

Homes of Meaning: Traditional Knowledge and Architecture of the Mishings of Assam

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Abstract

Shelter is a fundamental human need, evolving from simple dwellings to complex architectural forms. The Mishing tribe of the studied area in Assam's Brahmaputra Valley follows a traditional system of architecture, where houses are constructed using locally available organic materials such as bamboo and thatch. Their homes reflect not only practical functionality but also deep cultural meaning, symbolizing environmental knowledge, social values, and aesthetic sensibilities. This study examines both the construction techniques and the cultural beliefs underlying Mishing houses, highlighting how architecture serves as a meaningful expression of identity. It also documents contemporary changes in their housing practices, illustrating the dynamic interaction between tradition and modernisation.

Introduction

Human adaptation varies across cultures and is shaped by both physical and social environments. To understand the meanings behind cultural actions, it is essential to examine not only behaviors and events but also the material objects and artefacts through which communities express their values, identities, and worldviews. Material culture plays a central role in mediating social interactions and in constructing identities related to gender, kinship, age, class, occupation, and ethnicity. Through processes of enculturation, repeated practices become naturalized and embedded within everyday life, revealing the enduring and dynamic nature of culture itself. As Saraswati (2004: 112) observes, culture generates patterns of life that transcend dualities such as sacred and profane or inner and outer, shaping human existence in profound ways.

Among the Mishing tribe of Assam, tradition embodies the active presence of ancestral knowledge in contemporary life. Transmitted orally and through embodied

practice rather than written documentation, Mishing tradition encompasses shared values, rituals, language, and social norms, as well as material expressions such as their distinctive bamboo-and-thatch stilt houses. These dwellings not only reflect ecological adaptation to the Brahmaputra floodplain but also embody social identity, kinship relations, and cultural continuity.

Traditional architecture in Northeast India has received sustained anthropological attention for its ability to encode social structure, cosmology, and environmental adaptation. The importance of house shape as cultural expression was established by international publications like Rapoport's *House shape and Culture* (1969) and Rudofsky's *Architecture Without Architects* (1964). While regional studies—most notably Blackburn and Kolkman's *Tribal Architecture in Northeast India* (2014)—have documented the richness and diversity of dwelling traditions across ethnic groups. These studies demonstrate that tribal houses are not merely functional shelters but cultural artefacts embedded with ritual significance, ecological knowledge, and collective memory.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, traditional architecture attracts interest from anthropologists, architects, archaeologists, geographers, engineers, and museum curators. While some scholars emphasize materials, construction techniques, and environmental performance, others foreground socio-cultural meaning, symbolism, spatial organization, and heritage preservation. The ICOMOS Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage (1999) underscores that such built forms constitute 'fundamental expressions' of community culture, a point of particular relevance in Northeast India where rapid urbanization threatens both tangible structures and the intangible knowledge systems underlying them.

This paper examines traditional knowledge and architecture through a focused case study of the house-building traditions of the Mishing tribe in Assam, India. By situating Mishing dwellings within broader theoretical, cultural, and ecological frameworks, the study highlights how vernacular architecture operates simultaneously as a material practice, a cultural symbol, and an adaptive response to environmental realities.

Review of literature

Scholarly research on the Mishings of Assam emphasizes the interconnections between migration, ecology, architecture, and ritual practice. Historical sources indicate that the Mishings migrated from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh region to the Brahmaputra valley between the 13th and 14th centuries A.D., a movement that shaped their transformation into riverine dwellers while retaining elements of earlier hill-based traditions (Pegu 1956; Pegu 2012). This transition is most clearly reflected in their raised platform houses (*chang ghar*), which represent both environmental adaptation and cultural continuity.

Studies on Mishing traditional architecture highlight that housing is not merely a technical response to floods and climate but also an expression of social organization and cosmology (Dutta 2002; Blackburn 2003). The traditional *okum* is characterized by an open, communal layout that reinforces collective domestic life and kinship relations, although recent trends toward nuclear families and modern housing have altered these patterns (Goswami 1994; Baruah 2019).

