



TRIBAL IDENTITY POLITICS IN NORTH -EAST INDIA: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON THE MISING AUTONOMOUS MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

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Abstract

The North -East India is not a homogeneous unit as it comprises numerous ethnic groups as tribe and non-tribe with distinct identities and different issues. It seems that Indian state never tried to understand the heterogeneity of the region, but has been trying to impose on them as homogeneous group with the main stream of the culture. This imposition has been leading to different political demands to protect and safeguard their ethnic identity under the constitution of India. The different plain tribes of Assam like The Bodo, the Mising, the sonowal Kachari, the Rabhas, the Tiwas the Deoris and the hill tribes like the karbis and the Dmasas have been demanding different political rights like separate state, autonomous council under the sixth schedule of Indian constitution since post-independence period so as to accelerate their collective development in all spheres of the respective tribes. Of course, some of them have achieved their political goal such as the Bodos, the Karbis and Dimasas, but the rest have been demanding to attain their aspiration. Similarly, the six ethnic groups viz. the Ahoms, the Chutias, the konch Rajbongshis, the Maran, the Mataks and the Tea tribes have also been demanding for inclusion them in the scheduled tribe category under the Indian constitution. In short, the main causes of the tribal and non-tribal unrest can be defined as economic, political, social, cultural and influx and migrations etc. The Misings of Assam have also been demanding since eighties for accelerating their collective development by capturing autonomy under the sixth schedule of the constitution of India in satellite system.

Key words: Homogeneous, Tribe, Heterogeneous Identity, Influx, Migration.

1. Introduction:

The region of North -East India consists of different ethnic and racial groups living with strong sense of unity in diversity in different geographical location by preserving their own traditional cultures. But due to explosion over population and rapid influx, most of the ethnic groups of Noth-East India have been suffering from identity crisis as being minority even within their own geographical location for which they compel to demand their special right and privileges from government of India through their respective states government so as to survive on par with other advanced ethnic groups. The ethnic groups of the region belong to different racial and linguistic groups. The different groups like the Khasis, the Nagas, the Garos, the Bodos, the Misings, the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Ahom, the Chutias , the Konch Rajbongshis, the Adis, the Galos etc. are living with composite culture in the region. These groups have been divided into different categories as tribes and non-tribes and plain and hill tribes on the basis of development and geographical location. In Assam, different tribes such as the Bodos, the Misings, the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Sonowal Kacharis of the plain tribes and the Karbis, the Dimasa Kachari of hill tribes have been demanding autonomy in their respective dominated areas under sixth schedule of the constitution of India to meet their rapid collective development. Of course, the Bodos of the plain tribes and the Karbis and the Dimasa Kacharis have achieved their minimum political goal. It is because the tribes of Assam are socioeconomically very backward in comparison to mainstream of the Assamese society and each of them are own dialect, language, culture, religion customs traditions etc. They have been dominated by non-tribal groups since ages. In the age of globalization and impact of globalization, many tribal groups either tribal or non-tribal groups have almost lost their sociocultural identity. Hence the identity crisis has been suffered by them and the responsibility of preserving their identity is being taken by some elites of the respective tribal groups through various ethnic movement. The Misings of the Assam have also been continuing their autonomy demand since four and half decade ago to go ahead with other advanced tribes and non-tribes of the North-East region.



2. Review of Literature:

There are different studies on the area of different ethnic groups in North-Ester India. Different ethnic movements like identity politics, socioeconomic development and cultural preservation movement have been emerging in the region. So, different scholars and researchers have been contributed in this area. Their studies and contributions have been reviewed.

