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Ethnic Identity Movement Of The Misings Of Assam

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Abstract

Ethnic identity is in recent times one of the most important discussed issues amongst scholars, policy makers, and academicians. 'Ethnicity' is now a widely prevalent word. It is found operating at international, national, regional and local levels. The North Eastern region of India is no exception. Being the home of several, culturally, linguistically and racially distinguished groups having their own socio-political aspirations, it is perhaps more intense and more complex than any other parts of the country or the world. The rise of an elite group among many of them has further added to complexity of the situation.

In the post-independence period with a goal to maintain distinct identity most of ethnic groups of this region started ethnic movement demanding either autonomous or separate state and their demands were conceded creating new states as well as granting autonomy. The Misings, a major section of tribal population of North-East India lives in Assam with their distinctive identity also have been continuing their movement for ethnic identity for several decades.

Key Word: Ethnicity, Identity, North-East, Movement, Tribal, Misings, Assam

Introduction

The post Second World War witnessed an emergence of some newly independent nations. All these nations began to involve in the process of nation building and at the same time strengthening the idea of a national identity. These nations tried to develop a new unified identity of "nationalism". According to Dipankar Gupta a sociologist terms it "exclusivist identity in the form of supra-local community called nation state" (Gupta, 2000). The idea of belonging to a nation predominantly guided the actions of the diverse groups and communities in the formation of this national identity. Such an idea was undermining the ethnic and linguistic variation within a state. For example, ethnic identity implies a sense of belongingness of a particular group or community which is derived from same descent. But the process of developing of national identity undermined the ethnic and linguistic variation which had given rise to ethno-political movements. In the later colonial times and in the beginning of post-independence period the nationalist leaders of Indian state made effort to integrate and bring the ethnic groups and tribals into the national sphere by restoring their past heritage. But their efforts, somehow undermined the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual identities of these groups which gave rise ethno-political movement in later period. In the recent times, these ethnic groups started to articulate their distinct identity by themselves because of threat posed by dominant group on their distinctiveness.

Scholars have defined 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group' from different angles. According Cohen "an Ethnic group is an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other groups within the same society in that they share".

Ethnic identity is in recent times one of the most important discussed issues amongst scholars, policy makers, and academicians. The term ethnicity is derived from the Greek word 'ethnos' which means 'heathen' or 'pagan' (Eriksen, 2010). Aristotle used the term ethnos, as distinct from citizen in order to denote natural inferiority of the slaves (Roy, 1990). According to Max Weber, ethnic group is a human collectivity based on an assumption of common origin, real or imagined. In the United States of America, 'ethnics' as a polite term was used throughout the Second World War to mean the Jews, Italians, Irish and other groups of people 'inferior' to the dominant groups. Paul R Brass has defined ethnicity as, "any group of people dissimilar from other people in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for complete division of labor and of reproduction forms an ethnic category". By objective cultural markers, Brass refers the language, distinctive dress, practice, beliefs customs, religion, and race etc. The all above definitions talk about the cultural basis of ethnicity and differentiates ethnic groups from other social groups based on class, gender and age groups. J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith refers to six important features of an ethnic group. These are: a common proper name to identify and express the "essence" of the community, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland which will create attachment to the ancestral land, and a sense of solidarity among the people of the community (Hutchinson & Smith, 2009). The above-mentioned features are very much essential for an ethnic group. E. Hunter and Phillip Whitten used the term ethnicity to mean "any group of people within larger cultural unit who identifies themselves as a distinct entity, separate from the rest of that culture". Today, most of the social scientists use the term to refer to "a social group which consciously shares some aspects of a common culture and is defined primarily by descent". (Pakem, 1990). Thus, ethnicity becomes a sense of ethnic identity and sense of belongingness to a particular group or community. It shows the sentiments and emotions of a group which tries to preserve their distinct identity.

In the modern times the identity crisis is inherent in a society undergoing rapid changes as in North-East India particularly among the tribals. The politics of North-East has been increasingly besieged by the movements of various ethnic groups for maintaining distinct ethnic identity. The demographic composition of this region is diverse with various ethnic groups, having different languages, cultures and customs. In the colonial rule these ethnic groups were politically independent under their tribal chiefs and they had independent administrative territories. These tribal territories were not ruled by any kings and as so tribalism was the prime feature of their political economy. The distinct cultures of these ethnic groups came under the threat of alien culture when colonial rulers annexed their territories in 1826 onwards. After independence the reorganization of Assam further affected these ethnic communities which resulted a number of movements for autonomy. The development of communication brought these communities closer to Christianity, Hinduism, and Vaishnavism, and interaction with the alien culture ushered in rapid transformation of these societies. Political domination by the alien people was time to time protested by the tribals. The seeds of feudalism and division of population into classes brought impact on their social structure and led to a number of separatist movements. The British even could not take them under their control completely during colonial rule and tension prevailed in the region which continued after independence (Bhadra. R. K). Thus, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram and Tripura have witnessed the rise of a variety of ethnic movements at different stages of its political evolution even after independence.