Research on bamboo-based construction demonstrates that the use of bamboo species such as *Bambusa tulda* and *Bambusa balcooa* provides ventilation, rapid drying, and resistance to dampness and insects; key adaptations in the flood-prone Brahmaputra Valley (Das and Bora 2018). These material practices reflect indigenous ecological knowledge embedded in everyday building traditions (Dutta 2002).

The ritual and symbolic dimensions of house construction are well documented. Scholars emphasize the significance of layered platforms and roofs in relation to cosmological ideas of protection, purity, and well-being (Blackburn 2003; Elwin 1961). The hearth (*meram*) is identified as the sacred and social centre of the household, closely associated with ancestor worship and domestic ritual life (Dutta 2002; Medhi 2015). Comparative anthropological perspectives interpret the hearth as a central axis of domestic and spiritual life (Levi-Strauss 1963; Carsten 1995).

Literature on communal institutions and youth dormitories provides a broader regional context for understanding socialization and cultural transmission. Studies document the decline of such institutions due to initiation of formal education and manifold socio-economic changes, paralleling similar transformations among the Mishings (Hutton 1921; Mills 1937; Elwin 1963; Ao 2004).

Religious changes among the Mishings have been analysed in terms of syncretism and cultural adaptations. Scholars trace the incorporation of Hindu and Christian elements into indigenous belief systems, resulting in hybrid religious practices rather than complete replacement (Bhandari 1992; Goswami 2002; Baruah 2016; Baruah 2019). Theoretical discussions on tradition and syncretism further explain how domestic rituals and material culture mediate identity and continuity (Lenclud 2003; Saraswati 2004).

Overall, existing studies conceptualize Mishings house-building and associated rituals as a holistic cultural system in which ecological adaptations, social organization, and cosmology converge, consistent with Mauss's (1990 [1925]) notion of the 'total social fact'.

Methodology

The research was conducted through ethnographic fieldwork, with primary reliance on observation and interviews. Field engagement extended intermittently over a period of two years (2019–2021), ensuring repeated interaction with the community. The study adopted a descriptive and analytical orientation. Firsthand information was obtained through participant observation and a series of in-depth interviews, conducted in both semi-structured and unstructured formats.

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed. In the initial stage, participants were selected purposively on the basis of their relevance to the research objectives. Thereafter, snowball sampling facilitated the identification of additional participants through referrals provided by earlier respondents.

In addition to primary data, secondary information was collected from published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and credible online resources, which served to contextualize and supplement the field observations.

Universe of study

The research was undertaken among the Mishing tribe of Sadiya Sub-Division in Tinsukia District of Assam. Two Gaon Panchayat; Shantipur and Amarpur were selected due to their significant Mishing population. It borders Arunachal Pradesh to the north and east, while the Lohit and Dibang rivers mark its western and southern limits before merging with the Brahmaputra. The area is ethnically diverse, inhabited by both tribal and non-tribal groups such as the Mishings, Ahoms, Kacharis, Deories, Nepalese, Bengalis, communities from the Hindi speaking states, and other Assamese communities.

Ecologically, Sadiya lies in the easternmost part of the Brahmaputra Valley and experiences a humid subtropical climate with intense monsoonal rainfall. Situated at the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas, the region is highly fertile but prone to recurrent floods and erosion caused by the dynamic courses of the Lohit, Dibang, and Kundil rivers, which converge here to form the Brahmaputra. The landscape comprises fertile alluvial plains interspersed with wetlands, grasslands, and forest patches, supporting rich biodiversity. This ecological setting not only sustains agriculture and fishing—the primary livelihoods of local communities—but also profoundly shapes settlement patterns, housing styles, and cultural practices.

The Mishings

Assam represents a complex socio-cultural landscape shaped by the coexistence of numerous tribal and non-tribal communities with distinct ethnic and linguistic identities. Since early historical periods, the Brahmaputra Valley has experienced sustained migration from surrounding hill regions, resulting in the gradual settlement of several tribal groups in the plains. The Mishing community constitutes one such significant migratory group from the hills of present day Arunachal Pradesh.

The Mishings are officially listed as ‘Miri’ under the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950. Historically, they were a hill-dwelling community inhabiting the Himalayan region of Northeast India (Pegu, 1956). According to the Census of India (2011), the Mishing population of Assam stands at 820,250, making them the second-largest Scheduled Tribe in the state. Their settlements are primarily located in ecologically diverse zones, particularly the riverine tracts of Upper Assam, including the districts of North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, and Tinsukia. Linguistically, the Mishings are classified within the Tibeto-Burman language family.