- i. Chandan Kumar Sarmah (2012): His contribution “*Maping the Trajectory of a Contemporary Ethnic Identity Movement: The Case Study of the Misings of Assam*” is directly relevant to the present study. He analyses the historical development of Mising identity assertion and traces the movement for several decades. It discusses the emergence of the educated Mising middle class, demands for political and economic rights and the shift of their demands from cultural concerns towards political demands and ultimately demand for territorial autonomy.
- ii. **Pait Sivanath (2021):** In his work “*Identity politics and Autonomous Movement of the Mising of Assam*”, he analyses the connection between ethnic identity and political autonomy. He also demonstrates that the demand for autonomy is involved in the questions of territory, administrative powers, political representation and institutional recognition, rather than cultural identity.
- iii. **Pegu, Nirmali (2018):** She highlights in her study “*Ethnic Identity Movement of the Misings in Assam: A Study of the Takam Mising Porin Kebang* (All Mising Student Union) that the students and educated youth of the Mising have been playing an important role for preserving their social, political, cultural and economic rights within their dominated areas through different ways such as democratic agitation, memorandum and negotiation with the government.
- iv. **Pritam Jyoti Pegu (2021/2022):** In his work “*Ethnic Movement: A Study of the Autonomy Movement of the Mising in Assam*” he examines the Mising autonomous movement. He also highlights that the implementation of the Assam Official Language Act.1960, along with other socio-political factors, contribute to the encouraging and strengthening the identity movement of the Misings.

3. Research Gap:

Though different literatures have been found on the tribal identity movement specially the Mising autonomy movement, yet some areas require to investigation. It has been found that most of the literatures gave concentration only on historical trajectory and political development of the movement. These literatures have paid considerable attention on political organisations and elite leadership, but the grassroots dimension of the movement deserves further investigation. The existing studies have given less attention ordinary people of the community as they are not able perceive the meaning and significance of autonomy. Despite the studies have given less attention on Government response of the movements. It is also seen that the changing character of Mising identity in the context of age of AI, globalisation, modern education, migration, digital communication and contemporary electoral politics provides an important area for further study.

4. Objectives of the Study:

- a. To understand the background of the Mising Tribe of Assam.
- b. To highlight the past and present trend of identity movement of North -East India.

5. Methodology:

The method is adopted analytical and descriptive methods. The data have been collected from primary and secondary sources of information. The primary data were collected from different leaders of different organization of both the Mising tribe and the Non-Mising under Dhemaaji sub-division in Dhemaaji district of Assam. The secondary data were collected from the available literature on the community.



6. Discussing and Findings.

6:1. Brief Historical Background of the Mising:

According to Census of India 2011, Assam had a total population of 31,205,576, of which 38,84,371 were Scheduled Tribe (ST) population, comprising 1,957,005 males and 1,927,366 females. It has been found that only 12.45% ST population in Assam out of total population. The Misings are the second largest plain tribe of Assam whose 680,424-population followed by Bodo and they have been mainly inhabiting in the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra valley and they are enlisted as schedule Tribe in the Indian Constitution in 1950 as Miri. But they prefer to recognize themselves as Mising and they are widely known as Mising for all purposes. They belong to Indo-Mongoloid race and a branch of the Teboto-Burma family of languages.

The Mising are believed to have originally belonged to the Tani group of tribes in the hills of present Arunachal Pradesh. They migrated to the plains of Assam between the 13th and 16th centuries. This migration was mainly due to inter-tribal conflicts, search for fertile land and better living conditions.

After descending from the hills, the Mising settled along the banks of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, particularly in districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Majuli, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Tinsukia, Golaghat, Tezpur etc. Their settlement in flood-prone areas led the them to develop a unique stilt-house architecture known as “Chang Ghar”.

