

## **Ethnic Movements: A Study of the Autonomy Movement of the Misings in Assam**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Assam is a state with different ethnic groups which are known for their distinct identity and colourful culture. If we look after the Independence then we find that in the nation building process the Indian state framed policies which aims at homogenization and integration based on a dominant language. Such policies by the state opened up doors for ethnic communities to assert their identity. The Mising autonomy movement is one such example in which the Mising tribe demanded for the autonomy of their community. The implementation of the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 and various other reasons augmented the struggle for autonomy. After struggling for many years, the Mising Autonomous Council was established in 2005 fulfilling the demand and expectations of the Mising people. However, the movement did not end there and sporadic movements have been going on for various other reasons. This paper is an attempt to study the autonomy movement and the creation of the Mising Autonomous Council and the recent developments thereafter.

*Key Words: Ethnicity, Autonomy, Sixth Schedule, MAC, TMPK*

### **INTRODUCTION**

After the attainment of Independence in 1947 the politics of assam has been designed by different ethnic movements. If we look at the demography of the state then we find that the state is composed of various tribes each having distinct language, belief system, culture etc. The state is composed of various tribes like the Bodo, Mising, Sonowal Kachari, Thengal Kachari, Deori, Tiwa, Rabha, Karbi, Dimasa etc. It was because of the demand of certain tribes that Assam was re-organized several times after Independence. However even after the re-organization the state is not free from ethnic movements. The creation of Nagaland, Meghalaya are such glaring examples of ethnic movements. We can now see a series of demands by different ethnic communities for safeguarding their culture and identity. The formation of **Plains Tribal Community of Assam** (PTCA) in 1967 by the tribal people of Assam is an example for the demand of autonomy. It was a common tribal platform living in the Brahmaputra valley. Among the tribes were the Mising who started the demand of self-rule as a means to safeguard cultural and political representation and to control the local resources. Mising, Agom, Kebang, the apex literary organization of the Mising started the process of revivalism and self-assertion after the enactment and implementation of the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 alleging that it is a means of dominance by the majority groups. Thus this paper will not only focus upon the

autonomy movement of the Misings but will try to address the diverse issues and sentiments associated with the tribe as a major ethnic group of the state.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

The primary objective of this paper is to:

1. To examine and analyze the Mising Autonomy movement as a major ethnic movement in Assam.
2. Focus upon their concerns, sentiments and expectations from the government of Assam in post-independence period.
3. Thirdly, to analyze the role of Mising Autonomous groups and organizations in representing the cause of the Mising community and recent trends thereafter.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

The methodology applied for preparing this paper is based on qualitative explanation. There is the use of Secondary resources like, books, magazine, research papers, digital resources, archives etc. for the purpose of data and information collection.

### **ETHNIC MOVEMENTS IN ASSAM**

Separatist movement is not a new phenomenon in the Indian political scenario. Some want separate nation and some want a state within a state. The case of the Bodos is that they want separate statehood from Assam. With mass influx of immigrants from the neighbouring countries, the Bodos and other ethnic communities develop a sense of political, social and economic insecurity. With growing encroachment of tribal lands by non-tribals and the domination of the non-tribals in the polity and economy of the states, the ethnic communities developed a sense of separatist tendency. The continuous movement for separate state of Bodoland is an expression of such situations.

Ethnicity is a sense of identity or a feeling of belonging to a particular ethnic group. Ethnicity or ethnic identity involves in addition to subjective self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition either as a superior group or a group at least equal to other groups (Brass). Ethnic conflicts have greatly affected the cultural and political setup of the country. Assam in particular is a state which composes of people belonging to different ethnic groups. Very often the state witness ethnic conflict and strife which in turn hamper the harmony of the state. Demands like separate state, autonomy etc. very often disturb the peace of the state. Issues like identity politics, economic and political rights have become a part of political discourse in India. Identity politics have attained a great deal of attention in modern India. Now it has become a tool of political campaign to attain vested interests. Identity politics have created an atmosphere where demands for autonomy have increased based on their particular identity. Bodoland movement by the Bodo tribe in Assam is one such examples. Through these movements they tend to promote their cultural, religious, socio-economic, racial and ethnic identity. But off late it has assumed a new character in which political angle has been added to promote their demands.

