

## CHAPTER IV

### SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND IDENTITY POLITICS

In the previous chapters, we have seen how the Mising as an ethnic group emerged in the Brahmaputra Valley. Most importantly, we have observed how the 'internal cultures' and historical contingencies led to the formation of a heterogeneous, non-cohesive social structure among the Mising. It can be argued that the migratory status of various social sub-groups, as well as ecological factors, and thus "internal collective identity constructions," are inextricably linked in the process of heterogeneous Mising social formation. Moreover, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the self-realization of the Mising as a homogeneous identity seems to be intangible. Furthermore, due to this heterogeneous social structure, the sense of solidarity among the Mising remains within the social sub-group level and is more obvious and visible within the clan and the village level. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the historically specific experiences and contexts to understand the development and gradual realisation of collective identity as Mising. Yet in order to enrich our understanding, there is an urgent need to examine the intersections between the internal and external levels of analysis. We intend to bring the external level of analysis within the framework of social movement and identity politics in this chapter. This chapter focuses on the aspect of the Mising social movement and other 'Ethno-national movements' in the realisation of Mising collective identity.

In the previous chapter, we have already noted the fragmented and non-cohesive Mising social structure. Therefore, it appears that there has always been a collective identity crisis to realise the need for political awakening among the Mising. In his analysis of approaches to the study of the phenomena of "social movements and collective action', David E. Meyer observes that "students of social movements fit into two rough categories: ...from

the inside out, starting with activists and their concerns, and those who start from the outside in, looking first at states, political alignments, and policies, and then at patterns of collective action. Regardless of the starting point, we need to look at both efforts. By this triangulation, collectively if not individually, we can get deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of social and political protest politics.<sup>1</sup> Sociological research on social movements is basically found to be based on three core concepts, i.e., political opportunities, mobilising structure, and collective action frames.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have argued that:-

‘The emergence of a movement is not simply a consequence of accumulated grievances, but rather is contingent upon changes in the external political system. While proponents of the concept of mobilizing structures assumed that grievances and opportunities alone are insufficient to produce a social movement; instead, they argued that pre-existing social structure, such as informal social network and formal organization are crucial to the initiation and spread of collective action. And collective action frames refers to ‘interpretive tools that individuals call upon to make sense of their situation, identify the sources of their grievances and formulate ways to address them.’<sup>3</sup>

These are the concepts in which many researchers of social movements and collective action have made use of them. Following the success of "social history" in the 1960s and 1970s, "ordinary people" as well as "great individuals" find their place in historical narrative.<sup>4</sup> As such, historians have studied the phenomenon of social movement by using these core concepts. It has also been proposed that.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David S. Meyer, 2000, *Opportunities and Identities: Bridge-Building in the Study of Social Movement*, in David S. Meyer, Nancy Whiter, Belinda Robett(eds), *Social Movement: Identity, Culture and the State*” Oxford University Press, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Dill, Brian & Aminzade, Ronald, 2007, *Historians and the study of protest*, in Bert Klandersmans and Conny Roggeband(eds), *Handbook of Social Movements across Disciplines*, Springer, p. 288.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, C Robert, 2003, *The Historian’s Toolbox: A student’s guide to the Theory and Craft of History*, M.E Sharpe, Inc., p. 150.

<sup>5</sup> Klatch E. Rebecca, 2000, *The Development of individual identity and consciousness among Movements of the Left and Right*’ in David S. Meyer, Nancy Whiter, Belinda Robett (eds), ‘Social Movement: Identity, Culture and the State,’ Oxford University Press, pp. 186-87.

‘political consciousness also grows from the multitude of forces which exist prior to participation... a complex array of external factors –social background, parental ideology and values, political climate of the community, the influence of teachers, leaders, or books-intertwines with individual personality and experiences during childhood to create an affinity toward the political world. This orientation, combined with critical historical and political events, propels, individual to put their beliefs into action. Thus, Structural factors as well as individual experience and personality shape political identity and action.’

As it is already stated, political consciousness may grow from the multitude of forces which exist prior to participation. In the context of the Mising, we can examine such forces in the form of the very historical positioning of the community, the very political climate, and most importantly, the Mising interaction with the peer Assamese speaking intellectual, which gave direction to the community towards the realisation of social awakening rather than a political consciousness which led to the speculation of "imagined communities' in the distant past.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, the beginning of the Mising social identity or ethno-national movement appeared amidst this very background of the community. This was itself a product of the process of integration of the community into the larger Assamese society.

The rise or realisation of Mising as a distinct or exclusive ethnic group involved a great deal of self-identification and redefinition of their status. Historically, social awakening played an important role in the realisation of Mising's collective identity. Hence, the nature of the Mising social movement for the realisation of an ethnic identity was simultaneously a product of its endeavour for socio-economic mobility in a period of losing or declining Assamese hegemony or in the making of a composite Assamese culture.

### **The Mising under Ahom Suzerainty and in Colonial Period:**

Before we turn to discuss the role of social movement in the realization of Mising collective identity, there is a need to consider the historical factors in the political

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<sup>6</sup> See in details Anderson, Benedict, 2006, *Imagined Communities*: Reflections on the Origin and Spread on Nationalism.

mobilization/social awakening and finally shaping/fashioning the ethnic consciousness of the Mising as a visible entity. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Mising immigration into the Valley has never occurred in a simultaneous way. It occurred in a series of successive wave of immigration/migration into the Brahmaputra Valley. As such if we look into the fundamental historical realities that create the background for the birth of social awakening or social movement it can be traced back to some historical period like the Ahom hegemony and British rule.

To begin with the political aspect, it appears that the Mising were under the political domain of the Chutiya state to a considerable extent before the coming of the Ahoms. As it is already discussed in the previous chapter, there is ample evidence of a historical relationship between the Chutiyas and the social sub-group Pagro-Mising. While with the establishment of the Ahom dominions in the Brahmaputra Valley, the Mising had the opportunity to experience 'the politics of integration' under the Ahom Monarchy. However, it is important to remember that the Mising have always had a strong sense of separate identity. It is evident from the medieval Assamese chronicles that, at least till the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Mising had a great deal of hostility towards the ruling Ahom monarchy. The Ahom chronicles maintain several incidents of raids made by the hill tribes, including the Mising, in the domain of the Ahom territory, especially in the areas of the hill slopes and its adjacent areas. As a result, the Ahom monarch introduced several measures to cope with the hostilities or repulsive activities of the tribes. It is recorded that Pratap Singha adopted a policy of appeasement whereby he made provision for the Posa to the Mising, as in the case of the other hill tribes of the time. Under this system, the Ahom monarch grants villages, fisheries, and fisherman at a nominal cost in exchange for acknowledging Ahom suzerainty.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the Ahom monarch, Jayadhaj Singh, is also said to have sent an expedition against the Mising

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<sup>7</sup>Asom Buranji by Harakanta Barua Sadarain(ed)) SK Bhuyan; Guwahati 1930 p.40 Assam Buranji by Kaisinath Tamuli Phukan, Gauhati, 1930 p. 32.

in 1655 and made them pay a regular annual tribute to the Ahoms. Besides, he recruited some of the Mising as his soldiers and enlisted them in the *Kanhri* units.

Indeed, the creation of the post of officer of the rank of a Barua, as well as the appointment of the Sadiyakhowa Gohain and the Barbarua to the overall charge of the *Miri* (Mising), demonstrates that the Ahom monarch was still suspicious of the Misings' movements and activities. Besides, the repulsive spirit still found its expression when the Mising, along with the *Deori Chutiyas* and *Daflas*, made a combined effort to attack the villages of the plains in 1665 AD. However, the combined attack had been successfully dominated by the Ahom forces. During Gandhar Singha's reign, the Sadiyal Miri or Miris of the Sadiya area/region rose in a serious revolt around 1683, when the latter was recorded to burn the house of the Sadiya Khowa Gohain and his family.<sup>8</sup> Again, they got defeated at the hands of the Ahom and compelled them to sue for peace. At the same time, the Ahoms built a rampart on the border of the Assamese villages exclusively on the *Miri* territory.<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that from this period onwards, the Chronicles are almost silent about the Mising rising rebellion. It appears that the Mising accepted the Ahom suzerainty from then onwards since they now served the Ahom forces and to some extent in the sphere of administration.