The Mising were free people with their own traditional forms of administration system till the advent the British rule though Assam went under British rule in 1826, the vast areas of the Mising remained free till 1911. The Murkongselek area (present Jonai sub-division) was brought under the British in 1912 after the British expedition against the Abor (Adis) in 1911. The administration was totally based on tribal customary rule. The traditional customary constitution of the tribal people this land was the rule local *Kebang* (council of jurists) for decisions on disputes in tribal way of justice. The rule of *Kebang* is still prevailing in the Mising villages, but the Assam Government was reluctant to recognise the distinct social system while the present constitution of India came into force with the provision the fifth and six schedule for the tribal of India, some portion of the North East Frontier left out. The Mising populated areas of Balipara and Sadiya including Murkongselek were carved out of NEFA and were amalgamated with provisional administration of Assam instituting without proper investigation and examination of the condition of this tribe and their areas. These areas were later on declared as “Transferred Areas” (Vide notification No TAD 35/50/109 dated 13th February” 1951) with Assistant Political Officers at Chariduar, Balipara, and Sadiya for administration of tribal areas (Vide Notification No TAD 35/50/154 dated 5th May, 1951) to effect administration under Assam Frontier Administration of Justice Regulation Act 1954. The policy for amalgamation and assimilation of tribal people of these lands with other advanced ethnic groups of Assam have been later on done on the basis of the Report of the Meeting of North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and excluded area sub-committee held at Sadiya during 1947 headed by Late Gopinath Bordoloi committee as chairman of the said committee. The important portion of report of the sub-committee are cited “The population of the plain tribal which is being gradually assimilated to the population of the plains, should for all political purposes be treated as minority. Measures for protection of their lands are also in our view of necessary action. We have kept in mind the possibility of these certain areas inhabited by tribal in the plains or the foot of the hills whom it may be necessary to provide in the same manner”. With mere reports, the sub-committee stated that “We have also provided that Administration of the areas to be brought under the Provincial Administration in future should also be similar to that of the Existing Hills Districts”. Not on the view contents of the report of the said sub-committee but on the view of political purposes, the government of Assam separated these portions from NEFA. The portion then become an important part of the contiguous Mising populated region of Assam on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra from Sadiya to Baroli river on the west. Thus, the Mising inhabited tribal areas of upper Assam deprived from inclusion into both the fifth and six schedule of the Indian constitution. The three Members Expert Committee on the plain tribes of Assam headed by Dr. Bhupendra Singh constituted during the Bodoland movement described these facts of exclusion of the plain tribes from the fifth and six schedule as “Quirk History”.



This quirk of historical event deprived the plain tribal areas from much needed constitutional protection and exposed the land and the people to exploitation, deprivation and alienation. Instead of ruling the tribal people on the basis of foundation of their tradition, custom and laws, the Government of Assam sternly exercised the rule of administration of costly codified court system. As a result, the innocent tribal people became the victims of law in the hands of administration, where they are unscrupulously crushed by anti-tribal elements with the help of administration directly or indirectly. The tribal people could not maintain their balance of existence in their tribal way in the hands of Assam Government. As a result, the plain tribes of Assam had no other way except raising demand for separate state, autonomous etc. The Mising people too organised themselves to fight for their rights of constitutional protection within India.

6:2. PAST AND PRESENT TRENDS OF THE MOVEMENT AND ITS ANALYSIS:

Though the Mising people raised their demand for autonomy first in 1947, the popular mass movement was launched only in the eighties. Considering the growing popularity of the autonomy movement, the Govt. Of Assam led by Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia announced grant of autonomy to the Mising and invited the All-Assam Mising Students Union Known as Takam Mising Porin Kebang (TMPK) and the Mising Action Committee known as Mising Mimak Kebang (MMK) for negotiation in 1994. The Govt, gave a written proposal to create an Autonomous Council named as Mising Autonomous Council (MAC) under an Act of State government. The Proposal said that

1. There shall not be any definite boundary and compact area for the MAC.
2. The revenue villages having 50% or more would be identified and included into the MAC.
3. The MAC will not be any legislative power; it will have only executive power on 34 subjects enlisted under 11th schedule of the constitution of India incorporated after 73rd amendment.
4. Fund to the MAC would be provided only from the Tribal Sub-plan of the State.

Several round table discussions were held between the Government of Assam and the leadership of TMPK and MMK. They insisted that the MAC should have definite boundary and democratic system. They also objected to the criterion of 50% Mising population in a revenue village for identification and inclusion in to the proposed MAC. The TMPK and MMK strongly demanded that the existing Tribal Belts and Blocks and the Tribal Sub-plan areas in Mising dominated areas should be included into the MAC and that MAC should be created under the six schedules of the constitution of India in satellite system. But the Government of Assam refused to grant their justified demand and went ahead into impose the boundary less autonomy. Hence, the the TMPK and MMK strongly opposed the boundary less MAC since the time of granting MAC.

