gohain*. However, Saikia (Saikia, 1988:434) discovers three types of bricks used in Bishmaknagar and contends the fort to belong to a period earlier than the Chutiya Empire.

Scholars like Bhavananda Burhagohain, R.F.K.L. Baruah and Dr. L. Gogoi (Saikia, 1988:434) are of the view that the Fados ruled over Vidarbha or Kundil. They later adopted Tantrik form of Hinduism. The Chutiyas, they contend, originated when Fados came into contact with the Idu and Padam tribes of the Hills. T..N. Burhagohain, meanwhile, asserts that the Idus were undoubtedly a branch of the Chutiyas. (Saikia, 1988:434)

#### 4.2: THE IDU MISHMIS:

The Idu Mishmis are a sub tribe of the Mishmi; others being Tawra (Digaru) and Kaman (Miju). The Mishmis are a non-literate society and do not record their past. The community's oral tradition does not clearly inform about their history. Therefore, it is difficult to trace their history. It's not very clear when the tribe arrived in the region. However, many scholars have found the mongoloid tribal people living in the North Eastern Upper Assam region since the Vedic age. Some of the earliest Hindu texts like *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*, the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* mention *Kirata*, the Mongoloid people living in the sub-Himalayan north eastern hills of India (Chaterjee, 1951:9,16,22). The *Kiratas*, according to the Vedic accounts, traded herbs and forest products with the Aryans. The Mishmis, in later ages, were also known for trading the forest products like Mishmi Teeta, honey and aconite (poison) with the people of Assam and the Tibetens. According to Choudhury (Chaudhury, 1966), the Mishmi Hills was even referred in the Greek literature like *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (1st Century A.D) and *Geography of Ptolemy* (C. 150 AD). *Kirrhadia (Kirata)* people living in surrounding Hills are even mentioned in the *Geography of Ptolemy*. The tribe, according to the book, were expert craftsmen and built bridges out of canes. Hiuen Tsang visited Assam in 642 A.D. He also observes the presence of Mongoloid people in the North Eastern Hills of India (Gait, 1967:28-9). These sources indicate that the tribe might have been living in the Mishmi Hills since pre-historic times.



J.F Needham (Needham, 1900), while on Bebejiya Expedition in 1899, mentions a legend around a place called *Ikulama* near Chepaho,<sup>‡</sup> on the way towards Mayudia Hill. According to the legend, a Chutiya King gifted the Idu Chief, a Tibetan dog. On the way to his home the dog died on a particular spot in the Emachpaeta hillock. The place was named after the dead Tibetan dog as *Iku Lama* (*Iku-Dog, Lama-* Tibetan). This legend suggests the ties and contacts between the Idus and the pre-Ahom Chutiyas.

The first written document about the Mishmis appears in the Ahom Chronicle, the *Buranjis*. The chronicle mentions a rampart called *Mishmi Garh*, during the reign of Sutiyanpha Nariya Raja (1644-48 A.D) (Devi, 1968:185). The rampart probably was meant to check the movement of the Mishmis in the Ahom territory.

Moreover the records in Ahom Buranji (Devi, 1968:185-6), suggests a considerable presence of the Mishmis in the plains of Sadiya-Kundil region. According to the chronicle, the Mishmis in thousands attacked Sadiya, destroyed many villages and confined the Ahom Governor, *Sadiya Khowa Gohain*, in a fort. The Ahom King Ramdhvaj Singha had to send reinforcements with gunmen, the *Hilaidari Konwars*, to rescue the Governor. Thereafter, the Mishmis were defeated. Many Mishmis were caught and put to death. The Ahom-Mishmi treaty (1675), which is engraved in the Sadiya Snake Pillar,<sup>§</sup> clearly mentions that the Mishmis were pushed back to the hills of the Dibang region and also mentions about the tribe paying tribute to the King. The inscription in Tai Ahom Language (and translated into English) reads:

*I, the Dihingia Borgohain, do engrave on the stone pillar and the copper plate these writings (with strength of which) the Mishmis are to dwell on the hills near the Dibong River with their females, children attendants and followers. They will occupy all the hills. They will give four basket full of poison other things as tribute and keep watch on the body of the fat Gohain (Sadhiyakhowa Gohain). If anybody happens to be in possession of and wishes to remain on all sides (of the hills) he is prohibited from encroachment. If anybody would dwell by the side of the Hills, he would surely become a slave (of the Mishmis). I do*

<sup>‡</sup> 52 K.M from Roing on the way to Hunli and Anini

<sup>§</sup> The 11feet high octagonal Pillar was put between present Eze (Deopani) River and Nijamghat. The pillar, a finely carved semi human serpent coiled around the pillar with its human head resting on the top. Tai Ahom script is engraved all over it. In 1919, the British Govt. bought it to Sadiya and the same today is in the entrance of the Assam State Museum, Guwahati.



*proclaim wide if anybody sits exalted (i.e., comes in power, i.e., become ruler) he should not break (the agreement) and break the stone”*(Allen, 1928).

