

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The Misings, known as the riverine community, is the second largest plains tribe of Assam and comprises an integral part of Assamese society. But as in the case of the other communities living in the state, the Misings too have witnessed the impact of revivalism and identity politics. These historical processes, on the other hand, have marked the development of ethnic identity assertion which led to the culmination of the autonomy movement among the Misings. These developments have formed the basic elements for understanding the Mising social structure in particular and as an ethnic group in general.

Traditionally, the Misings traced their roots to eastern Himalayan tribal communities. The Mising shared a cultural-linguistic area with modern-day Arunachal Pradesh ethnic groups such as Adis, Nyishis, Apatanis, Tagins, and Galo. Recently, some linguists and social scientists have placed them under one category as the "Tani group of communities." It is because they have shared so many related cultural components. They are basically a clan (*Opin*) ridden patriarchal society, practising strong clan exogamy and subscribing to tribe endogamy. Once upon a time, they practice slash-and-burn cultivation and observe animist and shamanist ritual. Most significantly, they shared almost a "near-universal tradition of migration' from outside of their present day habitation area. In short, the memories of migration among the Tani are vivid, and often associated with their current identities and origins.

However, despite this long shared or common cultural antiquity, they now stand as distinct ethnic groups from each other in terms of culture, language, and ritual observances. The social structure of these ethnic groups has never seemed to be coherent throughout their history of existence. First of all, each of these ethnic (tribal) groups exhibit a remarkable

heterogeneity in terms of sub-tribes or social sub-groups, comprising numerous clan identities and lineages within the single ethnic group. Thus, it appears that the eastern Himalayan region can be identified as a "cultural area", depicting the "complexes of cultural traits" maintained by many communities.

The diversity of social identities, thus, may be the source of developing a new paradigm to study the "nature of the formation of culture" and the ethnic boundaries that exist amongst these societies within historical context. This situation, on the other hand, opens up a new direction for examining the cultural practices of these ethnic groups in general in accordance with the issues related to the process of identity formation in particular. A few studies of this kind have shown that to address the issues related to social identities require the use of "multiple theoretical lenses." It shows that, historically, the social composition of an ethnic group has been diverse instead of its early assumption as homogeneous. By looking at a micro level, it shows that each social sub-group or social component shows a deviant pattern of behaviour or cultural practices. It is also true that in the increasingly changing global scenario, these varied or diverse components of the ethnic group bear only minimal significance. But this distinctively patterned way of life has been the living reality for others in historical periods. Hence, it emphasises the importance of studying social history (associated with social groups, their placement in specific ecological niches, and their interrelationship in society) of ethnic groups in a historical context, while reconsidering issues of social identity.

Within this framework of 'ethnic phenomena', the history of Mising ethnicity can be understood. The Mising had a long and shared history of migration, which they followed, as is evident from their 'migration tradition' from Tibet to Arunachal Pradesh and finally to the Brahmaputra Valley around 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> CE, which appears to have made them experience many geographical boundaries/locations for a long period of time. It is in the context of this

changing socio-cultural landscape that the making of the Mising identity can be best understood. It is under such consideration of context that would reflect how the Misings construct their past, how they reflect their relationship with their environment, and hence it would reflect how they construct their 'ethno-genesis'. In other words, defining who constitutes the Mising is never an easy issue for scholars, and it becomes more complicated when it is studied within the framework of primordial and presentist notions of identity construction.

Thus, the parameters of ecological perspective, the system of cultural values and belief systems, and identity construction formed the basis for a better understanding of these phenomena among the Mising and their social structure. This study is an attempt to understand all these features while placing them all on the same plane as a unit of analysis of Mising society as a whole. The Mising cultural practices after their arrival in the Brahmaputra Valley have undergone a pattern 'kinds of connections with their local environment'. They have the specific way of showing their cultural lives through 'distinct ideas of ecological practices/wisdom', subsistence patterns, kinship, and through a communicative channel to their numerous *Ui*. Hence, it is important to investigate their current relevance and form, as well as the cultural response through which all of these characteristics and their shared ethnicity are manifested. Therefore, our central questions had included: how have ecological settings influenced cultural formation among the Mising? Why are there linguistic variations among the same group of people? How does an ethnic group like the Mising negotiate with their own cultural differences? What is the impact of identity politics on the realisation of collective identity of the Mising?

Within these conceptual underpinnings, *Ecology, Culture and Identity*, then, together constitute a composite structure. Apart from being a structure, these categories can be identified as processes. These categories are significant factors/elements while studying and

interpreting the specific Mising social structure and are also the foundation on which the dynamic of Mising ethnicity and the structure of attitudes are sustained with their basic tenets and identity.