During the last AGP led Government of Assam, an interim agreement was signed by TMPK and MMK with the Assam Government for demarcation of the boundary and holding the election which has been remaining unfulfilled till date. Apart from, the TMPK and MMK have been continuing their justified demand till date. The recent decade the congress Govt. Led by Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi had taken steps to hold election of MAC by surveying constituency to constitute under the state government Act of Assam and held MAC election in 2013 by constituting 36 constituencies in satellite system. The second MAC election was held in 2019 under the Government of Assam led by chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal. It is noticeable that after completing their term, the MAC election has not been held till date. Of course, the Chief Minister of Assam, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sharma has stated before the media that his Cabinet has passed to hold the Mising Autonomous Council and the Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council election within November,2026. But date of election has not been notified till date. The autonomous demanding groups, TMPK, MMK and TMMK have been continuing their autonomy movement to achieve under the six schedules of Indian constitution.

From this study, It has been found that in constituting of constituency of MAC, the non-Mising especially non-tribes were dissatisfied, they did not like to include them into the MAC and they demanded to exclude them from the MAC. Of course, the non-Misings support the justified demand of the Mising and welcome the democratic election of MAC for the



collective development of the Mising, but they are only reluctant to include themselves in the MAC and willing to preserve their identity as earlier. So, different non-Mising organizations are strongly opposing not to include them in the MAC. The leaders of different organizations of the Mising opine that those non-Mising who are willing to live within the jurisdiction of MAC, they will also get equal rights as usual Misings from the MAC. They also opine that the proper MAC constituency should be constituted without hampering on the non-Misings so that all Assamese can live with peace and prosperity by preserving their own ethnic identity in equal manner.

Though they have got the autonomous council under the state act of Assam, but their main aspiration is to achieve autonomous under sixth schedule of Indian constitution. So, they have been continuing their identity movement till date in different ways. They also submitted a memorandum to the government of Assam in 2017 to grant their autonomy under the sixth schedule of Indian. In response of their memorandum, the Government of Assam constituted a ministry level sub-committee to look into their demands under the chairmanship of Dr. Ranoj Pegu, Tribal Affairs Minister of Assam Government and he submitted a proposal of their demands to the Government of Assam to be granted Mising, Tiwa and Raha Hashong a constitutional autonomy under the sixth schedule of Indian constitution in 2021.

As a result, the present Assam Government led by Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma sent a proposal to Indian Government for granting autonomy of Mising, Tiwa, and Rabha of Assam under the sixth schedule of Indian constitution last 9th February, 2024. A tripartite discussion was also held among Assam government, Home Minister of Indian Government and leaderships of Mising, Tiwa and Rabha in 25th December, 2025. After that discussion, the home minister of India committed to constitute an interlocutor committee for survey and talk with different ethnic groups who are living with Mising, Rabha and Tiwa so that the rights of other ethnic groups will not be hampered.

7. Recommendations:

1. Central and state Government of India should thorough fully survey and examine whether these areas are eligible for granting autonomy under sixth schedule of Indian constitution or not.
2. The justified demands of the tribal people should deeply be thought by the Government and the elite groups of the society for their rapid development.
3. Every people of Mising or tribes or non-tribes should keep in mind the strong sense of Assamese.

8. Conclusion:

In fine, it can be concluded that the tribal people are willing to live under their own customary rules with constitutional rights of autonomy so as to go ahead with strong sense of being Indian nationality within the state of Assam.

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Cover Page



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
ISSN:2277-7881(Print); IMPACT FACTOR :10.16(2026); IC VALUE:5.16; ISI VALUE:2.286
Peer-Peer Reviewed, Refereed & Open Access International Journal - As per UGC Norms
(Fulfilled Suggests Parameters of UGC by IJMER)
Volume:15, Issue:10(1), October 2026
Scopus Review ID: A2B96D3ACF3FEA2A
Article Received: Reviewed: Accepted
Publisher: Sucharitha Publication, India
Online Copy of Article Publication Available: www.ijmer.in

7. Occasion of XVII general Conference held on 9th, 10th, 11th & 12th, July, 2026 at Murkongselek Mising Krishti Bhawan, Jonai, Assam and printed at Advegiz M & P, Guwahati, Assam.
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