In the post-independence period with a goal to maintain distinct identity most of ethnic groups of this region started ethnic movement demanding either autonomous or separate state and their demands were conceded creating new states as well as granting autonomy. However, the demands for either separate or autonomous state on the basis of ethnic identity have not ended yet. However, in recent years the situation is seen fast changing and today we find inter-ethnic clashes in many areas. Thus, the ethnic movement continues to be a major factor in molding the nature of politics of the North East. This paper however deals with the ethnic identity movement of the Misings of Assam.

About The Misings

The Misings a major section of tribal population of North-East India lives in Assam with their distinctive identity. Constitutionally they are recognized as “Miri”. Ethnically as well as linguistically, they belong to Tibeto-Burman group of Mongoloid stock. It is very difficult to explore the origin of the Misings as there is no written records to know about their past. Archaeological remains are absent which are considered as the most important source to know about a tribe’s past. But oral literature, particularly the ‘Mibu Abangs’ (Priestly hymns of the Misings) speak about the origin and past of the Misings.

Some literally works of medieval period and Ahom chronicles (Buranjis) have mentioned about this ethnic tribes. Originally the Misings used to live in the in the range of Miri hills in between the present Siang and Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh before their coming down to the plains. According to John. M. Cosh in his book ‘Topography of Assam’ recorded in 1837, the Misings migrated to the plains in 18th century and began to settle down in the strip of alluvial land along the bank of river Brahmaputra.

Their folk literature suggests that the Mising had migrated to the plains and began to settle mainly in both the banks of the Brahmaputra River about many hundred years ago. According to 2011 Census of India their population was estimated at 6,87,863 in persons, and they are found mostly in the district of Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Tinsukia and Darang with the highest concentration of their population in undivided Lakhimpur district. Their population had greatly increased by addition of many runaway families from the hills and assimilation of people.

The Misings have their own traditions, customs, religious beliefs practices and languages. The language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of Indo-Chinese group which is akin to the Adi language. The tribe that’s the Mising has a rich folk literature which reflects their sentiments and feelings, social norms and values, historical events associated with their migration from the hills to the plains as well as social, political events experienced in their life.

A Brief Analysis of Identity Movement of the Misings

During the colonial regime, the British did not find any resistance from the Mising tribe in the process of political integration of the region. The British never interfered in the internal affairs of the tribes. The tribes were left to manage the affairs in the matter of internal governance. But natural process of evolution of the tribes particularly the Misings were affected by the changing political and economic conditions under the British regime. They could not occupy any space in the economic sector to accommodate themselves as they had no industrial background. The emerging Mising elites looked for administrative works rather than to involve in industrial and commercial activities.

Though the plains of Assam were occupied by the British as per the treaty of Yandaboo, 1826, the major parts of Mising territory, particularly the Murkongselek and Sadiya area remained free from British occupation till 1911. But only after that a British expedition conquered this area with adjoining Adi territory.

The British for their colonial interest, grouped and regrouped, bifurcated and joined the tribals and their territories and thus played with the geography and future of the tribals and when the colonial rulers left, they left everything in a mess, which remains to be unsolved till today.

As per suggestions of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reports,1918, section 52-A was inserted in the Government of India Act, 1935 several territories of Assam province were declared as as backward tracts such as The Garo hills district, Khasi and Jaintia hills district, Mikir Hills (Nagaon and Sibsagar districts), The Nort Cacher Hills, The Naga Hills district, Lushai district, The Sadiya frontier tract, The Balipara frontier tract and Lakhimpur frontier tract. The traditional Mising territories were divided and placed in Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur Backward tracts while the rest were kept under provisional administration of British Assam. In 1936, Backward Tracts were categorized as “Excluded and Partially Excluded areas as per recommendation of India statutory Commission, 1930(popularly known as Simon Commission) as follows:

A. Excluded Areas: i) North- East Frontier (Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur Tracts) ii) The Naga Hills Districts, iii). The Lushai Hills Districts, iv) The North Cachher Hills sub-division of Cachher District.

B. Partially Excluded Areas: i) The Garo Hills Districts, ii) The Mikir Hills in Nagaon and Sibsagar Districts, iii) The British portion of Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts(other than Shillong Municipality and the Cantonment).

Thus, a large area of the Mising territories were grouped with NEFA and separated from the rest.