Apart from many other demands the main demand or the movement by the ethnic communities is mainly on the ground of autonomy. Its idea is to remain outside the governance of the state of Assam. If we look at the example in the North East then we find that it is on the ground of identity that the

state of Assam has been divided many times. Creation of Meghalaya, Nagaland has been a glaring example in this regard. One of the beliefs among the tribes is that they think they themselves will be able to govern themselves better and in a more efficient manner. Further it is only in the separate state or autonomous region that their identity will be protected and preserved better according to the communities. Thus ethnic movement in Assam is a fruit of politicization of ethnic sentiments and consciousness.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MISINGS**

The Misings are the second largest tribal group in Assam. According to the census of 2011, the total population stood at 680424 in the state. Linguistically the Misings belong to the Tibeto-Burman family and belong to the Indo - Mongoloid race. They are found in the upper Assam region and mostly inhabit the districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Majuli, Golaghat, Sonitpur and Biswanath. The tribe mostly resides near the bank of the river Brahmaputra and Subansiri. They are agricultural and rear pig, hen, goat etc. to earn their livelihood. Originally the Misings were hill dwellers and inhabit the Northern hills of Upper Brahmaputra valley. They are believed to be migrated to the plains in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. They live in isolation from other communities and have their own traditional ways. The Misings are believed to be migrated from the hills of Arunachal to the plains following the downstream river and their tributaries. Still sizeable amount of mising population is found in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. If we look at the medieval history, mainly the writings of Vaishnavite and Ahom chronicles, they make mention about the Miris in relation to Vaishnavite saints and the Ahom kings. The Misings were called Chutiya Miris during the reign of Chutiya kingdom. Though, the term Mising is in greater use in the state but in the constitution of India it has been mentioned as 'Miri'.

## **MOVEMENT FOR SEPARATE AUTONOMY AND THE ROLE OF THE MISING ORGANIZATIONS**

Assam after its creation and bifurcation into several other states has seen various tribal movements for autonomy. The movements for autonomy by the tribal groups like the Bodo, Sonowal Kachari, Deori, Karbi, Mising etc. are such examples. If we look at the movement of the Bodos and the Misings in particular then we find that the nature of movement of the Bodos has been a militant one while the Misings resort to peaceful means to attain their ends. Post- colonial developments in India and Assam in particular had a great impact on various ethnic communities in Assam and Misings are not an exception to it. It was the implementation of the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 that led the Misings to analyze themselves about the position they enjoy in the state. Such developments led them to think about their different identity from the Assamese speaking people. They feared domination by the elite Assamese speaking population. The preference given to the Roman script than the Devanagari is an ample proof in this regard. The language act narrowed down the access to higher education and govt. job as well as political representation in the state.

Policies like forced assimilation, strict land policy, erroneous implementation of the tribal sub-plan and deprivation led to the demand for separate autonomy of the Misings. As early as in 1933 the Misings demanded for tribal land which incidentally coincided with the formation of the 'The Asom Miri Chatra Sanmilon'. It was later renamed as Northbank Mising Students Union. Further in 1951 the organization was renamed as Murkongselek Transferred Area Mising Students Union. In 1959 the

Southernbank Mising Student Union was formed. Collaborating with the NEFA, the Assam-NEFAMising Student Union was formed in 1971. These organizations together formed the All Assam Mising Student Union in 1978. Contribution of this organization during this period was the allocation of a particular date to celebrate the Ali-Aye-Ligang which gave a sense of recognition to the Mising identity. In collaboration with the Mising Agom Kebang (Mising Sahitya Sabha), the student organization tried to spread Mising language in a refined and scientific way. In spite of the Devanagari script they adopted the roman script for the Mising language. The demand for 6<sup>th</sup> schedule in the Constitution of India was raised by the Mising community at the conference of student union on 14 and 15 September 1982. A memorandum was handed over to the Chief Minister of Assam demanding the Mising language to be recognized as a medium of instruction in the primary schools in the Mising dominated regions. It was on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> February 1985 that the student organization was renamed as Takam Mising Porin Kebang (TMPK). The community designated 5<sup>th</sup> May as the Demand Day of the community. After prolonged demand, agitation and submission of memorandums, the govt. accepted Mising language to be taught in the primary schools in the Mising dominated areas. Mising language broadcast was also demanded to be broadcasted in the All India Radio (AIR) and an increase in the time slot of the programme.

The decade of 1990s brought numerous conflicts due to vested political interest among the Mising organizations. Towards the end of 1994, the Assam Govt. invited and presented a modified proposal for the autonomy of the Mising community. The TMPK was however dissatisfied with the clauses put forth by the govt. First, inclusion of villages having 50% and above Mising population into the council. The TMPK felt that these could be treated as Core Areas of the Mising Autonomous Council and the villages outside as satellite areas. Secondly, instead of a boundaryless council, TMPK proposed a territorial council which would include all areas. Thirdly, the MAC to be included in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India and to keep it outside the purview of the Panchayat Raj System like the system prevalent in the BTAD regions.