On the other hand, it throws an ample light on the Mising's association with its immediate society and how it responds to those inevitable social forces. It is noteworthy that the literature of Ahom-Mising relations often maintains examples of such historical relations. Leela Gogoi, in his *Asomor Sanskriti*<sup>10</sup> described that the Mising were well established in the Ahom kingdom much before the 16th to 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D. He mentions that the Ahoms included the Mising in the *Khel-Mel* by creating a new post called *Miri-Barua* under an

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<sup>8</sup> Purohi Assom Buranji, (ed) S.K Bhuyan, Gauhati 1992, pp160. ff (PAB) Tungkhungia Buranji (ed) S.K. Bhuyan, Gauhati 1993 pp. 24f. AB, p.167

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>10</sup> Gogoi, Leela, 2012, *Asamar Sanskriti*, Banalata Publications, Dibrugarh, p. 114.

officer to supervise it. Besides, he stated that in the *Kachari-Jayantiya* Buranji it is found Mising soldiers participated in Ahom's expeditions to *Kachari-Jayantiya*. Further, he maintained that Rudra Singha's (1696–1714) projected Bengal expedition also included the Mising soldier. On the other hand, Laksmi Devi's Ahom-Tribal relation<sup>11</sup> of Laksmi Devi records that after defeating the Sadiyal Miris (miris living near Sadiya), King Jayadhaj Singh shired them as soldiers. The writer observed that the Mising were experts in fighting with bows and arrows, and hence the king ordered the Miris to enrol in the *Kanri* or Archery *Khel* of the Ahom army. Most significantly, she went on to add that apart from the *Sadiyal Miris (Pagro)*, the *Kanri* Khels of the Miris comprised the Miris of Ayangia, Samuguria, Jangoya, Lasongoya, Tamar-goya, Doityal etc. There are also some references that suggest that the post of the Borgohain was also enjoyed by people of other ethnic origins, including the Misings.<sup>12</sup> One Chaopangbonduk of the Miris is said to have enjoyed the post of Borgohain.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, during the reign of Pratap Singha (1603-41), one Bhokola Gohain, one of the members of this Miri Borgohain is said to have adopted a Miri boy to earn the name Miri-Sandikai, and hence his descendants came to be known as members of the Miri- Sandikai family.<sup>14</sup>

Hence, from the above discussion, it appears that the participation of *some section* of the Mising in the Ahom administration and the various measures apparently paved the way for the Mising to interact with their immediate neighbours, though at a minimal level. These interactions, on the other hand, appear to have paved the way for the Mising to establish a more viable political and economic relationship with the Ahom, allowing them to settle with the lowland communities of the Brahmaputra valley. In short, the Mising, by that time, became an institutional category in the Ahom hegemonic political structure. Here, we can

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<sup>11</sup> Devi, L, 1992, *Ahom Tribal Relations*, Panbazar, Guwahati, Second Edition, p.203.

<sup>12</sup> Borboruah, Hiteswar, 2006, *Ahomor Din*, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati-21 Assam, p. 530.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 486.

<sup>14</sup> Devi, L, 1992, op cit., p. 211.

illustrate some of the Mising sub-clan names, whose origin seems to have derived from professional titles or roles assigned to them by the Ahoms. For example, Kanri or karhi, patigiri, Medi, Patiri, and Buarua are considered to be sub-clans of the Pegu clan of the Pagro group.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it appears that the descendants of the clans who rendered services as Karhi or archers in the Ahom military were known as Karhi. Likewise, the surname Patigiri is the name of the title given by the Ahoms to a member of the Pegu Clan who was appointed as a revenue officer in the Khagarijan area.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, it appears that the polity mechanism among Mising can at best be described as being based on a village or *doulung*-based self-administrative system known as ' *Kebang* '. Mention may be made that the Mising, along with other tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, did not have the historical experiences of state formation nor kingship.<sup>17</sup> Sarah Hilaly has observed “though the cultural profiles of the groups reveal strong influences of dominant cultures around them, yet the culture of the majority of the group despite interactions remained distinctive from these state influences... in their independent status, they negotiated state powers through raids and control over trade networks...exchange of commodities of materials well as cultural value strengthen the internal bonds despite conflicts over territory and trade...the mediaeval period, therefore witnessed the evolution of the extended Eastern Himalayas as a distinct region, through specific instruments of the surrounding states, yet never subjugated till the end of the colonial rule. The control of the states could at best be described as ephemeral.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, it appears that in the absence of an institutionalised form of government, the *kebang* played the role of collective body or tribal

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<sup>15</sup> Pegu, Nomal, 2011(Second revised edition), *The Mishings of the Brahmaputra Valley*, Dibrugarh, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> A detailed discussion has been made in Blackburn, Stuart, 2003/4, *Memories of migration: notes on legends and beads in Arunachal Pradesh, India*, European Bulletin of Himalayan Research. p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Hillay, Sarah, 2015, *Trajectory of Region Formation in the Eastern Himalayas*, Sage, Indian Council of Historical Research, p. 300.

council to administer the village.<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy that in the subsequent period, i.e., during the Ahom and the British, the village elders of the Adi-Mising were said to be recognised as the village chiefs or *Gam* who also served as *Kebang Abus*, but they were mostly said to be the agents whose duty was to make the people obey the order of the foreign government.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism had a profound influence on the Mising of Assam. In fact, after about seven centuries of their arrivals into the Brahmaputra Valley, to a large extent, the lives and customary practises of the Mising have been influenced by the culture of their dominant Assamese-speaking neighbours. For Mising, assimilation to the dominant Assamese-speaking Hindu culture may include learning the Assamese language, adopting textile culture, changing food habits, adopting the method of settled cultivation (as discussed in the previous chapter), etc. In the case of their belief system, they have adopted, as Tabu Taid put it, "a kind of a monotheistic Hinduism."<sup>21</sup> This is evident from the penetration of 'Vaishnavite Hinduism' in their social life. There are folk tales narrating the story of the Mising initiation into Vaishnavite Hinduism.<sup>22</sup> *Naamghar*, or the Prayer Hall, became a regular feature of their village life, which was never a part of their erstwhile traditional belief system.

However, the Mising social structure appears to have persisted due to their deeply rooted world views shaped by environmental factors, and as a result, many cultural

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<sup>19</sup> According to Jogendra Nath , 'originally the term *Kebang* is an intelligent, wise man, well-versed in history, tradition, and knowledge-both mundane and spiritual.' A detailed study on this is made in Nath. Jogendra and Pegu, Naba, 2012, *A Cultural History of the Misings of Assam*, Prithivi Prakashan, Guwahati, p. 141 and in Niyori, Tai, 1993, *History and Culture of the Adis*, New Delhi, p. 146.

<sup>20</sup> Niyori, Tai, 1993, *History and Culture of the Adis*, New Delhi, pp. 133-138.

<sup>21</sup> Taid, Taburam, 2013, *Mising Folk Tales*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, p. x.

<sup>22</sup> These stories amply reflect how deeply Mising social lives have been influenced by the Vaishnavite Hinduism and how the neo-vaishnavites monasteries played a significant role in the process of socio-cultural integration of the Mising into the greater Assamese social structure. N.C Pegu recorded that the Mising were subjected to the influences of the Gosains of Sessa, Nomati Katonipur, Jokai, Elengi, Budhbari and Kuamora Satras and to their alluring doctrines. A detailed study on this is made in N.C P Pegu, 2011(Second revised edition), *The Misings of the Brahmaputra Valley*, Dibrugarh, pp.153-160. And Taid, Tabu, 2013, *Mising Folk Tales*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, p. 27.



components remain relatively un-aculturated. It has been found that the process of assimilation did not affect all aspects of Mising social life equally. Historically, the Mising were an endogamous community in spite of their close association with their dominant Assamese-speaking population. The persistence of this cultural trait of the Mising is another important characteristic of their social life. Perhaps, the Mising practice of clan exogamy and endogamy became the chief device through which their ethnic identity has been maintained for a long period of time. Under these considerations of Mising relationship to its new cultural milieu or landscape, it can be explained that the existence of endogamy, along with its clan exogamy, is a basic functional unit of their social organization. Basically, the Mising practice of endogamy is based on the consideration of cultural differences with that of the non-Mising inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley.

It is worth noting that the existence of the epithet *Mipag* (*Mi* means man and *ki-pag* means polluted or insignificant)<sup>23</sup> literally men of polluted origin to denote its non-Mising people, which clearly speaks that Mising were always aware of the differences between them and other communities living nearby their locations. More significantly, the anthropological field studies (1985) on five Mongoloid groups from Upper Assam, such as the Ahoms, Chutiya, Deuri, Moran and Misings, have shown *remarkable differences in the distribution of "anthropometric", "behavioral" and "dermatoglyphic" traits as well as in the distribution of ABO blood group and PTC gene frequencies.*<sup>24</sup> This study thus concluded that these five Mongoloid groups are historically "*endogamous units with no or minimal genetic contacts*" in spite of their close habitation. However, marriage with other social groups has been seen to be taking place recently, but people are still looking for socially desirable partners for

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<sup>23</sup> Phukan, B.N, 1997 *The Mishings, their origin, Migration and Relationship with the Mipags-An analysis* NEIHA p. 219.

<sup>24</sup> B. M. Das, Priya Bala Das, Renuka Das, H. Walter & H. Danker-Hopfe, September 1985, *Anthropological studies in Assam, India .Observations on five Mongoloid populations*, Anthropologischer Anzeiger Accessed:10/02/2014 04:45. p. 203.

marriage. On the other hand, the social status of the Mising as an endogamous tribal community can be understood precisely as a mark of social boundary or "border" reflecting its viable internal organization.