After independence, a committee (Bordoloi Committee) was formed in order to determine the future of these excluded and partially excluded areas. The Bordoloi Committee recommendations were incorporated into Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and ensured the creation of Autonomous District Councils for

1. The United Khasi and Jaintia Hills,
2. The Garo Hills,
3. The Lushai Hills,
4. The Naga Hills,
5. The North Cachher Hills,
6. The Mikir Hills,
7. The North East Frontier Tract including Balipara Frontier Tract, Abor Hills and Mishimi Hills Districts, and
8. The Naga Tribal Areas.

The Committee recommended incorporation of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India providing Autonomy to the Excluded and Partially Excluded areas by creating Autonomous Districts Councils. But surprisingly the committee did not recommend for autonomy to the Misings and other plains areas mostly inhabited by other tribals.

The “Assam Land Revenue Regulation 1886” was amended in 1947 (The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act (1947) to which the chapter (x), comprising sections from 160 to 171 were added there in the various measures for the protection and preservation of tribal lands. Accordingly, 333 nos. of Tribal Belts and Blocks comprising 122,02,702,00 bighas of land were created in the plain’s districts of Assam. The leaders of the Misings community complained that the said Belt and Blocks are only in papers. The Govt. of Assam has never been sincere in protecting them. Thus, the question of protecting tribal lands within Tribal Belts and Blocks originally covering 1,09,73,673 bighas seems to be nobody’s business. They are now being driven out from the Tribal Belts and Blocks turning them landless. Now, they are roaming from forest to forest and begging from the revenue minister for a plot of land. Perhaps this situation has led to serious stagnation in the development activities of the Mising people.

It is to mention that these tribes subsist primarily on agricultural economy based on production of rice, mustard seeds, pulses and vegetables. Rice is their staple food. The rice is produced mainly for domestic consumption where mustard seeds and pulses are produced for commercial purposes. However, the main source of income for an average Mising family is livestock namely fowls, pigs, goats etc. With the growing process of population employment in various fields other than agriculture is negligible during post-independence period. Moreover, they face the problems like land, employment, flood, education etc, which still remains unsolved. The Mising hoped that the government will look into all problems with sincere and full sympathy for immediate fulfillment of their problems. But the Government and men in power in all times have been neglecting the demands of the Mising people which may create repercussion problems and grievances relating to land, employment, flood, erosion, education, border and property which badly needed prompt initiatives and action of the state government for immediate solution.

Belts and Blocks in the areas of the Mising tribe were not protected and no administrative measures were taken to protect these belts and blocks for which encroachment took place in the tribal belts and blocks. Even permanent land settlement in the tribal areas has not yet done. As a result, most of the Misings do not have land patta (Land ownership) though they have possessed a particular plot of land since time immemorial. As such, they cannot receive any loan and any other financial assistance from the government because they have nothing to mortgage in exchange. The recurring visit of the devastating flood and perennial erosion is one of the major problems of Assam. As the Mising people live beside the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries, they are the worst sufferers of the floods and erosions. As a result, Thousands of people lose their lands and property annually and have to move from one place to another in search of land for shelter. Due to recurring on slough of floods and erosions and the resultant landlessness, the Argo-based economy of the Mising people is in a shambles. On the other hand, when drought condition prevails, crops fail for want of irrigation. There is no modern irrigation system of any kinds in areas inhabited by the Misings. Because of unscientific method adopted by the government, the river beds have been getting shallower and shallower every year resulting in greater and greater devastation by floods. The embankments that are constructed are often weak and so there are frequent breaches of such embankments in the Mising localities causing untold miseries to the Mising people. It is because of such wrong and halfhearted measures that the devastation caused by floods is increasing from year to year. But no governmental initiatives have so far been taken in this regard. So, the Mising elite began to feel that all round development of their respective community is not possible without adequate share of political power. Therefore, they have come to realize that in order to politically powerful they must consolidate and organize their communities on the basis of their socio-cultural identity. In view of this the emerging educated elite of the Misings rightly or wrongly became conscious of the fact that their respective communities were deprived and discriminated. It appeared to them that during British rule the caste Hindu Assamese elite became dominant in all spheres of life. Therefore, they had developed a sense of alienation from the main stream of the Assamese society. The political and cultural domination of a particular group would naturally annoy and alienate the weaker groups and lead to suspicion, hatred and disintegration. The progress of the Assamese society can be accomplished when the constituent groups are recognized as distinct groups taking into cognizance the legitimate hopes and aspirations of the weaker ethnic groups. This would help the weaker groups to develop a sense of belonging to a larger whole. In fact, all groups should have their rightful place in the mainstream to achieve unity of a composite society. Another important issue of identity of the Misings was around language and script. After the Bodo and the Karbi achieved recognition of their languages at primary school level, the Misings too started movement for recognition of the language. This led to the formation of Mising Literary Association (Mising Agom Kebang) in 1972. The main demands were the introduction of Mising language in schools in the Mising dominated areas and recognition of Roman scrip for it in place of Assamese. This language movement of the Misings marked by aggressive mass movements on questions relating exclusively to Mising identity for the first time in history. In 1987, eventually the Mising language also was recognized and introduced as a subject in the primary schools of Mising dominated areas of Assam. But movement is still in progress for granting Mising language as medium of instruction in school level.

