The Mising Movement in Assam: 
Awaited Accord and Unanswered Questions

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Abstract

The state of Assam is a home of different ethnic groups known for their distinct cultures and identity. In the post colonial period, the nation building process in India shows state designed policies of homogenisation and integration of different ethnic groups within the fold of a dominant language. This opened up discontent among many ethnic communities leading to initiation of movement for their cultural revivalism and establishment of identities. The movement to establish separate socio-cultural and political identity by the Mising community is significant one among such initiatives. The movement though posed in an organised way during 1960s and 1970s, it however has long historical background. Along with the implementation of Assam official Language Act 1960, there are many socio-economic, political factors that contributed augmentation of the movement. After a long struggle an Autonomous Council to rule the areas dominated by the community was created. It however now appears that the Council has failed to fulfill the expectations of the Mising people. This paper has an analysis the movement, creation of the Mising Autonomous Council and the developments thereafter.

I: Introduction

Politics of Assam has been increasingly designed by various ethnic movements after the independence of India. The demographic composition of the state is diverse with existence of various ethnic groups having distinct historical memories, cultural features, beliefs, languages or dialects. These ethnic groups are numerically less in number than the dominant Assamese speaking group. This multi-ethnic state since 1960s is facing the crisis of assertion by the various ethnic groups, which is basically to protect and preserve their identity. Once a very large state (227,281km²), Assam has been reduced by nearly two third (to 78,543 km²) since independence because of re-organisation and creation of new states¹. The state re-organisation process however could not end the...
assertions of many ethnic communities. We see a chain of movements for autonomy where many ethnic groups demanded assurance of their socio-cultural and political identity. A quick outcome was formation of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967, a common political platform of all the tribal community living in the Brahmaputra valley. Among them were the Misings, started movement for self-rule as a means to ensure their cultural and political representation, and above to have powers to control resources in their locality (Saikia, 2011:118). Mising Agom Kebang\(^2\), a literary organisation of the community launched cultural revivalism process to fight against the implementation of Assam Official Language Act 1960, alleging it as a means of majoritarian dominance.

The Misings are an indo-mongoloid tribe inhabiting in large parts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Sonitpur and Tinsukia districts of Assam. A few live in and around Pasighat of East-Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. They are the second largest tribal group (plain) following the Bodos in Assam. Originally they were hill dwellers and inhabited in the northern hills of the upper Brahmaputra valley, in Siang and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. According to the Census of India, 2001 the population of Mising community in Assam was 587,310 constituting 17.8 percent of the total ST population in Assam (Table 1).

\(^2\) Mising Agom Kebang is the highest body of Mising people established in 1972. Mising Agom Kebang is a non-political voluntary organisation, dedicated to the cause of preservation and development of Mising language and literature.

### Table 1: Population of major scheduled tribes in Assam, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Scheduled Tribes</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Proportion to the total ST population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Scheduled Tribes</td>
<td>3,308,570</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodo</td>
<td>1,352,771</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mising</td>
<td>587,310</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbi</td>
<td>353,513</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>277,517</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>235,881</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiwa</td>
<td>170,622</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimasa</td>
<td>110,976</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deori</td>
<td>41,161</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Census of India, 2001

The ST population in Assam is predominantly rural with 95.3 percent; only 4.7 percent live in urban areas. Among them the Mising community recorded the lowest having only 1.8 percent urban population (Census of India, 2001).

### II: Background of the movement

The Misings now a plain tribe with a sizeable population were originally a hill tribe and their habitat was in the ranges of Abor, Miri and Mishmi hills of the erstwhile
North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh. The community started settling down in the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri rivers of Assam even before the start of the Ahom reign (Bordoloi et al, 1987). There is indication that the Misings migrated from the hills to the plains about eight centuries ago and continued to do so till the first part of the nineteenth century (Mipun, 2012:17). The Misings on their way down came in contact with the Chutiyas3 and came to the contact of Ahoms only when the Chutiya kingdom was invaded and conquered by the Ahoms4. Although the Misings initially resisted the Ahoms through small scale sporadic uprisings, they finally came to an agreement with them (Mipun, 2012:18). By this agreement Ahoms granted limited autonomy to the village chiefs and in turn the Misings had to resist the other groups that tried to invade the areas of Ahom kingdom. Thus the community started their journey with a political history of having autonomy through a village and community based political structure and maintained this status even after the end of Ahom rule. After annexation of Assam, the British took over the responsibility of administering the Mising inhabited areas with slight modifications in the arrangement.