Another significant aspect of Mising societal development during the days of Ahom and, later on, the British period, became visible or expressed basically in the change of material culture. This was a part of a significant shift in material culture (like in the change of dress, food habits, and house construction), and most importantly, there was a shift in agriculture practices from jhum to settled agriculture. In short, it became distinct to find out the aspects of Mising cultural components that interact with the immediate social environment and thus make the population's adaptations visible. On the other hand, it amply shows that over significant spans of time, there was interplay between the wider contact culture and the immediate ecological setting that resulted in the development of a distinct social structure. As such, Mising social structure and social organisation reflects the contact situation or adaptation more visible. In short, the dispersion of the various Mising social sub-groups eventually led to the "fragmentation and reduction" of their cultural components.

However, as we have noticed in the previous chapter, some social sub-groups have completely undergone drastic transformation, especially in the sphere of language or dialect. Some have completely forgotten their mother tongue. This very situation, on the other hand, made the Mising social structure non-cohesive or fragmented. The subsequent development of the Mising social movement is thus inextricably associated with the above noted historical conjecture. In other words, the issue of collective identity has been a constant in the history of the Mising social movement. Here we can illustrate the point of how the identity of a particular community has been shaped by external factors in the course of history. This situation can be further illustrated by the following observation.

### **Influence of Govt. Policy in the making of Mising social Movement:**

In fact, as we have already discussed the position of Mising as an ethnic group within the dominant or larger Assamese hegemony in pre-colonial or under Ahom suzerainty. The British occupation of Assam in 1826 had a far-reaching impact on the region's administration. As the British officials penetrated deep into the interior of Assam, they introduced certain administrative measures by categorising the population under the category of backward tribes, adivasi, forest dwellers, and non-tribal. It appears that the colonial anthropological construct of "tribe" referred to communities that were assumed to be primitive and uncivilized, geographically, culturally, and economically separated from the mainstream.<sup>25</sup> As a matter of fact, it is argued that 'neologisms like Adivasi, Janajati, and tribe as ontological verities are rooted in particular colonial and ongoing post-colonial attempts that successfully erase the complex pre-colonial political, military, and economic relationships and histories'.<sup>26</sup>

As such, the British authorities, for the purpose of administrative convenience, brought the Mising inhabited areas under a system of indirect rule. Indeed, following the Act Montague-Chelmsford Report of 1918, the Mising inhabited areas were eventually categorised as backward tracts of Lakhimpur, Balipara, and Sadiya, the last tract running into the border of Tibet. Further, in 1936, on the basis of the recommendation of the Simon Commission, the backwards tracts were regrouped as "excluded and partially excluded areas" and were jointly administered with the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) of Assam, a British agency that had territorial borders with Tibet. According to these administrative

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<sup>25</sup> Dasgupta, S. 2016, *Introduction: Reading the archive, reframing the 'adivasi, histories* IESR , Sage, Vol. 53, No. 1, p. 2.,

<sup>26</sup> Chatterjee, Indranee, 2016, *Adivasi, tribes and other neologism for Erasing precolonial pasts: An example from north East India* IESR, Sage Vol. 53, No. 1, p. 9.

regroups, any reform and legislation passed by the Assam provincial legislature with respect to the administration of different areas of the province would not apply to the Mising territories. Besides, the responsibility of controlling and managing the administration of these backward areas was entrusted to the Governor of Assam, who functioned as an agent of the British government.

At the end of the Second World War, the British government was preparing to transfer the powers to the government of India. It was the first time a few individuals, led by Padmeswar Doley showed their concern for the future status and political autonomy of the Mising people. This led to the formation of a political organisation called North-East Frontier Miri-Abor Sanmilon on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1947. As a result, these few middle-class educated elites demanded that the British government should provide separate autonomy for the Mising, Abors, Daflas, and Charak tribal communities based on the ethnic affiliation that the Mising shared with these communities. Furthermore, the committee decided during its first session at Murkongselek, chaired by Mr. Howard William, the then-political officer at Sadiya, that the autonomous unit's territorial boundaries should extend to the areas bordering Tibet in the north, the Brahmaputra in the south, Sadiya in the east, and the River Subonsiri in the western part of the province of Assam.

However, the subsequent policies adopted by the post-independence state government did not seem to give importance to the very demands of either equal socio-economic opportunities or a sufficient amount of territorial autonomy. On the other hand, the Mising inhabited areas were bifurcated from NEFA and were integrated with the plain areas of Assam province. These areas were categorised as "transferred territories" and were proposed to be protected under the scheme of "tribal belts and blocks". With these provisions, the transferred areas were prevented from being encroached upon by non-tribal groups.

Nonetheless, these provisions did not reflect any signs of conceding the group's political autonomy.

### **The Role of Social-Cultural Organizations and collective Identity among the Mising:**

To paraphrase Rebecca E. Klatch, generation analysis can provide framework to understand how external factors affect the development of political consciousness and mobilization in social movements.<sup>27</sup> Analyzing the Karl Manheim's theory of generational unity in the understanding of political consciousness, Rebecca E. Klatch further stated that 'like class consciousness, based in a common social location...Generation Units are people who share a common historical location and who experience dramatic social change at the same time.'<sup>28</sup> In short, this theory thus points to the significance of historical factors in political consciousness and in shaping generational consciousness. In the case of the Mising, such political consciousness among them can be traced back to the 1920's and in the participation of India's Struggle for Freedom Movement and in the post-independence period by some individuals. As such, the Mising activists received political orientation in a divergent ways. Thus, it appears that a complex set of external factors fostered self-awareness and social awakening among the Mising, which then became the foundation of ethnic base political consciousness.

In the 1920's, social awakening among the Mising started to grow, which resulted in the development of an organization known as *Assam Miri Sanmilon* which subsequently transformed into the an organisation called Mising Bane Kebang. It was in 1924 that the fragmented Mising were gathered at Gejera Mirigaon, Majuli. Most significantly, the gathering was presided over by Pitambor Dev Goswami, (P.D Goswami) the then

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<sup>27</sup> Klatch, Rebecca E, 2002 *The Development of Individual Identity and Consciousness among movements of the Left and Right* In Davis S Meyer, Nancy Whittier & Belinda Robnett (eds.) ' Social Movements: Identity Culture and the State' Oxford University Press, New york, p. 186.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.187

Satradhikara of Goremour Satra, with the objective of spreading education amongst illiterate Mising, to discuss the issues of poverty and to eradicate the social evils that prevail among them and inspire them to organise themselves.<sup>29</sup> It is said that people from different districts of the state, under the leadership of Saru Chandra Doley, Muhi Miri(Patir), Karko Chandra Doley organised the Sanmilon with great zeal.<sup>30</sup> According to Nomal Pegu, education was almost unknown, as the society had only two graduates by the end of the 1930s. The Census report of 1901 shows that the number of literate, out of 1,000 was only 4 people.<sup>31</sup>

Hence, for the first time, a grassroots movement galvanized and activated a large proportion of the population while P.D. Goswami's initiative was more of a societal reformation than a political one. This very significant event inspired/ushered the fragmented Misings to get organize within themselves. In addition to the above noted historical situations, the surrounding community thus created the self-awakening among the Mising. Having grown up/associated amidst the contemporary Assamese middle class 'peer' political activists, the early activists of the Mising Bane Kebang (MBK) wanted to exploit the political opportunities at that time. As such, the social interaction with the 'peers' (Assamese middle class leaders) created an affinity towards the political world and hence constructed a larger framework to work out the details of various issues faced by the community.

Hence, the interaction of Assamese middle class leaders in the organization is evident as many such individual personalities were invited to preside over all the sessions that took place quite regularly. The following record shows the fact:

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>30</sup> Pegu, Ganesh, *Bane Kenbange Ringiyai*, published in the Mouthpiece of the Mising Bane Kebang session of 2005, at Abonori Alimur, Lakhimpur, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> B. C. Allen, *Census of India, 1901, vol-iv, Assam; Part 1, Report*, Shillong 1902, p. 103.

Table: 1. List of seniors leaders associated with the Mising Bane Kebang(MBK)

Personalities –Presiding the MBK’S Session	Place	Year
<b>Mr. A.C. Tolstoy</b>	Bhekelimukh	1927
Muhi Chandra. Miri	Namghoria	1928
<b>Md. Muhibuddin</b>	Jamuguri	1931
<b>Sarbewasr Baruah</b>	Pathalipam	1933
<b>Pitambor Dev Gosami</b>	Bebejia	1934
<b>Nilomani Phukan</b>	Kherkata Mukh	1936
<b>Sir Md. Sadullah</b>	Lohitmukh	1937
Mrs. Indira Miri	Moharammukh –	1938
Chakval Kagyung	Bonoria Chapori	1940
Karko Chandra Doley	Tamulichiga	1945
Karko Chandra. Doley.	Kuligaon	1950

These shows that the earliest secretary of the organization (1927-1950) involved in a small (tight-knit) organization. However, the objectives adopted for the time at the Bhekelimukh session on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1939, clearly speaks of the nature of self-awakening and social movement orientation. These were as follows<sup>32</sup>: - 1.Spread of Education 2.Social Reforms 3.Improvement of Economic status. 4. Unification of all groups of Mising living in several districts of Assam. 5. To keep proper relation with other tribal group of Assam 6. Work for all round development for all people of Assam.