The tribes in the northeast India presents a complex and fascinating history due to its specific geo-political and socio-cultural landscape/setting. This specific ecological set up has shaped the cultural components of the communities living in the region for a long period of time. Hence exploring the worldview or the tribal universe is pre-requisite to understand their cultural past and identity and this situation necessarily draws theoretical attention to understand the relationship between human and their environment in the region. Social scientists on the other have adopted different theoretical perspective to address these phenomena. As such for a long a time the concept of ecological determinism or the environmental determinism have been used for examining how cultures, cultural features origin, change, adapt and function. In the subsequent period in the quest for more precise understanding of the relationship between cultures and environment Julian Steward developed the methodology known as cultural ecology. These theoretical frameworks have profound impact on the study of the relationship between human and their environment. However, these approaches (environmental determinism) help little to explain in details about myths and ritual and other beliefs and practices of an ethnic group. Hence this relationship has been extended into social i.e. the social environment. Therefore, social scientists have now shifted their attention from the theory of ecological determinism to a new focus on questions pertaining to indigenous (local) ideas of human-nature relations. Within the ecological theory, they strongly advocated the ethnographic approach to human-nature relationship and to have the insights of how human may construct meaning about their identities and environments. It is within this theoretical framework that this work explores the interaction of the Misings with their environment.

The Mising belief system in various gradation and degrees are influenced by forms of Hinduism and other religious order conserving with animist or shamanistic practices. Mising worldview reveals the indigenous or the local system of beliefs and practices and most importantly it helps us to contextualise their myths and other ritual activities. What is significant here is that the Mising cosmology or worldview retains an overall paramount position in exploring their distinct identity or cultural past. Their worldview finds its expression in rituals song like *Mibu-abang*, socio-religious festival like the *Ali-aye-li:gang*, *Dobur* and *Po:rag*. One can depict Mising cosmology as having many entities. Their perception of past events goes back to the beginning of the world and the origin of the Mising themselves. Hence the creation myths are an essential component of the Mising's identity construction. It demonstrates the intrinsic entanglement of humans and non-human entities. As such, the perception of non-human entities is integral to Mising's ideas of cosmology or world view, as well as to their views of themselves and of others. The Clans among Mising also find their genealogy in those creation myths. This socio-mythical pattern in worldview often incorporates elements of the landscape and other non-human persons.

Hence it is evident that the Mising interact with their environment in a mutually constitutive way. This can be also inferred from the narrative of *Donyi* (Sun) and *Polo* (Moon). These non-human entities are revered as benevolent and hence invoked on every auspicious occasion by the Mising. This speaks about their interaction with visible objects through culture as mechanism to perceive and interpret it. The sociality with these entities is directly engaged in a relationship which protects the cultural continuity and stabilize the community by providing both religious and social code of conduct.

The sociologies and ontologies of non-human organism can be further noticed in the prevalence of predominant belief in numerous *Ui*. Their beliefs and perception of *Ui* gets manifested in ritual ideology since both the human and non-human entities are entangled in

everyday activities in the context of a fearsome wild landscape. The shamanic explanation of this constitutive relation with non-human entities i.e. *Ui* thus gives an insight into the understanding of different ontologies of human-environmental relations. There are the tales, *Mibu abang* and typical dance associated with shamanic ritual known as *Mibu dagnam*. The ritual constituents were rooted in their interaction with the environment and with their cosmos, or worldview.

The most apparent ritual dynamic can be observed in the celebration of socio-religious festivals like the Ali-aye-li:gang, Po:rag and Dobur. The myth and the ritual order in these festivals speak of a worldview which is grounded on the agricultural mode of production. Mising perception of the natural landscape as animated and inhabited by non-human entities are again manifested in these festivals that reflect the entangled relationship with the ancestors and other non-human entities for ensuring fertility of the soil, protection of the crops and finally to ensure a good harvest or fruitful production which in turn would enhance the prosperity of the community. The history of the Mising social life is embedded in these rituals and traditions and thus these ritualised activities are the ways to express, to reinforce and sustain the Mising ethnicity.

The Mising social structure is complicated as it represents both cultural heterogeneity and unity at the same time. The historical contingencies that led to this development find its explanation in the phenomena like migration-tradition and constant movement of the people and their social and physical adaptation to the Brahmaputra Valley. The questions/issues of this heterogeneous social component are addressed by analysing the nature of Mising migration into the Valley and the interaction with the local populace and through the study of their pre-migration and after-migration settlement pattern in specific ecological niches. The memories of migration and the component of oral tradition play an important role in ascertaining the community's geographical point of origin and current identities. However, it

is difficult to locate the pre-migration Mising as a coherent social unit or tightly bounded ethnic group. Instead, it speaks of the existence of plural identities and multiple processes of social interaction in the context of specific environmental setup.