The term ‘Miri’ by which the community was historically known, was assigned by the plains people of the Brahmaputra valley. E. A. Gait interprets the term as meaning ‘go-between’ or ‘middleman’ (Gait 2013), indicating the intermediary role the Mishings played between hill and plains populations following their migration. The community, however, considers the term derogatory and asserts the use of the self-designation ‘Mishing,’ which has gained acceptance in both academic and administrative contexts.

Ethno-linguistically, the Mishings share close affinities with the Adi and Nishi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh (Payengkakati 1935; Pegu 1956). In particular, marked similarities are observed with the Padom-Minyong Adi group. Bhandari (1992) notes

that both communities share a common cosmological origin myth and adhere to the worship of Doni-Polo as the supreme deity, where *Doni* denotes the Sun and *Polo* the Moon. These religious parallels are accompanied by similarities in material culture and subsistence practices, including house construction, food habits and preparation techniques, fishing, hunting, agricultural activities, and the brewing of traditional rice beer and so on and so forth.

Such shared cultural features suggest a close historical relationship between the Mishings and related hill communities and lend support to the view that the Mishings migrated from the hill regions of present-day Arunachal Pradesh to the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley. At the time of their initial settlement in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, the religious life of the Mishings was anchored in an indigenous cosmology characterized by animistic perceptions of nature and the spirit world.

The Mishing community primarily inhabits the floodplains of the Brahmaputra Valley, where their economic activities and cultural practices are deeply conditioned by the ecological rhythms of the region. As riverine dwellers, the Mishings depend on wet rice cultivation, fishing, and livestock rearing, with seasonal floods and riverbank erosion exerting significant influence on livelihood strategies. The precariousness of the ecology has shaped flexible subsistence practices, including the cultivation of flood-resistant paddy varieties and the use of riverine commons for fishing. Ethno botanical research further highlights the community's intimate knowledge of wetland and forest resources, with plants used for food, medicine, housing materials, and ritual objects. These practices exemplify a dynamic relationship between ecological adaptation and cultural resilience.

Ecological uncertainty has also influenced the symbolic and ritual life of the Mishings. Seasonal cycles of abundance and scarcity are reflected in rituals such as *Ali-Aye-Ligang*, the agrarian festival marking the beginning of the sowing season, and *Dobur Uie*, performed to appease spirits believed to control floods and natural calamities. These rituals articulate a cosmology in which humans, non-human spirits, and ecological forces are interconnected, reflecting what anthropologists describe as 'ritual ecology.' Such practices illustrate that for the Mishing, ecology is not merely a backdrop for economic life but an active domain of social and spiritual negotiation.

The Mishing *chang ghar* (stilt house) stands as a prime example of architecture adapted to ecological constraints. Constructed from bamboo, cane and thatch, these houses are elevated on stilts to safeguard against floods, allow ventilation, and facilitate safe storage of food and livestock. The use of locally available, renewable materials demonstrates a sustainable building practice that is cost-effective and environmentally suited. Das and Bora (2018) emphasize the disaster-resilient qualities of the *chang ghar*, noting its structural flexibility and ease of repair in the aftermath of floods. These features embody what architectural scholars identify as 'bioclimatic intelligence,' showing how traditional forms integrate environmental knowledge into design.

Beyond ecological adaptation, Mishing architecture also encodes social and cultural meanings. The spatial organization of the *chang ghar* reflects kinship structures, with separate areas designated for men's and women's activities, ritual performances, and the storage of agricultural produce. The elevated structure is also symbolically significant, as height conveys both protection from ecological threats and ritual purity.

Thus, the house is not only a shelter but also a cultural text that materializes social order, gender roles, and cosmological beliefs.