On the other hand, the session held at Picholamukh on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1955 still seems to show that peers from different social backgrounds and orientations continued to influence the consciousness of the "people" as the session was still presided over by some personalities such as Kuladhar Chaliha, the then Speaker of the Assam assembly. Hence, the activist learned a framework for understanding the issues and started to articulate them.<sup>33</sup> However, there was a process of "changing organizational environment" by which a significant transformation and a re-labeling of the organization took its course of action in the movement. The special session of 1955 at Gejera (MAJULI) marked such a shift in the organization by which the name "Assam Miri Sanmilan" was changed to "Mising Bane-Kebang"<sup>34</sup>. As N. Pegu states, "the wordings were much dearer to the heart of the Mishings."<sup>35</sup> This label thus captures a shift among the activists not only in the world view but also conveys the realization of identity/collective identity of the community and a sense of commitment for the activists to re-affirm and extend their own organizational orientation.

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<sup>32</sup> Pegu, Nomal, 2011, op cit., p. 162.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>34</sup> *Ba:ne* stands for gathering in the Mising language. When two or more villages gather to discuss various issues, it is referred to as *Ba:ne Kebang*.

<sup>35</sup> Pegu, Nomal, 2011, op cit., p. 162.



At the same time, accompanying this new sense of shared organizational ideology, the organization was made into a Presidential type which shows the changing political orientation and, to some extent, the formation of individual political identity. As such, Mal Ch. Pegu was elected as its first president under the new constitution and remained in office from 1955 to 1961. It is noteworthy; the succeeding president was Tarun Chandra Pamegam, a noted writer of the contemporary time. Here we can witness an elected President of an organisation like MBK contesting a State Assembly election held in the year 1962. It is noteworthy that he contested the election from the Praja Socialist Party-the opposition political party in that election. As a matter of fact, Pamegam is said to have failed to convene the open session of the MBK till 1965. However, it was he who presided over the historic Kulanjan Session of the MBK in 1966, where the community witnessed the presence of the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

It is evident from the above noted brief historical background of the evolution of MBK that it adopted divergent forms of action. Most of the earliest objectives of the MBK were driven by socio-economic grievance and the construction/formation of a unified identity of the community. At the same time, they were well acquainted that their goals, objectives, or issues could be achieved only by the state's initiation or action. Indeed, it is evident that from the very beginning of the organization, there were a great number of associations of leaders from their immediate dominant group. Thus, there is a need to place the development of MBK in its contemporary broader political context.

In the study of social movements, it is often held that 'the nature and development of social movements cannot be understood without referring to the role of the state.' As such, many scholars seem to give emphasis to the "interaction between social movements and the states'." J. Craig Jenkins states,

'Social movements are inherently political... hence in defiance with the early/popular notion of social movement as an apolitical he argues... if their (challengers/activists) demands are to prevail and become

part of the institutional landscape, the state has to become involved in institutionalizing these claims... social changes without the support of the state will not persist. The state is therefore a targeted for social movements.<sup>36</sup>

Likewise Edin Amenta and Michael P.Young have theorized the impact of Democratic states on state oriented challengers. They have examined how the state may influenced the overall mobilization and the forms of their mobilization and collective action.<sup>37</sup>

Considering these theoretical framework, it would be pertinent to study the aspect of interaction between states and (social movement) in the initial structure of MBK. It would be necessary to consider the internal factors of collective identity formation of the Mising and the subsequent transformation into an autonomy demanding body. As has already been stated, the MBK was loosely structured with a diverse form of organizing orientation. However, the most significant aspect of MBK was the realization by the early activists of the organization about the fragmented Mising social structure. Indeed, the organization's early leadership may have seen the necessity of a community's self-identification under a common name or identity. On the other hand, as we have observed, the self-awakening process in the organization leads to the need for the creation of collective identity/activities. This was amply reflected in various measures taken by the activists of the MBK. This realization led to a grassroots mobilization and activities. They constantly seemed to attempt to negotiate with the issues of cultural differences within social sub-groups. An examination of the measured and reformation of MBK in its early phase would highlight this point.

Prior to 1956, the practice of the '*Ali-aye-ligang*' among the Mising shows the form of local base. It is said that it was celebrated by a few groups of villages based on their season

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<sup>36</sup> J.Craig Jenkins, 1995, *Social Movment, Political Representation, and the State : An Agenda and Comparative Framework* in 'The Politics of Social Protest : Comparative Perspectives On States and Social Movements' edited by J.Craig Jenkins and Bert Klandermans University of Minnesota Press, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Edin Amenta, Michael P.Young, 1990, *Democratic States and Social Movement : Theoretical Arguments and Hypotheses* , Social Problems vol-46 No-2 p. 153.

of cultivating crops. Indeed, it is evident that the celebration of this festival has never been done on a fixed date. These are not the norms of the tribal people living in different ecological niches. The fixation of a particular date for celebrating the festivals imprints a significant influence on the practice of collective identity for the Mising. In his book “The Mishings of the Brahmaputra valley” Nomal Pegu described the events/meeting as follows –

‘to create feeling of **emotional oneness** amongst the Mishings of the plains, a decision was taken (as requested by **govt. of Assam and Mising Bane Kebang**) in a huge gathering organized by then “Dibrugarh District Miching Kristi Kebang”...on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1955 with Dr. Nomal Pegu in the chair...After threadbare discussion, it was unanimously decided to celebrate ‘*Ali-aye-Ligang*’ on the first Wednesday of Falgun each year. This decision was endorsed by the then “All Assam Miching Kristi Kebang’...on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1956 with Karko Ch. Doley, MLA in the chair and immediately communicated to the govt. and the govt. of Assam kindly and promptly, at the stance of Bishnuram Medhi, the then chief Minister, declared a general holiday within undivided Lakhimpur district with effect from February 1957. This decision was endorsed by the Mising *Bane-Kebang* headed by Malchandra Pegu in due course.’<sup>38</sup>

However, our oral sources reveal a different picture of celebrating the *Ali-ai-Ligang*. In the early decades of the 1980’s, there was still variation in the celebration of the festivals in many Mising-inhabited areas.<sup>39</sup> In an area such as Golaghat, people are still ignorant of celebrating the festivals on a particular day.<sup>40</sup> This situation thus shows that the appeal/message of the MBK to celebrate the *Ali-Aye-Lingang* on a fixed day had not reached the large number of Mising villages. Geographical dispersion or the non-contiguous settlement areas of the Mising became a barrier for the activists of the MBK in their efforts to create/realize their collective identity. Identity consciousness formation was gradual and it depended a lot upon contiguity.

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<sup>38</sup> Pegu, Nomal, 2011 op cit., p. 85.

<sup>39</sup> Personal interview with Mr. Dharmeswar Pegu, aged 59, at Bokulguri, ( In Lakhimpur District ) on 19/11/2019

<sup>40</sup> Personal Interview with Mrs. Rinjumoni Doley Pegu, aged 50, at Bagenagora Gaon in Golaghat District, on 14/10/2016

One can also witness how constantly identities are being renegotiated or re-adjusted in the course of time. It is noteworthy that some writers, such as Nahendra Padun and, Ganesh Pegu maintain that the Mising till the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not use the clan name as their surname or clan title, but instead they used it to identify themselves along with the name of their father.<sup>41</sup> Hence, it is found that a large number of the populations used ‘Miri’ as their surname identity. For example, the famous Kamla Miri, the martyr in Indian Struggle for Freedom Movement, and his descendants still use Miri as their surname.

It could be observed that homogenization of certain heterogeneous traits and symbols within the Mising was undertaken by the MBK especially under the presidency of Malchandra Pegu (1955, 1957, 1958, 1959), who was also the then MLA from Golaghat district (1952–56), along with the senior activists like Karko Chandra Doley (the first MLA of the community), initiated a round of discussion on this issue of the surname ‘Miri’. Eventually, there was a consensus among the activists as they asked the members of the social subgroups who identify themselves with the surname Miri to alter their traditional ethnic clan identity. Further, it asked the group who had not the tradition of ethnic identity but identified themselves as Miri to adopt the title ‘Pegu’ and ‘Doley’ as their surnames.<sup>42</sup> In response to such a call, there was a dramatic change in the aspect of collective identity. As such, the *Bihya and Khalsa*—the non-Mising speaking social sub-groups (who were known for their exogenous origin)—were moving towards adopting the dominant/large group ‘Doley’ and ‘Pegu’ clan names as their new social identity. Here we observe how Mal Chandra Pegu was instrumental in bringing those social changes. Another significant development/achievement in asserting Mising cultural/collective identity became more visible with the construction of ‘*Mu-rong Okum*’ as a symbol of their ethnic identity in the

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<sup>41</sup> Padun, Nahendra, 1970, *Mising Opinor Utpati aru Bisaar*, in Bhriyumoni Kogyung (ed) ‘Mising Sanskritir Alekhya,’ Birubari, Guwahati-16, p. 292.