However, the Mising motives for leaving their hilly abode were mixed. The fact that the Mising migrated into the Brahmaputra valley in several successive waves is based on their oral narratives, clan migrations traditions and other historical records like the census reports. The process of migration resulted in the formation of social sub-group identity. As each of these social sub-groups had a separate duration of interaction with existing social and physical environment, it gave rise to the development of a non-cohesive social structure. Thus, the aspect of differential cultural life including the linguistic variations among the social sub-group finds its explanations in the experience of a web of heterogeneous or rather varied dimension of historic interaction and negotiations with different socio-cultural entities.

Nevertheless, the cultural practice of the social sub-group shows a remarkable similarity in terms of 'ecological adaptation and resource utilization' that led to the expression of a common material culture and identity. The social sub-group invariably inhabited the bank of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries which can be identified as a hostile floodplain environment. Many of their cultural components speak of its adaptation strategies. The house building structure of the Mising shows a rich repertoire of knowledge for physical adaptation to flood. Thus the 'ecological wisdom' also gets manifested in other areas such as subsistence pattern and more importantly in agricultural practices. In short, the natural or physical environment played an important role in determining the socio-cultural life of the Mising.

Similarly, the advantageous ecological setting facilitated the settlements of different social sub-group in the riparian areas which finally led to the adoption of 'lowland valley

cultivation'. It may be pointed out that after abandoning the shifting cultivation; the Mising shows mastery over this system of agriculture. In this respect, the adoption of *amro*- a dry variety of rice or rabi or summer crop gave them a more stable socio-economic life. The availability of forestland or fallow land, and prairie land or grassland in the vicinity of Mising settlements helped in the easy utilization of these arable lands for the *amro* cultivation which does not need any sort of irrigation system.

Another remarkable ecological wisdom in agricultural practice among the Mising can be noticed in *Poirang* cultivation. It would be interesting to note here that *Poirang* cultivation is done on lands which hold sufficient water in order to keep the ground moist for the germination of the seeds. Hence their knowledge on the climatic conditions and type of soil which needs to be wet at beginning, and hold a favourable proportion of water/moisture helped them to master this *Poirang* cultivation. The mastery over this lowland valley cultivation made rice a staple food among the Mising and it became an essential component in their day-to-day life. Indeed, it is used in a number of occasions. Their traditional beverage known as *Nogin* and *Poro Apong* is also made from rice. *Apong* on the other hand is an essential ritual ingredient as without it, religious activities and other socio-religious festivals cannot be performed. Likewise the traditional therapy practice of the Mising and certain beliefs (as in the case of *Kaa:rag*) are also found to be associated with rice.

The Mising women also played an important role in their subsistence economy. Their ecological knowledge and expertise are central in the management of household activities and agricultural activities among the Mising. It can be aptly inferred on the basis of field experience that women perform roughly 60-70 per cent of family food production and agricultural activities among others. Mising women are the carrier of the ecological wisdom *per se*. They are the custodians of socio-religious festivals such as *Ali-aye-li:gang*, *po:rag*, *dodgang*, and *urom apin*, which are integral to their world view and lifestyle pattern. As



such, the inevitable food dishes like *Apong*, *purang apin*, and food items with different leafy vegetables for the celebration of these festivals and rituals are the result of their expertise and knowledge on the physical environment. Similarly, they are considered the preservers of Mising textile culture as they retained their loin loom that is used during time of their sojourns in the hills. The *gadu*, popularly known as ‘Mirijim’ in Assamese is one of the most illustrative examples of Mising’s women expertise in textile product. The modern sophisticated blankets may have virtually replaced this traditional hand-made *Gaddu* but the utility of *Gaddu* clearly testifies to the fact that the hostile cold and windy conditions of floodplain environment, especially in the winters, necessitated the weaving of this heavy blanket among the Misings. Hence, the Mising relied heavily on natural resources for a living and maintained a symbiotic relationship with surrounding nature, which is evident in women's work and environmental knowledge.

Overall the Mising had adapted to different ecology where they settled in. Hence their heterogeneous socio-cultural identity is embedded in nature. It is this context that the Mising as a self-conscious ethnic group needed to be addressed. The shared history of migration, similar ecological adaptation and experiences alone was not sufficient to the realisation of their collective identity as Mising. In other words, the fragmented and the non-cohesive social composition apparently barred the development of solidarity among the Mising. The sense of belonging was more obvious within the village based social sub-groups and visible within the clan.

Therefore, to understand the historically specific experiences and context to trace the development and gradual realisation of Mising collective identity, the thesis examines the intersections within the framework of social movement and identity politics. It would help in understanding how the Mising had negotiated with their cultural differences and other

inevitable social forces in due course of their habitation in the Valley and would also explain the impact of identity politics on the issues of Mising collective consciousness.