Thus, like other ethnic groups the Misings remained backward educationally, socially, economically and even politically. Hence, they wanted to develop the community culturally, economically, politically and socially for maintaining their own distinct identity. In fact, they do not like to be submerged by the dominant Assamese caste Hindu culture. It needs to be mentioned that the culture does not necessarily imply the cultures of the Assamese caste Hindu alone. Different ethnic groups of Assam also contributed their respective shares in the formation of a composite Assamese culture. The Misings of Assam also made great deal of contribution towards this process.

So, the Misings began to feel that they are markedly different from the rest of the Assamese society. Their attitude towards the dominant section of the Assamese is likely to be governed by mutual suspicion and mistrust. They felt the need of a common platform among them to fight for the upliftment of tribal communities in Assam. In the pre-independence period, the Mising elite, felt that various socio-economic policies introduced by the Ahoms and the colonial rulers were primarily responsible for the backwardness of the Mising community, who are one of the aboriginal groups of Assam. Hence in 1924 'Mising Bane Kebang' (Mising People Association), in 1933 'Asom Miri Chatra Sonmilon came into existence. Apart from these

independent organizations of the Misings they also contributed their respective shares in the formation of the common platform of all the tribal communities of Assam such as, 'Assam Tribal league' (1933) and 'All Assam Tribes and Races Federation' (1944) to fulfill their common urges. After independence negligence and non-implementation of welfare schemes by the Government of Assam further worsened the situation. The discrimination of the Mising finally led its emerging elite to perceive that their community would never prosper and develop unless they are organized and articulate on a sound footing. They increasingly realized that the development and prosperity of the community depends on the maintenance of distinct identity of the community within a large Assamese society. For this reason, they started mobilizing their community on the basis of their distinct lingo-cultural and social traits capable of bargaining with the ruling elite to gain for the community. Thus, after independence they continued to mobilize their community and in the subsequent period, they formed a number of organizations to uphold various demands of the community before the government of the day. Gradually the Mising elite realized that for all round development of the community it is important to become politically powerful. In view of this, since the thirties of the present century, the Mising organizations played a significant role in politics too. By and large, the organization among the Misings constituted from time to time have been playing vital role in the assertion of the ethnic identity. Since the Sixties of the last century, the Mising elite have been mobilizing their community with a new vigor to achieve what they called "legitimate share" in the administration of the state. This had culminated in the formation of Mising Agom Kebang (Mising Sahitya Saba) in 1972, Takam Mising Porin Kebang (All Mising Students Union) in 1971 Takam Mising Mime Kebang (Mising Women organization) in 1986, Mising Mimag Kebang (Mising Sangram Parishad) in 1993 etc. and they started their identity movement and have been continuing till present times.

Conclusion

It may therefore be concluded that the various ethnic groups of Assam including the Misings express dual loyalties i.e. loyalty towards their own respective communities as well as the nation as a whole. They want to fulfill their aspirations within the parameter of the constitution of the country. What they really desire is that the relevant provisions of the constitution are to be implemented properly so as to enable them to enjoy equal rights and status in the society and if necessary new provisions need to be created in order to safeguard their legitimate interests. It also appears that the Misings as an ethnic group of Assam has been bargaining for a legitimate share of political power, so that they can solve their various problems. Therefore, the emerging ethnic elite of the Misings consciously or unconsciously involve in the process of autonomy movement. It may therefore, be observed that the Mising autonomy movement is not only the result of their traditional traits but it acts as a continuous defense mechanism against the domination by the relatively advanced section of the Assamese society. In view of all these, it may be observed that autonomy movement and national loyalty are not incompatible but conceivable forces in the political process of our country. However, a harmonious balance between these dual loyalties needs to be maintained for efficient function of the political system.

Considering these points of view the demands made by the Misings does not appear to be a treat to the integration of the Assamese society. It also therefore be mentioned that maintenance of separate Mising autonomy would in no case alienates the Misings from the mainstream of the Assamese society. In building of a strong Assamese society, preservation and maintaining of distinct identity among the ethnic groups will strengthen the process of integration of the Assamese society. It would not only cement the ethnic groups but also contribute greatly to build a mosaic of the greater Assamese society.

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