The demands were however not met, instead the then Chief Minister of Assam, Hiteswar Saikia created a new organization called as the 'Mising Autonomy Demand Committee' (MADC) in 1995. Instead thousands of Mising people came out to protest against the new organization. The leaders urged the Mising people to boycott the Annual Conference of the Mising Bane Kebang, the apex organization of the Misings. A 60 hours Assam bandh was also declared on 21 April as a protest against it. Thousands of people marched towards Bilmukh to protest against the announcement of the Mising autonomy by the Chief Minister where the meeting was held. Many activists were wounded in the protest and two of them got killed. The martyrs were Boga Medok and Naresh Taid. Anjana Pegu, a young lady got wounded in the protest and succumbed to it later. So, these three personalities were considered to be the martyrs of the Mising autonomy movement.

Since the govt. was unable to form the council due to the protest of the student organization, the govt. took strict measures and began to torture the members of the TMPK. Utilizing the opportunity of confusion and chaos the MADC and MISING BANE KEBANG signed an MoU with the govt. and formed the MAC in 1995. An ad-hoc committee was formed with Lakshminath Panging as its chairman. This committee continued even after the congress were voted out of power in 1996. Once again the congress came to power in 2001. In 2002, meetings were held between the Plains Tribal Welfare Department of Assam and the Takam Mising Porin Kebang, Mising Mimang Kebang, Mising Bane

Kebang and Mising Autonomous Council who agreed to identify core areas and satellite areas as proposed by the AGP govt.

After the establishment of the Mising Autonomous Council in 1995, the Misings have been fighting in a democratic and non-violent means for the attainment of 6<sup>th</sup> schedule. The parent student organization, the Takam Mising Porin Kebang (TMPK) leads the struggle in this respect. It should be kept in mind that though the TMPK leads the struggle for the misings, but they also take active parts in the democratic struggle for other reasons too. For instance, the movement against the construction of big dams in the lower Subansiri river. Since with time various problems are coming up related to the mising community like the issues of displacement, soil erosion etc., the TMPK is taking active part in mitigating such problems as well as raising the issues to the notice of the govt. So, along with autonomy and identity the movement is taking various other forms for the betterment of the community.

### **RECENT TRENDS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE AUTONOMY MOVEMENT**

If we look at the latest trends in the autonomy movements of the misings then we find that the issue of identity has come to the forefront. The community is now pushing itself aggressively but in a non-violent way for the protection of their identity. The Misings have their own language, religion, culture etc. which is different from other communities. So, they want to maintain this uniqueness from the encroachment of other communities. The Misings are now experiencing a strong wave of revivalism to the age old customs and traditions. Understanding the demands of modern democracy they are now engaged in active political participation. The formation of the Gana Shakti Party is an example to assert their political space in the state. However, we also find that there are two sections of people who want to adopt modern approach to the community and the other who want to revive the old age traditions which are exclusive to the Misings. Since the movement is now led by modern educated young leaders they understand the necessity of both the approaches and adopted the middle path which will be most beneficial for the community.

However, there is an allegation that after the creation of the MAC, the other communities residing in the area feel threatened. They also say that the Misings are antagonistic to the interests of other communities in the area. Hence, there occur turmoil and tension very often in the regions dominated by the misings. So, such issues should be taken into account by the MAC and all the stakeholders of the community for the peaceful co-existence of all the communities present in the area because it is only in peaceful co-existence that will bring about further development in the region.

### **CONCLUSION**

Ethnicity is a widely debated and prevalent topic today all around the world. We can find its presence at the international, national and local level. The North Eastern region and Assam in particular is not an exception to it. Ethnic identity assertion of the region is there even prior to the Independence. Many tribes in the state are pushing for separate state, like the Bodos and some are pushing for autonomous region, like the Misings, Sonowal kacharis etc. The main demand for such communities is to safeguard and protect their separate identity. If we look at the earlier period then we find that the movement began as a non-political issue concerning issues like language, culture etc. However, with the advent of time and with the rise economic problems and the issue of representation it took political turn. Thus began the demand for greater share in the political space of the state. The separation of Nagaland,

Meghalaya are such examples of ethnic movements in which they demanded right to dignity and the preservation of their language and culture from the dominant majority. The Mising autonomy movement to be included in the 6<sup>th</sup> schedule is the main demand of the community at present. However various other reasons are also being raised by the community. If we look at such movements then we find that it is the students who always play the lead role. For instance, the creation of BTR, their student organization, ABSU took the lead role. Same is the case with the Mising community, where its apex student organization, the TMPK plays the main role in organizing protests and demand rallies. The formation of the Gana Shakti Party and reclaiming space in the political sphere by the community has been a step to empower the community.

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