The British government categorised the ethnic groups of Assam as backward tribe, forest dwellers and non-tribal people. The British government for administrative convenience included the Mising territories in their indirect rule and the village chiefs were granted some degree of autonomy like the Ahoms, for which they would have to take care of the law and order situation of that particular area. The developments in Montague Chelmsford Report5 (1919), and the Simon Commission6(1927) recommendation had greater significance in the sense that these developments generated a separate identity among the Misings. The colonial accounts have indeed served as a cognitive basis of ethnic distinctiveness and foundation of common Mising identity (Saikia, 2011:121).

The Misings were aware about their future status and autonomy at the time of independence of India. This led some middle class intellectuals to form a socio-political organisation called North East Frontier Miri-Abor Sanmillan7 and recommended the British government to create an autonomous unit for the Misings,

3 Chutiya is an indigenous ethnic group scattered in different parts of Assam. The Chutiya kingdom was established in 1187 in northeastern Assam with the capital at Sadiya. The Ahoms overpowered the Chutiya king in 16th century.

4 Ahoms ruled Assam for nearly 600 years from 1228 to 1826.

5 Following the administrative act Montague Chelmsford Report, the areas that were autonomously controlled by the Mising traditional chiefs, were brought under the indirect administration of the British. The areas were eventually categorized as backward tracts of Lakhimpur, Balipara and Sadiya, the last tract running up to the borders of Tibet (Pegu,1998)

6 In 1936 on the basis of recommendation of Simon Commission, the backward tracts were further regrouped as ‘excluded and partially excluded areas’ and were jointly administered with the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) of Assam (Pegu,1998)

7 It was the first organisation to raise the demand for separate autonomy for the Misings and allied groups. It was led by late Padmeswar Doley, the then secretary of the Sanmillan. Its first session was held on 20th May, 1947 at Murkongselek and was attended by Mr. Howard William, the then political officer of Sadiya.
Abors, Daflas, and Charak Tribal communities on the basis of ethnic affiliation the Mising shared with these communities (Mipun, 2012).

In the socio-cultural context Misings became a part of the larger Assamese culture and community. The Ahom policy to form an integrated society of the Mongoloid tribes by the process of Ahomisation has opened the door for the Mising culture to become a part of the larger Assamese culture (Phukon, 2007). In this period Misings came into contact with the neo-vaishnava movement led by the great Vaishnava saints, socio-religious reformers Sankardeva (1449 A.D-1568 A.D) and Madhabdeva (1489 A.D-1596 A.D) that helped the acculturation process (Mipun, 2012). Such interactions for several hundred years have made the community part and parcel of the greater Assamese culture and society, even some adopted Assamese language as their mode of communication.

The developments of Assam in the post-colonial period have a far reaching impact on the Misings. As indicated in the beginning, the nation building process in India aimed to build culturally homogeneous states with singular identities (Mahanta, 2007:130). In this process the small minority and ethnic groups started to feel the domination of the large group, as the large group started consolidating power and tried to justify its socio-cultural dominance over the minority ethnic groups. The impact of the assertion, in whatever magnitude and forms was obvious. It led to a cultural revivalism process in the Mising community led particularly by the educated middle class.

III: Causes of the movement

Verrier Elwin in his *A Philosophy for NEFA* (1949) observed: “... the first cause of tribal depression was the loss of their land and forests. This had the effect so enervating the tribal organism that it has no interior resistance against infection by a score of other serious evils”. The population of Mising was enumerated for the first time in 1871 and subsequently each decennial census recorded the Mising population. One hundred years of census records (1871-1971) give us valuable information (Table-2) regarding Mising population.