Despite its resilience, Mishing indigenous architecture faces pressures from modernization and changing material preferences. The increasing use of concrete and brick structures, motivated by aspirations for permanence and status, often undermines the ecological suitability of housing in flood-prone areas. Scholars like Das and Bora (2018) warn that the decline in bamboo cultivation and craft knowledge further threatens the sustainability of *chang ghar* construction. At the same time, hybrid models that integrate indigenous design principles with modern materials are emerging, offering potential pathways for balancing tradition and development. These debates underscore the importance of documenting and revitalizing traditional architectural practices as part of cultural heritage and disaster risk reduction strategies.

The Mishings are well known for their hunting and fishing skills, although their primary source of livelihood is agriculture. Along with other poultry, they also domesticate livestock such as pigs, cows, hens, goats, and ducks. The Mishing women are renowned for their weaving abilities and are thought to be born weavers. It is said that a Mishing girl learns to weave before engaging in other daily activities.

The traditional house of Mishings

It is believed that the first group of Mishings landed in the upper region of the valley sometimes between 13th and 14th century A.D. (Pegu 1956). As they have become plain dwellers from a hill dwellers their livelihood have passed through many changes but certain traits are still prevailing, and one of them is the housing architecture of the tribe. The tribe prefers riverine areas for settlement and they construct their 'traditional' houses with the locally available raw materials; bamboo and thatch as the valley has different varieties of bamboo, sometimes wood and cane are also used in these buildings. The word 'traditional' has been used under quotes because in the contemporary Mishing society there are different types of houses that do not conform to the traditional architecture. *Okum* is the term used by the Mishings for referring to a house and in Assamese the house type of the Mishings is referred to as *Chang-Ghar*; *Chang* means raised platform and *Ghar* means house, in other words it means a house with raised platform, we can also use the term for the Mishings to be pile dwellers. The basic reason(s) for this pile dwelling house is believed to be safety from animals as they were earlier a hill tribe and for the other reason for the tradition of building houses still continue is to stay safe during the flood in the monsoon as they are now a riverine tribal community.

The Mishings do not have specialised persons (architects or builders) for the construction of their houses, they do it by themselves. Locals are consulted when selecting a site for construction because they have firsthand knowledge of the kind and quality of the soil due to their everyday experiences building both new and old structures. Women do not put their hands on the building till it is built but they contribute in other ways like serving meals, serving tea at regular intervals along with betel nut and betel leaves etc. throughout the construction of an *okum*. There is no division of labour among the males; all age groups participate and work together. The size of the house depends on the size of the family; generally they have nuclear family,

so the size of their houses remains small. An *Okum* is basically a long house with a raised platform made of different varieties of bamboo and for the roof they use thatch (basically straw). The *Okum*'s do not have separate rooms; it is a long house without any distinct line of separation, generally the fire place which is termed as the *Meram* is the central of an *Okum* which is regarded to be the most sacred place within the house. Food is cooked here and all the family issues, discussions related to any matter generally takes place in and around this sacred area. It is regarded to be the most important part of the house as they also believe that their ancestors reside at this place. The *meram* is discussed in detail towards the later part of the paper.

Within the house there is no actual separation or demarcation. However, as informed by the informants of the study area, the men generally occupy the eastern side of the *meram* called as *Ri:sing* and the women take the western side called as *koktok*. Towards the western direction they generally prefer to have the washing area and which is mostly used by the women this is how it continues and if guests comes they are asked to sit towards *ri:sing*. The guests are generally welcomed at the front veranda called *tunggeng*. The head or the elderly family members prefer to occupy the area towards the end of the house at night and the young members specially the boys towards the front door of the house. Although the precise period cannot be remembered, the Mishings no longer follow these specific customs. However, these customs are gradually disappearing and now a days they have started building modern houses with specific number of rooms. In earlier times, boys customarily spent their nights in the *morung* (youth dormitory), which functioned as an important institution for learning, socialization, and the transmission of cultural values. It provided training in crafts, warfare, and community responsibilities, while also serving as a space for oral traditions and collective discipline. Over time, however, the practice of residing in dormitories has declined. The spread of formal education, the rise of nuclear family living arrangements, and the influence of modern socio-economic changes have diminished the role of the *morung*. As a result, boys no longer spend their nights in communal dormitories but instead stay at home with their families.