This might be the reason why the Mishmis were not paid *Posas*. In 1799 (Baruah, 1985) the Mishmis joined the Khamptis in a battle against the Ahoms but were defeated.

These historical episodes suggest that the Mishmis had their presence not only in the Hills but also in plain region of north eastern upper Assam between the Dibang River and Digaru River, the location of present Bishmaknagar.

It is general tendency among the scholars to suggest the theory of Bodo dominance in the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh by pointing their river names like Dihang, Dibang, Dikrong, Diphu, etc. However, the tribes of Arunachal have their own names for all these rivers. After occupying the Sadiya region, the Ahoms and later on the British, adopted Bodo names for the rivers in the vicinity. For instance, the Mishmis call Dibang as Talon and Diphu or Kundil as Chipu. The name Chipu is not a mispronunciation of Diphu but it means *Chi* (water) and *Pu* (place). There are many river names starting with Chi in Mishmi language like Chini, Cheya, Chihri, Chulu, etc.

Another famous river in Mishmi Hills, Lohit, has a significant place among the Hindu pilgrimage centres. Lohit is a Sanskrit name which means Red River, the analogy being that of Parshuram washing and cleansing the blood stained hand. The significant aspect is that the Ahoms, despite being Hindunised, did not adopt the Sanskrit name for the culturally significant river. Ahoms called Lohit as *Tilao*, which basically is adoption of *Tellu*, the Mishmi name for the river. T T Cooper, the first Englishman to extensively tour the Mishmi Hills in 1870, records the Mishmis levying taxes on the visiting pilgrims.

#### **4.3: KRISHNA-RUKMINI AND BISHMAKNAGAR:**

The earliest British account on the Bishmaknagar ruins by Lt. E.A Rowalt (Rowalt, 1845) in 1845 associates the place with the myth of Krishna and Rukmini.

Similarly Major S. P. Hannay's (Hannay, 1848) writes:

*Bishmook Nuggur.-This is a Hill Fort ; built according to the traditions of the people of Upper Assam, by a rajah of that name (Bishmook), whom the Hindoostanees appear*



*to identify with Bheekhrum, rajah of Koondilpoor, the father of the celebrated Rukhmini. It is situated at the foot of the mountains nearly north of Saddyah, between river the Dikrong and Debong Rivers, and may be distant about 16 miles.*

Historians so far have maintained this idea in the Mythic history of the region. According to Edward Gait (Gait, 1967:16):

Krishna frequently appears in Assam Mythology. In the Bhagwat it is narrated that there was a king named Bhismak, who ruled in Vidharbha, which, according to popular tradition in Assam, is the designation of the country around Sadiya. According to ordinary Puranic accounts Vidharbha corresponds to the modern Berar, but this is not the only case in which the early Hindu settlers in Assam assigned local sides for the occurrences mentioned in Hindu Mythology. Numerous similar instances occur in Further India, and even in Java, where many of the events narrated in the Mahabhrat have been given a Local habitation. The Brahmaputra valley is known to the Buddhist of Further India as Wesali. Bhishmak's capital was called Kundina, a name which still survives in the Kundil river at Sadiya; and the ruins of an extensive fort, about 94 miles north of that town between the gorges of the Dikrang and Dibong rivers, are said to be the remains of his capital. The walls are of no great height, but they are very well preserved; they consists of from six to nine courses of hewn stone chiefly granite surmounted by a breastwork of bricks, loopholes, but without any binding of cement. In the same locality are four large tanks and the brick foundations of what must have been extensive building. Bhishmak had five sons and a daughter named Rukmini. Krishna, having heard of her beauty, was anxious to marry her, but her father had arranged to give her to another prince named Sisu Pal, whose fort may still be seen a few miles to the east of the one attributed to Bhishmak. Rukmini secretly sent the news to Krishna and, on the day bed for her marriage; the latter suddenly appeared and carried her off in his chariot He was pursued by the crowd of princes who had come to assist at the wedding, but he defeated them and married Rukmini.

ML Bose (Bose, 1999) is also of the same view and connects Bhishmaknagar-Rukmini myth with the Malininathan in Arunachal Pradesh.

#### **4.4: THE IDU MISHMI CONNECTION:**



Many later books on Arunachal Pradesh associate the myth with the Idu Mishmis. The popular myths and legends of the tribe, so far, in my understanding, do not reflect the Rukmini myth. However, my knowledge is limited as the *Igu*, the shamanic chants are parallel language which needs systematic extensive study. Deciphering *Igu* chants, which indeed are the first hand narratives, would enable us to understand the Mishmi culture in depth. People marrying supernatural beings have been part of many Mishmi myths.