Table 2 shows that Mising population of Assam has increased substantially in the last one hundred years. The community’s population recorded 587,310 numbers in

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8 Sankardeva and Madhabdeva were great vaishnava saints, scholars, socio religious reformers of medieval Assam and figures of greatest importance in the socio-cultural and religious history of Assam. They by the neo-vaishnavite movement (*Eksararia naam dharma*) tried to eradicate all the evils there in the society and to establish a society based on equality.
10 A systematic and modern population census, in its present form was conducted non-synchronously between 1865 and 1872 in different parts of the country. This effort culminating in 1872 has been popularly labeled as the first population census of India. Verrier Elwin however indicated the source as 1871.
the 2001 Census and the population is predominately rural (98.2 percent). The point of argument here is that while their population is increasing significantly, their possession of land is decreasing. Having the tradition of living along the bank of the rivers their habitats till date are constantly exposed to flood and erosion, forcing them to retreat and shift their home very often. Moreover, there are evidences of penetration of people from other communities in the areas inhabited by the Mising community since the colonial times. After the independence there have been rising awareness in the community on the necessity of permanent land and the issue now has taken a different dimension. Earlier the land was abundant, there was minimal problem of river erosions and the economy was less monetised; all did not pushed for the need to have documented proof of permanent land possession. In addition to such factors, the process of modernisation forced the tribal people to shift to the interiors leaving their original habitats. There are evidences that the present market hub of Paltan Bazar area of Dibrugarh town and the court area of Lakhimpur town of Assam were originally inhabited by the Misings (Doley, 1986:54) and market forces forced them to sell their land at minimum prices (Sharma, 2002).

The Misings are primarily depended on land based activities for livelihood. Along with agriculture, livestock rearing are their main occupations. In a land constrained situation the constrained face by this predominately rural community is well understood. It may be noted here that the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Amendment Act, 1947 constituted several tribal belts and blocks in order to restrict transfer of land by sale, mortgage, lease, agreement, exchange or otherwise, to protect the tribal land from any kind of encroachment. Despite such action the number of non-tribal population in such areas continued to rise (Phukan, 2007: 192). Land alienation of a tribal community depending on primary occupations has a reciprocal relationship with poverty. The prime factor of dissatisfaction of the plain tribes including Mising is the loss of their traditional land and forest (Sharma, 2002).

Unemployment is another problem confronted by the Mising community. Poor educational and skill attainment in a resource (land) constrained situation would mean that unskilled are not capable to take part in the opportunities offered by the changing economy. In 1971 the literacy rate of the Mising community was just 18.2 percent (Table-3). This had improved to 60.1 percent in 2001. Still it was lowest among the

### Table 2: Growth of Mising population 1871-1971

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage of increase</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage of increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>13,786</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>84,976</td>
<td>23.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>25,636</td>
<td>85.96</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>N.A</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>38,430</td>
<td>49.91</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>108,736</td>
<td>27.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>47,719</td>
<td>21.57</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>163,453</td>
<td>50.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>68,706</td>
<td>23.03</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>259,351</td>
<td>58.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Bhandari (1984)*
Social Change and Development  
Vol. XI  No.2, 2014

major tribes of Assam only followed by Dimasas and Karbi community. In addition to the relative educational and economic backwardness, the requirement of knowledge of Assamese language to obtain a government job created an additional barrier.

Table 3: Literacy rate of the Mising community and other Major tribes in Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1971</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mising</td>
<td>18.20</td>
<td>28.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Scheduled Tribes</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimasa</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>69.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbi</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>64.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodo</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>71.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deori</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>84.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiwa</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>72.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mising</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>71.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>76.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source-Census of India 1971 and Census of India 2001

Social exclusion is another basic cause of discontentment in the community. The great vaishnava saint and socio-religious reformer Sankardeva (1449 A.D-1568 A.D) though tried to include all the sections of society under one fold\(^{11}\), his descendents were unsuccessful in the endeavour. The Mising community had to face a long history of social exclusion in the post Sankardeva Brahminical social setup. The most important socio-religious institution inherited from the neo-vaishnava movement\(^{12}\) led by Sankardev was Satra\(^{13}\). One of the responsibilities, rather the prime one of the Satras was to work for the betterment of the tribal and marginalised people. But Satras in later period confined its role merely to that of a tithe collection (Sharma, 2011:126). Many Tribal communities felt socially excluded in this set up and started conversion to Christianity. In addition to the faith and devotion factors, the enactment and implementation of Assam Official language Act 1960, made many communities unhappy and alienated. The literary organisation of the Mising community Mising Agom Kebang stated some sort of revivalist approach to preserve their own culture and identity. The policies of assimilation rather than integration created discontent and fear of losing their identity. Growth of an educated Mising middle class on the other hand made the community politically more conscious. The spread of education have made them organised and

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\(^{11}\) Sankardeva, the great socio-religious reformer of medieval Assam tried unite the scattered society to one fold through the religious practice of belief in one god. He rejected all distinctions based on caste, creed, religion and attempted to create a unified society of universal brotherhood.