If we try to understand the architecture of a Mishing house; it is quite unique and interesting they construct their house mostly with bamboo of different varieties. For the pillars they use both *Bambusa tulda* (*jati*) and *Bambusa balcooa* (*bholuka*), for the floor they use *Bambusa balcooa* (*bholuka*) and for the bamboo matting walls they prefer to use *Bambusa tulda*. Its smooth surface and capacity to split evenly into slats make it convenient for weaving or laying as flooring strips, which can be tightly bound with cane. Importantly, the slight gaps between bamboo slats ensure ventilation and drainage, which are vital in the humid, flood-prone ecology of the Brahmaputra Valley. Floors made of *Bambusa tulda* dry quickly after floods or heavy rains, preventing dampness, rot, and insect infestation that would otherwise compromise the dwelling. There is a distinctive belief in constructing an *okum* where there are five layers both in the base and in the roof of an *okum* and in between these layers resides the Mishings. The five layers of the platform in chronological order from bottom to top are *jo:pong*, *ertong*, *bener*, *porpium* and *piso*. The flooring of the Mishing *chang ghar* (stilt house) is constructed in a systematic five-layer arrangement, each serving a distinct structural and functional purpose. From bottom to top, the layers are as follows:

1. Jo:pong – The foundational layer made of strong bamboo beams (sometimes wooden) fixed horizontally on top of the vertical posts or pillars of the house (*okum*).
2. Ertong – Half-split bamboo culms, cut longitudinally, placed perpendicular to the *jo:pong*. The inner side of the split bamboo faces downward, ensuring stability.
3. Bener – A layer of small, whole, un-split bamboo placed perpendicular to the *ertong*, forming an additional support grid.
4. Porpium – A crisscross layer of split bamboo woven together like a net, fixed above the *bener*, which adds resilience and distributes weight evenly.
5. Piso – The topmost layer, made of smooth bamboo mats tied with bamboo strips, providing a flat and comfortable walking surface.

The preferred bamboo for most layers is *Bambusa tulda* (locally known as *jati di:bang*) due to its strength and flexibility. However, for the top matting layer (*piso*), the Mishings use *Bambusa balcooa* (*bholuka di:bang* or *bholuka ee:ra*) as it produces larger and wider splits, making it more suitable for flooring mats.

All five layers are securely fastened together using bamboo strips, ensuring durability and resilience against the humid and flood-prone ecology of the Brahmaputra Valley. Similar to the platform, the roof of an *Okum* is also constructed through a five-layered system. From bottom to top, the layers are as follows: *bangkung*, *so:ying*, *ertog*, *la:dang*, and *tarte*. The first layer, *bangkung*, consists of bamboo beams fixed parallel to and adjacent with the house posts. Above this lies *so:ying*, a series of bamboo poles laid perpendicularly across the *bangkung* at regular intervals, with spacing determined by the overall length of the house. The third layer, *ertog*, is made of split bamboo placed perpendicularly across the *so:ying*—a similar element to that used in the platform construction. The fourth layer, *la:dang*, comprises whole bamboo placed perpendicular to the *ertog*, creating a reinforced grid. Finally, the fifth layer, *tarte*, is a woven bamboo lattice arranged in a crisscross pattern within a rectangular frame sized according to the roof dimensions. The *tarte* serves as the base on which thatch is spread and secured with bamboo strips. As with the flooring system, each of these layers is tightly bound together with cane or bamboo ties, ensuring structural strength and durability.

The symbolic meaning underlying this architectural practice reflects the cosmological worldview of the Mishing community. The five structural layers incorporated into the platform and roof of the *okum*, though not explicitly defined, are understood to represent the cosmological strata. The number five itself holds auspicious significance for the Mishing, which further reinforces the cultural value of this design. As mentioned by the key informants; the ritual specialists (*Miboo* priests) are even said to avoid entering or performing rituals in houses that do not adhere to these architectural conventions.

From a practical perspective, the layered design is also associated with protection and well-being. The upper layers of the roof shield inhabitants from natural forces such as sun, rain, storms, and lightning, while the lower layers of the platform serve as a barrier against snakes, insects, and noxious gases from the earth. The raised platform, usually constructed more than five feet above ground level, aligns with the belief that

the purest air exists above this height. Furthermore, as riverine dwellers are vulnerable to seasonal floods, the Mishings regard the elevated structure and its layers as essential safeguards against floodwaters, infectious organisms, and harmful creatures seeking refuge during the monsoon.