A great variety of forces favoured the growth of socio-cultural organisation and other ethno-nationalist organisation among the Mising. The genesis of Mising social movement was not simply a consequence of grievance and other historical marginalisation but rather can be traced to changes in the socio-political system as well as development of an educated middle class. As such political awareness among the Mising grew from a multitude of forces like the very historical positioning of the community itself and in the contemporary political climate. The Mising Ba:ne Kebang was the foremost organisation who had initiated and spread of collective action for realising their socio-political aspiration in the state of Assam. The wide spread acceptance of Mising Ba:ne Kebang by the Mising people helped it to play the role of parental organization for a remarkable span of time. It is evident that the MBK in its early phase (1924-1960's) as formal organization of the community succeeded in giving an organising capacity among the activists which the Mising as ethnic group did not have hitherto. In their effort to create a common ethnic identity of the fragmented Mising, they initiated many historic measures. They constantly attempted to negotiate with the issues of cultural heterogeneity/differences and this is quite evident from some of the initiatives of the MBK. One of the remarkable achievements of the MBK is the historic event of deciding upon a particular day for celebration of *Ali:aye:ligang* annually. This decision of the MBK arrived at after much negotiations in their 1956 session made *Ali:aye:ligang* the foremost ethnic festival of the Mising.

However, the gradual transformation of MBK from a primarily cultural and ethnic organisation or largely a non-political entity to a more politically articulate entity is worth exploring. This coincides with the overall political atmosphere in Assam. 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.

It is under such circumstances that MBK became more complex and diverse with conflicting ideological tendencies. The associations of MBK's leaders with contemporary political parties broke the sense of its organizational unity which led to the alienation of activist/workers within the organisation. This situation thus resulted in the development of multiple ethno-nationalists organizations which were more dynamic and goal-oriented. Among such organisations, the role of Mising student body i.e. Takam Mising Porin Kebang (TMPK) and its allied organization Mising Mimag Kebang (Mising Action committee) was very significant. The rise of the Mising Students' Union under the vernacular nomenclature of TMPK in 1985, Jengraimukh session of the organization succeeded in receiving unprecedented response at the grassroots level. The TMPK raised the demand for political autonomy which was raised way back in 1947 under the leadership of Padmeswar Doley, but was not actively pursued after independence.

Considering the growing popularity of autonomy movement among the masses, Hiteswar Saikia led Assam govt. finally decided to grant autonomy demanded by the TMPK-MMK combine. The government created an Autonomous Council under the Mising Autonomous Council Act, 1995. The activists on the other insisted that the proposal of non-territorial autonomy (without boundary) was an 'absurd proposition and was not acceptable'. Though the Act failed to fulfil the aspiration of the Mising, yet under the banner of MMK and with the autonomy demand the MMK leaders participated in the general election of 1996 by projecting candidates in the constituencies of Jonai, Dhemaji, Dhakuakhana, Majuli, Lakhimpur, and Bokakhat. Subsequently, the Mising Autonomous Council Act has been

amended for several times. The most notable being amendment was made in 2005 through The Mising Autonomous Council (Amendment), Act, 2005.

Likewise, another ethno-nationalists organisation known as *Mising Dirbi Kebang*, developed in the 1980's had been endeavouring to establish the *Gumrag* Dance as a powerful symbol of Mising's ethno-national identity. In doing so, they negotiated and worked out a compromise unifying the different expressive rhythms of the Gumrag dance. Hence the attempts to homogenise the different dance forms of Gumrag for fostering a common Mising identity also bore fruit in due course of time.

Finally, exploring the aspect of Mising construction of the Misings history is an important exercise into the understanding of their ethnicity and in the question of the practices of collective identity. Their engagement with literacy led to written speculation and discourse about their identity based on oral tradition. This development resulted in the formalization of oral tradition which had several implications that impinged on Mising's understanding of who they were and are. The works of authors like Nomal Pegu and Peter Pegu on the Mising are seminal in addressing the issues of origin and migration from the perspective of an 'insider view'. Attempts were made by these authors by going beyond geographical extent to define a primordial identity of the Mising. As such the migration was seen as migration of a coherent social unit or as self-conscious group of separate identity as Mising. The reconstruction of the Misings' past by the members of the community was an act of the process of self-identification or redefinition of their ethnic identity and thus they considered Mising as a distinct identity with ancient roots. However, the diversity or heterogeneity within the community and how the homogeneity was sought to be constructed in the ethno-national interest got less emphasis in the discourse. This thesis tried to address this aspect of the Mising by exploring their linkages with ecology, ethnicity and identity.