<sup>42</sup> Telephonic interview with Khagen Pegu following the publication of his article entitled *Kaziranga and Mahi chandra Miri* in the Assamese daily Newspaper *Amar Asom* 24 August, 2016.

annual session of MBK. It is clear from the 1966 session that the construction of 'Mu-rong Okum' for public display in accordance with the presence of the Prime Minister of India became a tangible practice for the first time. The construction of the "Murong *Okuum*" in every session of MBK acted not only as a mere symbol of cultural heritage, but it was a part of their realization to preserve and revive their ethnic status in the state.

### **The growth of Ethno-nationalist Organizations:**

So far, we have made an effort to focus on the nature of the functions of MBK in the formation of collective identities. However, it must be remembered that, like many movements or social organizations, the MBK succumbed to fractionalization with a clear sign of polarization. In fact, the gradual transformation of MBK from a non-political organization to a political entity and its new typical workings cannot be fully understood unless we extend our attention towards other organs/components of social movements among the Mising. Moreover, as we can observe from the above discussion on the early activities of the MBK, it is clear that the organization in its early phase (1924–1960's) succeeded in giving an organizing capacity among the activists which the Mising as an ethnic group did not have hitherto. Basically, it is evident from the engagement between the MBK and the state that to a large extent, they succeeded in determining the internal dynamics of the MBK as a formal organization for the Mising social movement.

However, in the aftermath of MBK's success in organizing many remarkable events and undertaking collective action in the process of the making of Mising collective identity, the fundamental question of being an organization for social movement and social change seemed to have changed. As the MBK grew, it became more complex and diverse, with conflicting ideological tendencies among the leaders. Most significantly, the associations of MBK's leaders with contemporary political parties literally broke the sense of MBK's organizational unity or "ethnic base organization" and thus led to the alienation of

activists/workers within the organization. In other words, the contingent broader political and economic changes and their social location essentially led to the development of a more dynamic and goal-oriented social movement. An example of this goal-oriented shift comes from an article concerned with the MBK's conflicting ideological tendencies, which is considered to be the third phase of the Mising social movement. Ranuj Pegu (1998), a doctor by profession and a popular autonomy activist, argued that:

'As the autonomy movement grew stronger and popular, a new batch of young political leaders emerged out of the community and they soon developed differences with the existing old generation leadership of 'Mising Bane Kebang'(MBK), the so called parent body of the community. Most of the leaders of 'MBK' belonged to the ruling political party(s) and therefore, they did not support the autonomy movement. In this political polarization of the community, all other Mising organizations took the side of pro-Autonomy movement and walked out of the 31<sup>st</sup> general conference of the 'Mising Bane Kebang' held at Bodoti in Lakhimpur district in 1992. All the organizations jointly announced 'social boycott' of Mising Bane Kebang...'<sup>43</sup>

Thus, from the above discussion, it appears that the unique combination/mixture/interaction between individual political ideology and socio-political organization speaks to the peculiarities of the Mising social movement in which MBK succeeded in establishing itself as the dominant organizing body of the community. Moreover, it illustrates the point that due to the lack of strong centralized organization, it failed to create a coherent body within the community. Secondly, external factors like contemporary government policies or the political environment affect the individual's political ideology or orientation and thus affect the internal dynamics of social movements

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<sup>43</sup>Dr. Ranuj Pegu is currently the Education Minister of Assam. He was a popular activist in the Mising autonomy movement in the 1990's and became a household name among the Mising. In an article entitled, *Autonomy Movement of the Misings*, 1998, in J.J. Kuli (ed) , *The Misings : Their History and Culture*, he highlights the historical background of the Autonomy Movement of the Misings. Here he made an effort to interpret the grievances by attributing blame to historic government policy and the role of the state and thus mobilise the aggrieved Mising to assert their "claims". He was instrumental in advancing the Mising autonomy movement to the masses through an organisation known as *Mising Mimag Kebang*(Mising Action Committee) in 1993. He was the first founding president of this organisation which now alienated itself from the influence of MBK and thus 'democratic agitational programmes' started among the Misings

Gradually, multiple organizations (mostly driven by socio-cultural causes) have appeared with different nomenclature. The development of these "micro-cohorts" with clear motives and orientations indeed testifies to the fact that the community still lacked an all-encompassing organization despite the MBK's existence. Indeed, the history of the Mising social movement appears to be multifaceted with a number of ethno-nationalists organizations with different nomenclature. Therefore, there is a need to understand the formation of different ethno-nationalists organizations in the context of addressing the issues of collective identity and collective consciousness. This situation also became crucial in the context of the comparatively isolated and dispersed rather than less cohesive social structure and composition of the Misings. The evolution of present day TMPK, therefore, seems to speak of contrasting perspectives. In the first place, the contemporaneous existence of different nomenclature of the students' body clearly shows the non-cohesive social structure or social network till the 1980's among the Mising. Secondly, the growth of Mising Students Union again speaks to the need to contextualise the external circumstances and factors. The rise of different ethno-nationalists organizations in the history of the Mising Social Movement/social awakening, on the other hand, questions the status of MBK as the parental body of the community. However, it must be remembered that a variety of forces favoured the growth of these organisations. Both the contemporary socio-political environment and the exposure of the Mising elite class to the political world seem to have immense influence on the Mising social movement. Basically, increasing exposure to the ideas from the immediate society, the assertion of ethnic identity, among others, was promoting the growth of numerous organisations within the Mising Social Movement. It would be interesting note here that the turbulent anti-foreigners' Assam Agitation (1979-1985) had huge ramifications as the chauvinistic turn of the movement made the various ethnic groups like the Bodos,

Karbis and Misings restive. At the same time, the involvement of the ethnic leaders with political parties of the ruling dispensation or with parties with the progressive left leanings complicated matters.

As such the following organization will illustrate the point in case.

1. *Assam Miri Satro Sanmilon* was founded in the year 1933 which had a several phase of development as a Student organization with different nomenclature till it took the new form as *Takam Mising Porin Kebang* or All Mising Students Union in 1985

2. In 1972 *Mising Agom Kebang* or the Mising Literary Committee.

3. In 1990 *Mising Di'rbi Kebang* or the Mising Cultural Committee.

4. In 1990 *Takam Mising Mim'me Kebang* or the All Mising Women Committee.

5. In 1993 *Mising Mimang Kebang* or Organisation for Mising Struggle. According to N Pegu it was a 'political organ of the Marxist group'<sup>44</sup>.

Among these organisations, the history of the student body TMPK is remarkable to understand the nature of the Mising social movement. The first student organisation among the Mising is known/said to have been founded in the year 1933 as *Miri Satro Sanmilon*. It is noteworthy that after the end of the Second World War some leaders showed their concerns about the future status and political autonomy of the Mising. Subsequently in May 1947 few middle class intellectual led by Padmeswar Doley formed North East Frontier Miri-Abor Sonmilon and raised the demand for a separate Autonomy.<sup>45</sup> Hence it was for the first time the *Sanmilon* sent its recommendation to Howard William, the Political officer of Sadiya that the Indian government should create an autonomous unit for the Misings, Abors, Dafla, and

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<sup>44</sup> Pegu Nomal, 2011, op cit., p. 164.

<sup>45</sup> Saikia Pahi, 2009, *Protest Networks and Communicative Mechanisms and State Responses: Ethnic Mobilization and Violence in North East India*, Ph.D. Thesis submitted in the Department of Political Science, McGill University, Montreal, p. 196. (See in details for Mising Autonomy movement)



Charak.<sup>46</sup> With their utter dismay the state government did not take any initiative to fulfil these demands. On the other hand the *Sanmilon* was renamed as *Uttorporiya Mising Satro-Sanmilon* or "North Bank Mising Student Union". In 1959, another student organisation in the southern part of the region also came into existence as *Dakhinporiya Satro Sanmilon* or South Bank Mising Students Union.<sup>47</sup> In the subsequent period, there were changes in the nomenclature of the organization. Again the Sanmilon was renamed as "Assam Arunachal Mising Students Union" in 1974, and in 1974 it was again renamed as "All Assam Mising Student Unions" in the Dergaon session. The following session of the unions was held in the year 1982, where for the first time the idea of autonomy was embedded among the activists. This newly found objective galvanised the student unions in the sessions held in 1985 at Jengraimukh, Majuli. This time, the union was again renamed as *Takam Mising Porin kebang* (TMPK). This vernacular nomenclature received an unprecedented response from the community, which led to the development of a popular mass movement to launch on the autonomy demand.