The hairstyle of the tribe also seems to have a connection with the myth and suggest some links with them. The tribe's identity as Chulikatta Mishmi parallels with Krishna shaming Rukma, the brother of Rukmini, by cropping the hair. Scholars like Lila Gogoi, P. Saikia and BN Borgohain have viewed hair cropping of the Idus as a custom originating from the epic (Saikia, 1988:287). The same view is reflected by Hem Baruah (Baruah, 1954:129):

The Mishmis of both sexes wear their hair long. The Chulikatas, a clan by themselves, crop off portions of their hair. There is a myth about it which connects the custom with Lord Krishna's elopement of Rukmini, daughter of Bhisimaka, who was the ruler of Sadiya, in the Mishmi land.

Surprisingly, the tribe also considers their hairstyle as the basic and important identity. They proclaim, "*Kera-aa lahido chithu huluni chi thochi thoyula* (Those are the Kera-aas who live in twelve river valleys and have cropped hair and shaven temple). The twelve river valleys include Siang, Lohit and ten other major rivers falling between them. Significantly, one of the *Chithu* or river valleys is Chipu which also is known as Diphu or Kundil in Assam.

Many Assamese literary works suggest the Rukmini-Kundil-Arunachal connection as themes. '*Hanlu*' is a dignified lady of Arunachal in Muktinath Bordoloi's poem '*Parvati*' (lit. the daughter of mountain). The poet compares *Hanlu* with princess Rukmini, full of royal dignity and matchless beauty:

*Tumi rajesvari'*  
*nahaleno kundilar Rukminir*  
*lavanya sambhar,*  
*rijnan 'inir ..* (Saikia, 1988:287).



Furthermore in his another poem *Anischit*, Bordoloi describes the *Kancana* flower filled beautiful bank of river Kundil where once princess Rukmini lived.

*kanchan phulere dhaka lui tar ghat ...  
rukmini sundari  
thaka kundilarpar; .....jal – thal (Saikia, 1988:287)*

In a similar manner, Atul Chandra Hazarika, in his poem '*Tinisukiyar ring*' (the echoes of Tinsukia), while narrating the memorable past of Tinsukia town, describes the flow of river Kundil coming from Arunachal, carrying the sweet eternal memory of Krishna and Rukmini.

*Arunachalar kundil panir ..  
punya smrtikaria 'Krisna Rukminir ..... pir pir // (Saikia, 1988:288)*

Another important aspect is the abstinence of many kinds of meat in the food habits of the tribe. Despite being tribal, the Idu Mishmis, especially the women, are forbidden from consuming many kinds of meat. They also have very rigid rituals related to hunting and consuming meat. This practice also seems to make the people associate themselves with the Hindus.

Some people simply find similarity between Idu and *Yadu*, the clan of lord Krishna. The tribe also call themselves '*Kera-aa*', the sons of Kera, which strangely sounds similar to Kuru the brother clan of Yadu.

The Idus have a popular song eulogizing Rukmini, Bishmak and Rukma. This song, however, was probably composed in the early 1970s. There is an Idu village named Rukmo and a brick mound called Rukmini Nati in Chimiri village, 13 kilometres away from Roing. All the three mythical names can be found among the Idu Mishmis.

In the 1970s, a fund rising movement within the tribe was initiated by community leaders for the construction of Rukmini temple at Bishmaknagar. However, the proposal never saw the light of the day despite contributions.

#### 4.5: CONCLUSION:



The Rukmini-Bishmaknagar-Idu Mishmi connection is not validated by substantial evidences. However, the narrative has evolved out of historical circumstances, myth, literature, culture and geographical location of the place and people. Probably it may be difficult to ascertain the exact source of the belief. This, indeed, is true with most of the mythic narratives as they have multiple versions; the fantastic stories which may be woven around historical characters or real places, however, cannot be claimed as historical facts. However, myths, on many occasions are a powerful tool as they concern with the psychology of the people and appeals to their emotions and sentiments. They mostly are the founding principles of abstract institutions like belief systems and religions

Many narratives are far travelled tales which spread with ties, relations and contacts. The mythic versions of the rulers prevailed as the dominant myth in many cases. At times the most popular version suppresses other versions. The ongoing phenomenon itself manifests how myths are created and relations forged. This is the way myths spread and new bondings begin

The Idu Mishmis seem to come into the picture because since the recorded history the territory belongs to them. Moreover many narratives connect the place with the Rukmini myth and also the scholars could not associate Rukmini with any other clan or dynasty. Therefore it seems that people connected it with the tribe, the sons of the Soil. The Mishmis follow Animistic religion (Razzeko, 2018). They engage shamans called *Igus* in all the rituals. Most of the ritual involve animal sacrifices and elaborate oral chants, which are archaic and sophisticated language incomprehensible to most of the people of present generation. Their religious institution is not organised. Despite high religious conversion rate in Arunachal Pradesh, the Idu Mishmis are one of least converted community in the region. The tribe in Madhavpur Ghed exhibited the Shamanic ritual and folk dance.

Apart from the cultural aspect, the Indian government it seems is building the narrative to counter the malicious Chinese claim over the region. The concept of '*Akhand Bharat*', united India is to show the world that the whole India is one culturally, integrated since the earliest times. The speeches of Governor and Chief Minister of Arunachal echoed these sentiments in Madhavpur Ghed fair.



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