Having discussed the external structure of a Mishing *chang ghar*, it is equally important to examine its interior layout. A typical Mishing house is designed as a long hall-like structure without compartmentalized rooms for sleeping, cooking, or other activities; rather, the household shares a common space that reflects the collective orientation of Mishing domestic life. Each house features two verandas—one at the front and one at the back—known respectively as *tunggeng* and *yapkur*. Access to the raised platform is provided by a *kobang*, a traditional ladder made from notched mature bamboo culms or carved wooden logs, fashioned in the form of simple stairs. Beside the ladder stands a long bamboo pole, referred to as *lagjur* or *da:jong*, which functions as a handrail. The *lagjur* is embedded in the ground and fastened at its upper end to the first roof beam (*bangkung*), thereby integrating the ladder into the larger structural frame.

Windows are not a standard feature of Mishing houses. Instead, the bamboo walls—left unplastered—naturally create small gaps that allow light and ventilation to enter the house. This architectural practice not only reduces construction effort but also ensures that the interiors remain airy and filled with sunlight, reflecting an adaptive response to the humid, flood-prone environment of the Brahmaputra valley. Such an open, multifunctional interior, coupled with transitional verandas, illustrates the integration of ecological adaptation, social organization, and cultural values in Mishing traditional architecture.



Fig: 1 A traditional Mishing house
(Source: Authors' Fieldwork)



Fig: 2 The Meram
(Source: Authors' Fieldwork)

Figures 1 and 2 illustrates essential elements of the Mishing *okum*: the overall structure with its front veranda (*tunggeng*), access ladder (*kobang*), and the supporting handrail (*lagjur* or *da:jong*), as well as the *meram*—the central hearth of the household. Unlike many communities that maintain a separate shrine or sacred room, the Mishings locate their sacred space within the domestic hearth itself. The *meram* is positioned at the centre of the house, emphasizing its role as the symbolic and practical core of

domestic life. Depending on household size, multiple hearths may exist within one *okum*, but only the oldest one is reserved for ritual purposes and ancestral reverence.

The *meram* is constructed as a raised rectangular or square platform of clay and soil, bordered by four wooden planks known as *galung*. At its center rests a three-legged frame (*ki:ra*) used for cooking, beneath which firewood is burned. The hearth is meticulously maintained, never touched with feet, and revered as the dwelling place of the family's ancestors, who are believed to partake in the food prepared there. During fieldwork, it was observed that Hindu Mishing families often interpret the three legs of the *ki:ra* as representing the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh, while the four surrounding planks are symbolically linked to the four Vedas—*Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama*, and *Atharva*. Conversely, Christian Mishing families, while retaining the same hearth structure, do not assign such religious associations, underscoring how a common cultural practice acquires different symbolic interpretations across religious orientations. The centrality of the *meram* not only highlights the functional significance of fire in food preparation and warmth but also reflects broader anthropological themes of the hearth as the axis of domestic, social, and spiritual life.

Suspended shelves constructed above the *meram* form a distinctive feature of the Mishing *okum*. These are tied to the first roof beam (*bankum*) and arranged in three tiers, each serving specific household functions. The uppermost shelf, known as *kumbang*, is the strongest of the three and typically constructed from bamboo and wooden planks. It functions as a long-term storage space for durable food items such as water gourds, pumpkins, squash, paddy, seeds, unripe vegetables, and household essentials like jute ropes. The second shelf, *rabbong*, crafted in a crisscross bamboo design, is mainly used for preserving perishable food items. Here, dried fish is stored for making *namsing*—a traditional fermented delicacy preserved in bamboo culms—as well as raw pork for smoked meat preparations, and stocks of rice beer (*apong*). The lowest shelf, *perab*, is placed just above the hearth and designed in the form of a bamboo sieve. It stores food items required for daily use such as fresh fish, meat, chilies, salt, and vegetables. Additionally, cooking and serving spoons, knives, and machetes are often tied or hung from this shelf for convenience.