The adoption of democratic method for demanding autonomy instead of using violent means characterises the Mising Autonomy Movement. Hence the activists led the movement for the protection and preservation of their language, culture, and ethnic identity of the Mising. The increasing popularity of autonomy movement among the masses finally forced Hiteswar Saikia led Assam government to create an autonomous council under The Mising Autonomous Council Act, 2005.<sup>48</sup> Ranoj Pegu stated, 'nine round of discussion were held between the Government of Assam and the leadership of TMPK and MMK. The TMPK-MMK insisted that 'autonomy without boundary' was an absurd proposition and was not

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<sup>46</sup> Pegu Ranoj, 1998, *Autonomy Movement of the Mising People* In J.J. Kuli(ed) 'The Misings: Their History and Culture' Ayir Publication, Guwahati, p. 84. (See in details)

<sup>47</sup> Paramananda Chayengia, *T.M.P.K Sangram aru Itihah*, published in the Mouthpiece of the Mising Bane Kebang session of 2005, at Abonori Alimur, Lakhimpur, p. 82.

<sup>48</sup> (See the appendix- The Mising Autonomous Council, Act, 2005)

acceptable.’<sup>49</sup> However, despite of its utter dismay, the Mising participated in the general election of 1996. Subsequently, the Mising Autonomous Council Act, 1995 has been amended for several times in accordance with the provision of granting administrative autonomy in the Mising inhabited areas.

Similarly, mention may be made of another important ethno-nationalists organisation known as the *Mising Di'rbi Kebang* or the Mising Cultural Committee which was developed in the 1980's. This organisation played an important role in the spread and preservation of Mising cultural activities such as the preservation of Mising folk dance and songs. Sachin Roy in his, *Aspects of Padam-Minyong Culture*, has pointed out an important observation on dance. He stated

‘Dancing has been described as life expressed in muscular movements. The pattern of life lived by a society is the creation of the human spirit in its endeavour to adjust to its surroundings. These efforts again produce vibrations in the soul that are translated into expressive rhythms of the body. So the dance has been the natural method of expressing individual ideas and emotions and of celebrating communal joys and sorrows, aspirations and fears, love and hatred...’<sup>50</sup>

The Misings too have enchanting music and dance and occasions for such dance and songs are also many and varied. Some Mising dances are rooted in their socio-religious belief which at the same time works as a source of recreation and entertainment. As such the *Mibu-Dagnam* dance is a religion-based dance where the *A:bangs* are sung by the *Mibus* and the *yungur* or both the young boys and girls repeat the first line in chorus before every new line, and dance to the rhythm.<sup>51</sup> It is noteworthy that this dance form has similarity with that of the *Po:nung*, *Solung* and *Etor* dances of Galong, Pa:dam, Pa:si, Minyong of Tani communities of

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<sup>49</sup> Pegu Ranoj, 1998, *Autonomy Movement of the Misings*, In J.J. Kuli(ed) ‘The Misings: Their History and Culture’ Ayir Publication, Guwahati, p.86.

<sup>50</sup> Roy Sachin, 1959, *Aspects of Padam-Minyong Culture*, Shilong, p. 158.

<sup>51</sup> Pegu, Indreswar, 2019, *The Mishings of North East India*, Dibrugarh, p. 132.

central Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, there were the dances like *Lereli-sonam*, *Sello:ya sonam* where the Mising used to perform after in so many occasion without any musical instrument.<sup>53</sup> However, the most popular and currently prevalent dance among the Mising is the *Gumrag Sonam or Pakso-Soman*. This agro-dance which is performed in *Ali:aye:Ligang* is different from the above noted dances in respect of its modes and pace-movement of the body posture.<sup>54</sup> Indreswar Pegu in his recent works has observed that ‘the main form of *Gumrag* dance is the dance posture of the pace-movement at the time of crushing the soil with foot after the seed being sown... this posture of the foot is called *Dake-Kenam*.’ As such postures based on cultivation are one of the most profound parts of the *Gumrag* Dance. Perhaps various agricultural activities e.g., sowing paddy seeds, weeding, reaping, spinning, weaving etc. are expressed by body postures and movement in *Gumrag* dance.

The brief overview of the Mising folk dance thus symbolised the expression of a collective mind. It amply reflects the urge to express their ideas (worldviews) and emotions and of celebrating the communal joys and aspirations. However, the expressive rhythms of the people produced quite a different dance form within the community in the course of time. Here again the non-cohesive Mising social structure resulted in the development of distinguishable dance forms among the social sub-groups. It is noteworthy that the *Gumrag* dance form shows variations in its forms and expressions amongst the social sub-groups and at different Misings villages.<sup>55</sup> The *Mising Dirbi Kebang* had been endeavouring to establish the *Gumrag Dance* as powerful symbol of Mising ethno-national identity.<sup>56</sup> As such the activists of the *Mising Dirbi Kebang* felt the need to discuss and debate the issues of diverse

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>55</sup> *Dirbi* : A historical anthology book of Mising Dirbi Kebang, edited by Dembi Ram Panging, Published by Mising Dirbi Kebang, 2020, Dhemaji, pp. 125-126.

<sup>56</sup> Telephonic Interview with Mr. Suraj kr. Patiri Mili, Aged -58 on 28/07/2022. He has been a very active members of the Mising Dirbi Kebang(Mising Cultural Association). He served the associations as President for several years and took active part in the endeavour for making the *Gumrag* dance a common dance form of the Misings.

forms of *Gurmag* dance and to establish uniformity in it. After a series of discussion and debates the activists initiate several measures by organizing workshops on the *Gurmag* dance form in every Mising inhabited district of Assam.(see appendix-V) All these initiatives played an important role in the realisation of collective identity of the Misings.

### **Inscribing the Mising Collective Identity:**

It is worth exploring that the activists of the Mising autonomy movement were clearly resorting to history to claim their right to have an autonomous body of their own. The educated youths and students took the lead in organising the community. As such, the post 1960-70s periods witnessed the development of an organisation known as Mising Agom Kebang (Mising Language Society). This development helped in further articulation of the community. Indeed, literacy among the Mising spawned different kinds of literature. Soon, this literature came to be used by Mising themselves as a means to write their opinions on various matters.

### **The Colonial and other post-colonial Ethnographic discourse on the term ‘*Miri*’:**

The central point of debate among scholars, including the colonial and other post-colonial ethnographers, on the study of Mising is often centred on the associations with the term *Miri*. Different views and opinions have been developed by a number of colonial ethnographers and others to define the origin of the word *Miri* in connection with the Mising of Assam in their accounts. Describing the meaning of the term *Miri* Colonial ethnographers cum administrators such as E. T. Dalton (A Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, 1845), Alexander Macenzie (The North East Frontier India, 1884) and Edward Gait (A History of Assam, 1905) are of the opinion that the term *Miri* means ‘go between’. These ethnographers held the view that the Mising originally inhabited the area that lies between the Abor hills and the Assam plains and it was due to the very role of playing ‘middle man’ between the Abors

(Adis of Arunachal Pradesh) and the Assam plainsmen that they were named as *Miri*. (Pegu 2011:2) While Crooks did not agree with this interpretation and he claimed that the first syllable *mi* does not mean man in the Abor-Miri languages, he put further the view that the latter syllable *ri* does not show how the whole compound would mean 'gentleman' or 'nobleman'.<sup>57</sup> But ethnographers like Waddel (A Note on the Derivative of Miri, Man, 1911), maintained the term *Miri* is of Tibetan origin and explained that the *Miri* are a typically Mongoloid people and call themselves *Mi-zhing* or *Mi-shing*, which means the man of the soil and land, with a sense of native of the soil. However, post-colonial Indian ethnographers such as J.S. Bhandari are not convinced by Waddel's explanation, and he raises the following question: if the term is of Tibetan origin, why do non-Tibetan language speakers such as the Assamese use the term *Miri*? Further, another version claims that the word '*Miri*' is a derivative of *Mieure* or *Mirui* or *Mibu*. The priest, or tribal medicine man, and chief religious functionary among the *Adi-Mising* is known as *Mirui*, *Miri*, or *Mibu*, according to this version. J.S Bhandari mentioned, "The term is not used to designate an entire community... The hill people were identified as coming from or belonging to the land of the *Miris*, whose fetes of divine or supernatural power might have spread far and wide... Thus the *Misings* who were emigrants from the *Padam-Minyong* region, were named as *Miri* by the plains people and their abode as the *Miri Pahar* (Hills)... the term became popular and for the plains people the *Mising* became the *Miri*."<sup>58</sup> Contemplating this given version of J.S. Bhandari, authors like Jogendra Nath have also added that a particular tribe (*Mising*) might have had a greater number of shamanistic priests or *Mirui* or *Miri* or *Mibu* or very influential priests were there in the society, after whose socio-religious position they came to known as *Miri*.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> R. Boileau, Pemberton, 1835, (Reprint, 1991), *Report on The Eastern Frontier of British India*, Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Guwahati, reprint. p. 80.