\(^{12}\) Neo-vaishnave movement in Assam aimed to reform all the complicated existing Brahminical rituals, to unite the society by submitting to one supreme god by the simple way of congregational prayer and practice of non-violence in day today life.

\(^{13}\) Satra is a socio-religious institution of Assam established by Sankardeva to spread the teachings of neo-vaishnave movement.
articulate. There is realisation that the development of the community is largely dependent
on the extent of share in political process. Such realisation led to formation of sociocultural organisations such as Mising Agom Kebang (1972), Mising Divri Kebang (1980), Mising Mimag Kebang (1993), Takam Mising Porin Kebang (1971).

IV: The movement for separate identity

As mentioned earlier, the post independent developments in Assam have had far reaching
impacts on the all ethnic minorities including the Misings. The Assam Official Language
Act 1960 forced the Misings to a feared position and to think about their distinct
identity, different from Assamese speaking people. This distinctively came in to focus
with their preference for the Roman script instead of the Devnagri. The Language Act
narrowed down their material access, access to the government job, higher education
as well as representation in the political system (Pegu, 1998:85). This led to start the
process of cultural revivalism, first by promoting their language and scripts. They
demanded introduction of Mising language as medium of instruction in the primary and
higher education believing that this would assert their separate identity and make them
able to compete with the majority Assamese speaking people. This happened not only to
the Mising community but also to other ethnic tribal groups, including the Bodos.

The Mising Agom Kebang led the cultural revivalism putting effort to develop the
language in written form. Subsequently the organisation started publishing Mising
literary works. Some of the prominent literary works such as the Miri Path (Miri
lesson) and the Miri dowan of Mising Agom were published during these periods (Nath
1998:148) and helped in learning and teaching of the language.

In the early 1980s the movement took a turn and the Takam Mising Porin Kebang
(TM PK), the students’ organisation of the community came forward to lead the
movement. At the same time the demand for territorial autonomy of the community
started. By the time the movement had able to draw support from all sections of the
community and the demonstration for various demands reflected through huge streets
rallies. In 1987, government of Assam agreed to introduce the Mising language as
medium of instruction and as a language in primary schools in the Mising inhabited
areas (Nath 1998: 150-52). In subsequent years the demand for greater political autonomy
with devolution of power and formation of an autonomous body within the state was
intensified by TMPK. The greater political autonomy specified in terms of the six
schedules (Article 244) of the Indian constitution, with legislative, administrative and
judicial powers over a number of policy areas including land regulation, natural resource
management, customary laws and taxation. The proposition was to extend the area of
the administration of the autonomous council in several districts of Assam, where
Mising community constituted more than 50 percent population as well as those areas
where the Misings are a significant minority (Saikia 2011:127). The TMPK proposed
model of autonomy was however opposed by Mising Bane Kebang criticising it as