Beyond their functional value, these layered shelves reflect the ecological adaptation and resource management strategies of the Mishing. By harnessing the smoke and heat from the hearth, food items stored above are dried and preserved naturally, protecting them from spoilage and pests—a practice commonly observed in many indigenous and riverine communities. Importantly, these shelves also serve a protective role by acting as a buffer against sparks, thereby safeguarding the thatched roof from accidental fires. As shown in Figure 2, the *kumbang*, *rabbong*, and *perab* together embody the integration of practical utility, ecological adaptation, and cultural symbolism in Mishing domestic architecture.

The exterior of a Mishing *okum* incorporates the *kri-trig*, the open space beneath the raised platform, which constitutes a vital extension of the household. This area is multifunctional, often used to store agricultural tools, bamboo products, boats, and other items necessary for daily subsistence. It also commonly shelters livestock such as pigs, poultry, and ducks, and frequently houses weaving looms, which are an essential part of Mishing women's domestic and economic. However, the use of the *kri-trig* is

not uniform across households; while some families use it primarily as a poultry shed, others emphasize its role in storage or weaving.

The location of weaving looms in the *kri-trig* is particularly significant. Weaving is not only central to Mishing women's identity and livelihood but also carries symbolic and social value within the community. Since looms cannot be set up inside the *okum*, the shaded space below provides a practical alternative. This arrangement also contributes to household security: as women weave under the raised platform, they are simultaneously able to observe the surroundings and safeguard the house. Furthermore, the *kri-trig* represents an adaptive response to the humid riverine climate of Assam. The shaded and elevated structure ensures that the space remains cool and airy during the hot summer months, providing both comfort and functionality.

Mishing traditional architecture is not only a matter of material construction but also deeply embedded in ritual and belief systems. Before the erection of an *okum*, the suitability of the land is ritually assessed through a practice known as *kamor-oukam*. This examination is usually performed by the *Miboo* or, in his absence, by respected village elders. The ritual involves tying matured rice grains into a banana leaf or *tora pat* (a leaf commonly used for serving meals), accompanied by invocations to the ancestors (*Urom posum*). These packets, known as *tupula*, are then buried at the four corners of the prospective plot. On the following day, the packets are exhumed and inspected. If the rice remains intact and free from insect disturbance, the land is deemed auspicious for building; if otherwise, the site is rejected.

Temporal restrictions also shape the construction process. Building work is avoided on the death anniversaries of parents, while Wednesdays are favoured as especially auspicious days to begin construction. The communal dimension of house-building is equally important. Construction involves the collective labour of village youths under the guidance of elders, reflecting the strong ethos of cooperation and reciprocity within the community. Work is often accompanied by festivity, with participants sharing rice beer (*apong*), which reinforces social bonds and transforms labour into a celebratory event. Such practices illustrate how the architecture of the Mishings is not only an ecological and technological adaptation but also a reflection of their cosmology, ritual life, and social organization—what anthropologists term as the 'total social fact,' where economic, spiritual, and communal domains converge (Mauss 1990 [1925]).

When the construction of a Mishing *okum* is completed, it is not immediately inhabited. Entry into the new house is ritually sanctioned through a ceremony, which is considered an extension of *kamor-oukam*. On the chosen auspicious day, the *Miboo* or village elders preside over the ritual, underscoring the central role of religious authority in legitimizing domestic space. The host organizes a communal feast to honor those who contributed labor during the construction, and guests arrive bearing food items such as wild leafy vegetables, fish, and rice beer.

Within the newly built house, essential elements are ritually installed: a new hearth (*meram*), a climbing ladder (*kobang*), and a *tansuk*—a funnel made of split bamboo used specifically for pouring *po:ro apong*, a distinctive form of rice beer unique to the Mishings. The size of the *tansuk* varies according to family needs, and it is customarily positioned to the west of the hearth. A pig is sacrificed for the feast, and offerings are made to both ancestral spirits (*Urom Posum*) and the household deity (*Gumin Soin*).

The ritual culminates in the symbolic inauguration of the *meram*, with the first fire lit and the first meal cooked in the new dwelling.

Spatial orientation within the house also reflects social and gendered dimensions. During the ritual, men occupy the eastern side of the hearth (*ri:sing*), while women sit on the western side (*koktok*). This division persists in everyday practice, extending even to the seating arrangements for guests, who are directed toward the *ri:sing* side. Through these ritualized acts, the physical structure is transformed into a culturally meaningful dwelling, and only then is it recognized as a true *okum*.