<sup>58</sup> Bhandari, J.S., 1984, *Ethnohistory, Ethnic Identity and Contemporary Mishing Society*, Indian Anthropologist New Delhi, p. 81.

<sup>59</sup> Nath, Jogendra, 2012, *A Cultural History of the Misings of Assam*, Pritibi Prakashan, Guwahati, p. 33.

## **Self-inscribed Notions: The identification and the Self-definition**

The term *Miri* has been used to refer to the Mising throughout history, from sixteenth-century Vaishnavite writings to colonial accounts. But the questions then arise: If the *Miri* had been the Mising, how old is the name Mising? Secondly, how is the refusal of the term *Miri* as self-referential by the members of the community to be explained?

The interpretations of the origin of the word *Miri* by different colonial and other ethnographers have amply suggested the association of the word *Miri* with Mising of Assam. Although there is reason to believe in these interpretations, it still does not clarify any suggestive link as to how the existence of the term ‘*Miri*’ or ‘*Mising*’ as a collective identity of the community is to be explained. It is already stated that the word *Miri* is not used for self-reference by the community members; instead, as many scholars say, the Mising considered the word ‘*Miri*’ as disrespectful.<sup>60</sup> However, it is noteworthy that some authors like Nahendra Padun and Ganesh Pegu seem to maintain that, the Misings, till the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, did not use the clan name as their surname or clan title, but instead used it to introduce themselves along with the name of their father.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, it is evident that some sections of the Mising people/population had only "Miri" as their surname. It is noteworthy that in a souvenir published by Dhakuakhana government middle primary school, most of the Mising students during the period from 1912 to 1947 had a surname with that of 'Miri'.<sup>62</sup> Most significantly, Kamala Miri the martyr in the Indian struggle for freedom movement, and his descendants still use the term *Miri* as their family name or as a surname. So this situation shows that there was an acceptance or prevailing usage of the term ‘*Miri*’ within the community.

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<sup>60</sup> Pegu Nomal, 2011, op cit., p.1.

<sup>61</sup> Padun, Nahendra. 1970, *Mising Opiner Utpoti Aru Bisa*, in Bhregumuni Kagyung (ed) *Mising Sanskritir Alekhya*, Guwahati-16, p. 291.

<sup>62</sup> Hussain, Ismail, 2015, *Mising Samaj-Itihash Aru Sanskritir Oitijya*, Jyoti Prakashan, Guwahati -1, pp.429-30

Henceforth, different views have been put forward to define the origin of the word 'Mising' by a number of writers from the community. As such, T.C Pamegam has asserted that the word 'Mising' is the combination of *Mi* (man) and *yashing* (white or good) and hence they call themselves "good men" or "white men" and the non-Mising as Mipag-Mi (man) + ki-pag(impure).<sup>63</sup> This seems to be the most commonly accepted view by many writers. Tai Niyori, the author of the book, "The History and Culture of the Adis" suggested that the Adi people called them Mising to mean pure relatives, in contrast to the word Mipak (impure, outsider).<sup>64</sup>

Thus, the Mising appear to have discovered their identity "in the gaze of others," where the constituted/making of the past by the "others" does not resonate with their "locally specific logics of self-construction." Hence, they felt the need to incorporate the popular oral narrative into the process of their identity construction. Therefore, in a sense, there is an underlying need to examine or consider a tribal people's histories of their own world views. This concept has been framed as Joy L K. Pachuau put it "while identities may be constructs, they cannot be "created virtually out of nothing."<sup>65</sup>

The Mising were not unfamiliar with reminiscing about the past. Like many other historical communities, the oral tradition of the 'Pre-literate' Mising too consists of various kinds of narratives, songs, rhymes, proverbs, and other "popular creative expression'. Their contact with the modern world and hence their engagement with literacy ultimately led to written speculation and discourse about their identity based on oral tradition. While speaking of the Mising's engagement with history writing and written speculation, it can be traced to one individual named Sonaram Panyan Kotoki. The book under reference, titled as '*Miri*

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<sup>63</sup> Pamegam, T.C. 1970, *Miri or Mising* in Bhregumuni Kagyung (ed) *Mising Sanskritir Alekhyā*, Guwahati-16, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> Niyori Tai, 1993, *The History and Culture of the Adis*, New Delhi, p. 85.

<sup>65</sup> Pachuau, Joy L.K, 2014, *Being Mizo: Identity and Belonging in Northeast India*, Oxford University Press, p. 84.

*Jatir Buranji*' written in Assamese, was published in 1935. (This can be translated into 'A History of the Mising People'). S.P. Kotok's book became the earliest published monograph on Mising speculations about their origins and their past. Soon after this work, there were other important contributions. As such, Nomal Pegu, a physician by profession, deserves a special mention here. It was he who brought out the first book published in English on Mising history as 'The Miris or the Mishing of the Brahmaputra Valley' (first published in 1981, revised edition 2005, second edition 2011). In fact, this is the only work that touches the core issues of the identity formation of the Mising. Other important contributions included those by Taburam Taid (2013), Peter Pegu (1998), J.J Kuli (1998), Jatin Mipun (1992), Durgeswar Doley (1998), Ganesh Pegu (2010), etc.

The majority of these works of various genres are the result of their keen interest in and questions about the Mising's history. Therefore, their works virtually led to the formalisation of the Mising oral tradition. This formalization, on the other hand, had several implications that impinged on Mising's understandings of who they were and are. Most importantly, speculation on the origins and early abode of the community appears to be a discursive practise in which they engage in the historicization of the myth and thus create inconsistencies in the formation of Mising identity. Attempts were made by authors like Nomal Pegu and Peter Pegu by going beyond geographical extent to define Mising identity and, thus, they appear to choose to stress "the primordality of a common identity."<sup>66</sup> Therefore, there is a need to look at the ways in which the Mising formalised the myths related to origin and migration and, finally, their implications for the notions of their identity. However, this would be followed by a brief recount of the Mising origin myth itself. As

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<sup>66</sup> Nomal Pegu and Peter Pegu's work on the Mising is seminal in addressing the issues of origin and migration from the perspective of an "insider view". These works moved away from the existing discourse/historiography on socio-cultural antiquity of the 'Tanis'. It highlighted the contingencies of primal Mising identity, focusing on oral tradition as a tool of accessing their perceived notion of united/primal Mising identity. Peter Pegu, in his "A History of the Mishings of the Eastern India (1998) wrote "The Mishings were, in prehistoric times, an integral part of Chinese society, particularly during the rule of the Shang and Chou dynasty."



already discussed in Chapter II, there are different versions of the origin story among the Adi-Mising in different forms. The *Mibu A-bang* or the priest lore of the Adi-Mising, is considered the earliest known verbal songs of the community that were transmitted through the institutions of the Mibu cult.<sup>67</sup> The *Mibu A-bang* tells us the creation of the world. The rhapsodic chants of *Mibu* tell us...

... So it was complete darkness all around us, with absolutely nothing existing. This absolute nothingness is referred to as *Keyum*, and it is defined as the beginning of the beginning or nothingness in the rhapsodic chant. The ‘existences’ that followed *Keyum* are traced as

**Keyum>Yumkang>Ka:si>Siyan>Anbo>Bomug>**

**Mukseng>Se:di>Diling>Lin:tung>Tu:ye>Yepe>Pedong<sup>68</sup>**

From, Pedong emerged *Do-mi*, and from *Do-mi* emerged Mi-Mimang. Finally, from *Mi* emerged *Tani* (Man) and from *Mimang* emerged earth, water, air, stones and vegetation.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, in an attempt to interpret the term Mising, Nomal Pegu claim that “the term ‘Mishing’ derived from ‘Mishing’ -a descendent of *Do-shing*-the son of *Pedong-ane*.<sup>70</sup>

In support of this view he further incorporates an origin myth that prevailed among the Adi-Mising. The myth goes....

“Out of *Sedi* and *Melo*’s conjugal effort, *Diling* was born. *Diling* was survived by *Litung*’, *Litung* by *Tuye*, *Tuye* by *Yepe*, *Yepe* by *Pedong-ane*. *Pedong-ane* was profile in procreation

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<sup>67</sup> *Mibu-Abang* appears to be the chief institution or medium for the preservation of creation stories and ritual songs. The Mibu used to be the Man, or "Medicine Man" or "Healer" among the Mising. With the legends of divinity or "favoured divine power" in *Mibu*, the institution of *Mibu* occupies a significant place in their social lives.

<sup>68</sup> The traditional genealogical list shows the very pattern of remembering the names of their ancestors. Here we can notice that the structure of these names has two syllables, i.e., *Key/yum*, where the next name starts with the second syllable, i.e., *Yum/kang*. This traditional pattern of nomenclature, therefore, appears to help in memorizing the names of the ancestors for many succeeding generations. However, sometimes this pattern shows inconsistencies and often contradictions.