14 Grand Councils of the Misings (Mising Bane Kebang) played an important role in the socio-cultural
reform of the Mising society.
The disagreement among the Mising leaders made the problem more complex. This time TMPK was accompanied by other socio-political organizations as such the Mising Mimag Kebang (MMK, Mising Action Committee) and the Takam Mising Mime Kebang (All Mising Women’s Association) started stronger movement than the earlier years. At the same time the other group led by Mising Bane Kebang (MBK) also waged more vigorous struggle. Later in the period 1991-96 the Assam government tried to accommodate some of the demands made by MBK (Pegu 1998:86). While the TMPK waited for acceptance of their demand of greater autonomy, the group led by MBK with the support of Assam government formed a committee called Mising Autonomous Demand Committee and formally accepted the limited offers specified by the state government at a general conference in April 1995 (Pegu, 1998:87). Such development however did not help to arrive at a consensus in the community and the TMPK and MMK continued agitation with their demands. In 1996, there was a change in guard in the state government (from Congress to Assam Gana Parishad) and a permanent solution to the problem was expected. Disillusioned with the development and delays, the TMPK and MMK leaders initiated a legal battle filing a case against the state government to reconsider the institution of interim council. A final verdict was given by the Court on 11th March 1998 to dissolve the council (Saikia, 2011:131). Following the verdict the state government negotiated a deal with the leaders of TMPK, MMK, and Takam Mising Mime Kebang on 28th April 1998 that will grant a decentralised structure (limited autonomy), dissolve the interim council and conduct popular elections to establish a new autonomous council. The AGP government during its tenure till the year 2001, however, could not implement the promised provisions. This new government on the recommendation of the ministerial committee offered for creation of a Mising Autonomous Council with minor changes of the previous proposal, which was finally accepted by the TMPK though the original demands for greater autonomy remained in their agenda. The newly created Mising Autonomous Council Started functioning as a decentralised governing unit with the supervisory powers, but the finances still remained under the domain of the state government.

V: Conclusion

The creation of Mising Autonomous Council under Mising Autonomous Council Act15 1995 was a positive initiative for development of the Mising community. However, due to some procedural lapses the council has not been functioning well and expectations of Mising people are not being fulfilled. One basic problem in this context is the boundary delineation of the council area. Moreover, other problems include state government’s lack of willingness to decentralise the power in true sense, growing political differences among Mising leaders, opposition of specific provisions of the

accord by other communities living in the Mising Autonomous Council Area. The Misings constitute less than 50 percent of the total population in all the districts where they are mostly found. In Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts where Misings are most dominant, there too the physical distributions of the community interspersed with the Assamese settlement. Just above 51 percent (Saikia, 2011:142) of the total Mising population resides in geographically contiguous areas in the districts of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji and the rest of the population is widely dispersed in the districts of Jorhat, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Sivasagar, Tinsukia, Dibrugar and Kamrup. All have made the accurate boundary demarcation a complex and problematic issue. In addition to this, since the 1980s the Mising leaders are having differentiated opinions regarding various issues. There is always lack of consensus within the leadership. While the TMPK leaders are emphasising on broader form of autonomy that would encompass cultural as well as broader political objectives, but the MBK leaders from the very beginning are taking a flexible approach by showing its willingness to accept a limited form of cultural and political autonomy. This difference did not ended with the signing of the accord and continued even after it. Another problem as already mentioned is the dissatisfaction of the other communities inside and outside the Mising Autonomous Council is on specific provisions of the act. According to the Mising leaders the demand for Mising autonomy cannot be a threat to the integration of the greater Assamese society. They argue that they are part of strong Assamese nation building process maintaining their distinct ethnic identities which are not contradictory but complimentary to each other16. The development of Mising language and culture which in their opinion is necessary for upliftment and maintenance of distinct Mising identity can in no way be regarded as inimical to the Assamese nationality. But the other communities, particularly living inside the MAC area are not accepting the moves of the council with confidence. There are even protests from the other communities living inside the MAC demanding exclusion of their areas from the council area. These issues are appearing as constraints to have proper implementation of the MAC Act. Some realistic approaches are welcomed in this context to sort out the problems. One, it is required that both the Mising leaders and state government take approach based on ground reality regarding the boundary delimitation of the council area. The approach must be accommodative to all communities living inside the MAC area, so that no one feels excluded in the development process. Two, the Mising leaders must overcome their differences and need to work together. Consensus among the leaders regarding various issues would give MAC a definite path and strength. Three, state government should conduct the MAC elections regularly and decentralise the power in true sense. Decentralisation of power in real sense would help to solve many issues. Here we can say that for successful functioning of MAC, it needs to throw out all political differences among Mising leaders, state government and the other ethnic groups in and outside council area and must work together. At the same time considering the multi-ethnic social set-up, the Mising leadership must deal equitably with other ethnic groups living in the MAC area along with development of the Mising community to make the political settlements successful.

16 See Memorandum on the question of granting Autonomy to the Mising Inhabited Areas of Assam, by TMPK, TMMK, MMK, Guwahati, and August 10, 1996.
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