Discussion and conclusion

The Mishings of Assam, originally a hill tribe who migrated to the Brahmaputra valley during the 13th–14th centuries A.D. (Pegu 2012), have undergone significant transformations in their cultural life, particularly in the material domain such as clothing, food practices, and occupations. Yet, certain non-material traits, especially beliefs and ritual norms, have shown resilience across time and space. Housing architecture, though a material aspect, continues to embody this duality; while structural changes influenced by modernization and cultural contact are evident, underlying cosmological beliefs and ritual practices associated with house construction remain deeply rooted in their worldview.

Mishing house-building not only represents a technical process but also reflects a Traditional Indian Knowledge System (TIKS), wherein ecological wisdom, ritual symbolism, and social organization converge. The division of roles men constructing the physical structure, women contributing through ritual participation and weaving, and youth assisting under elder supervision illustrates gender complementarity and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Such practices exemplify enculturation, where skills and indigenous ecological knowledge are passed down orally and experientially, reinforcing both cultural continuity and social cohesion. Thus, the Mishing housing tradition serves as an ethnographic lens to understand how indigenous communities negotiate change while sustaining ancient knowledge traditions integral to India's plural heritage.

Mishing houses have traditionally been communal dwellings without internal partitions, where the entire family shares a common kitchen and living space, reinforcing collective livelihood and kinship ties. In the past, boys spent nights in *morung* or youth dormitories, which served as key spaces for social learning and cultural transmission. This practice, however, has declined as families now construct houses with separate rooms, influenced by cultural diffusion from neighboring Assamese communities. Despite this shift, many households retain their traditional *okum* alongside modern houses, reflecting a negotiation between continuity and change.

House construction also involves ritual practices, notably *kamor-oukam*, in which rice grains wrapped in banana leaves are buried at the four corners of the plot and examined the next day. If the grains remain untouched, the land is approved for building; otherwise, it is rejected. This practice demonstrates indigenous ecological knowledge in safeguarding bamboo structures from pests while embedding architecture within ritual cosmology.

It has been observed that Mishing families who had adopted Hinduism often interpreted the presence of Hindu gods and Vedic symbols within their hearth according to their beliefs, whereas families practicing Christianity did not attach any religious significance to it. The Mishing people were originally animists, practicing belief systems that centered on spirits, nature, and ancestral worship. Their engagement with Hinduism began only after prolonged contact with Assamese Hindu communities, leading to a gradual process of religious syncretism. As a result, many Hinduised Mishing families began incorporating Hindu gods, rituals, and Vedic symbols into their daily life and domestic practices, blending these with their traditional animist customs. This coexistence of animist and Hindu elements illustrates the dynamic nature of cultural adaptation, where indigenous belief systems are not entirely replaced but rather integrated with new religious frameworks, producing a distinctive hybridized form of religious practice. Such syncretism reflects how material culture, rituals, and domestic spaces serve as arenas for negotiating identity, belief, and social continuity within the Mishing community. Conversion to Christianity among the Mishings of Assam can be traced back to 1836, when American Baptist missionaries began their work in Sadiya. Conversion among the Mishing, however, was gradual—by the 1935 census, only thirty-eight individuals were officially recorded as Christians (Das 2012); this early phase laid the foundation for later religious transformations within the community. The families practicing Christianity had no explanations regarding the fireplace as the Hindu families had. Though they are practicing two different religious practices but one common thing among them is the practicing of their traditional beliefs to some extent, at the same time.

The ancestor worship along with the feast before inhabiting the new house, and before using the new fireplace are also worth mentioning. This can be interpreted in different ways, it shows their respect toward their ancestors, and the community feast is a way of celebrating for the new house and it is also a way of thanking all those who have laid their hands in constructing the house. These rituals help in keeping the social bonding strong and members of the community happily together. It is obvious that there is a concept of social change that has been taking place in each and every aspect of the society. As we all agree that both the society and the culture are dynamic in nature and it tends to change with time and space. With this paper, we have made an attempt to understand the traditional housing architecture of the Mishing tribe which is also changing with the times.

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