<sup>69</sup> Taid, Taburam, 2013, op cit., p.18

<sup>70</sup> Pegu, Nomal, 2011, op cit., p.7

and gave birth to many sons. Some of them are: *Do-mi*, *Do-pang*, *Do-shing*, *Do-bang* etc. From *Domi* came the Minyongs (Adi). From *Dopang* came the Padams (Adi). And so *Do-shing* gave birth to the Mishings of today and *Dobang* gave birth to Gallongs.’’<sup>71</sup> Similarly, in the story of the “Descent of the Misings from Ki-ling Kangge” (Heaven), it narrates, “In the days of yore Misings lived in Kiling- Kangge. They descended from Ki-ling Kangge to the lower regions, using ladders of gold and silver.”<sup>72</sup>

### **Historicising Myths and Identities**

The historicising led to the selection and creation of certain aspects of the myth, as in the case of the *Pedong-ane* myth, to fit their notion of identity formation. Secondly, and most importantly, by following their oral tradition, it took them to engage in establishing a link with the neighbouring tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, especially with the Adis. Thus, it was important for the Mising writers to speculate about their status within the Tani group of communities.

As a result, the *Pedong-ane* aspect of the myth came to be stressed, and this myth apparently served its purpose. However, as N.C Pegu wrote, "in the absence of any authentic record to show it otherwise, the contention that the Mishings are the offspring of *Do-shing* could not be rejected...the offspring of *Do-shing* formed a Mishing group parallel to Minyongs, Pasi, or Padam group."<sup>73</sup> In fact, as an advocate of this myth, he further historicised it to resolve the tensions on the issue of the primal ‘homogenous or united Mising identity. The historicising of the *Pedong-ane* myth was done by associating it with the names of places or people considered factual. Hence, he found that the word ‘*Pedong-ane*’ of the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp.30-31

<sup>72</sup> According to Tabu Ram Taid, “this legend has been a part of Mising oral traditions”. See Tabu Ram Taid’s “Mising Folk Tales” Sahitya Akademi, pp-3-4. As a matter of fact, this given version was first appeared in print in Sonaram Panying Kotoki’s book *Miri Jatir Buranji*(1935).

<sup>73</sup> Pegu, Nomal, 2011, op cit, p.8.

above myth is actually associated "with the *snow of the high hills that is soft and hardens later on.*"<sup>74</sup>

Further, in relation to the word 'Pedong-ane', Nomal Pegu draws his explanation from a Shimong story of migration collected by Tarun Bhattacharye that *Pedang-ane* is a mythical place, not a female human being as the Adi-Mising perceived it... *Pedong-ane* was originally "*Pedong-One*-means raining of snow all around the place and year (snow-clad mountains). But by a twist of the tongue, as he maintained, it became *Pedong-ane* from the original *Pedong-One*.<sup>75</sup> Hence, it is held the view that the descendants of *Sedi-Melo* first lived and flourished in some snow-clad mountains, the location of which is believed to be somewhere in Tibet. Hence, he further refers that: -

'The offspring of *Pedong-ane* spread centrifugally to cover all the mountainous regions from the left bank of the Subansiri River and to the Dibong River in the east. The Padams occupied the areas between the Dibong and the Siyang; The Minyong dominated the area between the right bank of Siyang and Siyom river. The Pasis migrated down further and settled in the lower region along the Siyang river. The progenies of Dobang occupied the areas west of the Siyom river up to the left bank of the Subansiri river. The Mishings, believed to be the fore-runners of all occupied an area upstream of the Siyang river first at *Riu-rega* after crossing the Doshing La pass, then at *Kiling liteng (killing-kange)* along the Sisap river later at Karko-Shimong area.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, following the identification of *Pedong-ane* as *Pedang-one*, literally, the raining of snow all around the place and year (a snow-clad mountain)—mythical place of origin, the allocation of dates of movements of people became an important exercise in accordance with the stories of the myth. In the process, ethnographers' and anthropologists' writings became crucial for the articulation of their identification. As such, N.Pegu wrote, "Scholars and

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<sup>74</sup> As quoted by Nomal Pegu, in his "The Mishings of the Brahmaputra Valley" from V. Elwin's *Myth of North East Frontier of India-1958*. p. 32.

<sup>75</sup> Pegu, Nomal, 2011, op cit., p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

anthropological studies have shown that all the branches of the mongoloid race had their origin in the high hills at the source of Huwang-Hu and Yangtse-Kiang—two great rivers of China. And their dispersion started some 3 thousand years BC. There is complete darkness about the time period and route taken by the last group—the Mising and the Adis. He mentions that Pliny and Ptolemy referred to some tribes called Asmeriuoi and Aboriman in the first century of the Christian era. Here he added a caveat by saying that "it was probably at the time when the Mising probably migrated from Tibet to the Siyang valley by crossing Doshing-la pass and lived around Ki-ling Kange and the Adis followed them after a couple of centuries by the same route."<sup>77</sup> Thus, according to Nomal Pegu, the legendary fame of *Ki-ling kangge* could be an actual place of *Ki-ling Liteng* along the Sisap River and the *Regi Regam* could be an actual place of Riu-rega. However, this geographical point of origin of the community persists due to the uncertainty of the identity of *Regi Regam* and *Kiling Kangge* as actual place names.

On the other hand, there are other ways in which these movements are narrated. The formalisation of the story led to the establishment of a link between the Mising and Adis to be called as forerunners and later migrants from Tibet. This formalisation narrative thus historicised the journey of the various Adi-Mising clan groups, which seem to have become important makers and markers of identity. In other words, migration formed a vivid part of the Mising imagination, and most importantly, it is in the movement of the different clans that constitute the Mising as ethnic group were also given meaning or incorporated. According to N.Pegu, clans such as Pegu, Doley, Kutum and Kuli of the Pagro group were the forerunners while migrating from Tibet and hence suggest there was no occasion for them to come into open conflict with any other groups during their journey along the Siyang

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-31.

Valley.<sup>78</sup> He further wrote “the existence of a place called ‘Pegu’ beyond ‘Tayek-Piugo’ in the Upper region of Abors hills and a lake known as ‘Pegu-Siyeng’ near Karko till today bear a palpable evidence that the Pegus had been there after migrating from Tibet’”.<sup>79</sup>

In short, the Mising speculation about their origin/identity seems to hold the following strands:-First, at one level, there is an assumption that there was a primordial identity as Mising. Thus, the migration is seen as a migration of the unified unit or as a self-conscious group of separate identity as ‘Mishing’( as in the case of N Pegu’s arguments.) Secondly, the articulation of Mising identity emerged from a single origin myth, which could otherwise have been disparate and distinct stories and narrations. Thirdly, to a large extent, Mising identity construction does not necessarily seem to be only self-referential/inward-looking; rather it’s some form of multitude of identity construction over the years where "other" stories (Tani group) are regularly/essentially invoked in the making of their identity.

Thus, the interpretation of the origins of the terms "Miri" and "Mising" is problematic, and none can be accepted unanimously. However, the formative 'mi' of both the terms '*Miri*' and '*Mising*' clearly speaks of the Proto-Tani *mi* ('person') which occurred in several other *Tani* communities and languages, as in the case of the **Mi**-lan, **Mi**-nyong, **Nyi**-shi , Bang-ni, etc. of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, the diverse views regarding the historic connection of these words with the community awaiting explanations are many. Although both the words '*Miri*' and '*Mising*' suggest an immediate origin within the community itself, the exact 'ages' of the existence of these words as self-referential appears to be difficult to determine.

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<sup>78</sup> It is from the Clan-Migration traditions of Adi-Mising that the writers draw their explanation for the community’s geographical point of origin. It is on the basis of stories of clan migrations of Tani people, which speak the same north-south direction that thus establishes/hypothesises Tibet as the early home land of the entire Tani people. See more T. Niyori, *The History and Culture of the Adis*, New Delhi, 1993.

<sup>79</sup> Pegu ,Nomal, 2011, op cit., p. 33.

<sup>80</sup>Post, Mark W. & Modi, Yongkee, 2011, *Language and the genetic Position of Milan* Anthropological Linguistic,Trustee Indiana University, p. 220.

Here we have discussed the relation between colonial account on the Mising and the Mising construction of Mising identity. In many cases the Mising nationalist writers 'validate their interpretation' on the basis of colonial ethnographic account. It appears that the colonial accounts indeed helped them to articulate a common Mising identity. However, reconstruction of the Misings' past by the members of the community was an act of the process of self-identification and can be interpreted as an act of representing the core of their contemporary identity. And it appears the perception of 'Mising as a distinct identity of ancient roots is the core their contemporary identity. The motivation for such approach is the aspiration to comprehend the much-needed establishment or reestablishment of Mising identity and history. On the other hand, the Mising's expose to the world of a wider geographical realm i.e. in the Brahmaputra valley provoked them the need to locate their origin within the larger Assamese socio-cultural context. In doing so they did not bother to consider other theoretical dimension of identity studies but firmly rely on oral understanding of their past.