

Tracing the Origins of the Mising Community: Myth, Legend, and Historical Interpretation

Dr. Jyoti Ranjan Mili
Assistant Professor
Department of Assamese, Nazira College, Assam
Email-jyotiranjanmili7@gmail.com

Abstract:

The Mising community is the second largest tribal population group in Assam. They mainly reside along the banks of the Brahmaputra River as well as its tributaries such as the Disang, Subansiri, Dikhow and Jiyadhol. The Mising people are predominantly settled in Upper Assam. Assam has historically been a meeting place of various ethnic groups at different periods of time. In official and historical records, they are referred to as 'Miri'.

There are several legends associated with the migration of the Misings (Miri). However, history does not provide any definitive or authentic evidence regarding these accounts so far. Therefore, there are differing opinions regarding when and from where the Misings migrated to Assam. This research paper attempts to examine the migration history of the Mising community with special reference to myths and legends, and also explores the conceptual understanding of the terms 'Mising' and 'Miri'.

Keywords: Mising, Migration, Myth, Legend, Miri.

1.0 Introduction:

The Misings are one of the major ethnic groups living in Assam. They were formerly known as "Miri." In historical records, religious texts, government documents, and other ethnographic writings, they are referred to as "Miri." The Misings are also found in several districts of Arunachal Pradesh. At present, the Mising people mainly inhabit the districts of Sivasagar, Charaideo, Jorhat, Majuli, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, and Tinsukia. The Misings are the second-largest ethnic group in Assam in terms of population. According to the 2011 Census, the Mising population in Assam is 6,80,424.

2.0 Migration History:

Assam is a meeting place of various ethnic groups. People from different ethnic communities migrated to Assam from different regions at different points in history. The Misings, who are now the second-largest ethnic group in Assam, also migrated to the region before the fifteenth century. The mention of the term "Miri" in the literature of the Shankari period provides evidence of their

early presence. However, historical records remain silent regarding their precise origins and migration routes.

There are several legends related to the migration of the Misings, but history does not provide any authentic or conclusive evidence regarding these accounts. Therefore, different opinions exist regarding when and from which region the Misings migrated to Assam. It is important to note that legends or myths cannot be considered history in a strict sense. Their authenticity often remains uncertain, as they are not written historical records but are transmitted orally through folk traditions. During this process, they undergo gradual transformation from their original form. However, they still reflect the values, customs, beliefs, and social realities of contemporary society. Therefore, although myths and legends cannot be treated as verified historical evidence, their significance in reconstructing the cultural and social history of an ethnic group cannot be ignored.

According to a legend among the Mising people, there were no animals on earth at the beginning of creation. It is believed that the entire world was in a state called "*Tapa Puhmang*" (a foggy or formless condition). From this state, the Creator *Che:di* (father) originated, and *Me:lo* (mother) was created by the will of the Creator *Che:di*. Later, the union of *Che:di* and *Me:lo* gave birth to *Don:yi* (the Sun) and *Po:lo* (the Moon). The *Do:nyi-Po:lo* further created all matter and living beings on earth. Therefore, the Misings consider *Do:nyi-Po:lo* as the supreme cosmic principle of nature and the source of all living existence.

It is believed that *Do:nyi-Po:lo* created all living beings and later formed *Diling*, *Litung*, *Tuhyi*, and *Yipik*. Therefore, these mythological elements hold significant importance in the cultural development of the Mising people. The Misings believe that *Dosing*, the son of *Podong Ane*, is their ancestral figure. The descendants of *Podong Ane*—*Dilung*, *Lutung*, *Tuyi*, *Yipik*, etc.—and the descendants of *Dosing*, *Domi*, and *Dobang* before *Podong Ane* all lived in the *Tapa Puhmang* mountainous region.

However, as their population increased, they gradually migrated to different places due to a lack of space for settlement in the *Tapa Puhmang* region. According to legend, *Dosing*, the son of *Podong Ane*, migrated southwest from the *Tapa Puhmang* mountainous region with his family. They settled for a time on the banks of the *Yilum-Chian River*. As a remembrance of this period, the Misings consider *Tad:go* and *Dog:ne* (two precious items used in various Mising rituals), found in the *Yilum-Chian River*, as highly valuable. The *Dog:ne* is still an essential element in many of their rituals. After some time, they left the place and settled in another mountainous region called *Kileng Liteng* [Pegu, Nomal: *Misingsakalar Itibritta and Sanskriti*, pp. 38–41]. After living there for many years, they migrated to a place called *Rigrihrigam*. It is believed that they migrated from one place to another in search of fertile land due to population growth and food scarcity. For these reasons, they eventually moved down to the plains.

According to another legend among the Misings, there was a Mising village on the banks of the *Chiang River* in ancient times. The name of the

village headman was Kepchi. He was strong and short in stature and was known in the area for his peculiar nature. In the same region, there was a river called Chiang, across which a cane bridge was built. One day, Kepchi went to the village of Padam on the other side of the river in search of *aro-arem* (Coughing plate). When he arrived, he met Gam Matbang of that village, who was known for his humorous nature.

After Kepchi introduced himself, Matbang jokingly remarked that he resembled a “big toe,” which deeply embarrassed Kepchi, although he did not respond at that moment. Matbang then hosted Kepchi by slaughtering a mithun and kept him in his house for the night. The next morning, Kepchi revealed the purpose of his visit. Although Matbang possessed many valuable bowls that Kepchi desired, he refused to give them to him. Feeling humiliated and disappointed, Kepchi returned home.

Later, Matbang attempted to send him off with some meat and fish. Kepchi and Matbang travelled together up to two villages ahead, while the men carrying the goods followed behind them. Upon reaching the riverbank, Kepchi told Matbang that he would wait there and drink *apong* (traditional rice beer) until the others arrived. After they became intoxicated, Kepchi suddenly remembered the insult he had received and, in a moment of rage, drew his sword and stabbed Matbang in the neck. He fell to the ground, covered in blood. Before his death, Matbang warned, “He is a traitor. The consequences will be terrible.”

In fear, Kepchi dragged the body and threw it into the river. He then crossed the cane bridge, cut it down, and destroyed it so that the pursuing group could not follow him. When the men carrying the goods arrived, they saw blood everywhere but could not find Matbang. News of Matbang’s murder spread throughout the Padam area. The Padams hastily held a *kebang* (traditional council) and decided to take revenge. They also consulted Gutung Gam, the Mising chief of the Chiang Valley.

The *kebang* decided to cut trees and construct boats to cross the river. The Padams prepared weapons and boats and, after performing rituals, set out to attack Kepchi’s village. The Mili and Kardong groups of the Misings guided the Padams across the river. After crossing, the Padams attacked Kepchi’s village and killed many people in retaliation for Matbang’s murder.

This legend indicates that the Misings were settled in the Chiang Valley. However, the extent to which this legend is historically accurate needs careful consideration. The origins of the Mising people are also reflected in various folk traditions such as *Pegu-Chiang*, *Bahtum and Bahli*, *Mikapalat*, *Ranu and Kaku*, and *Doyit Puhmi*, which are prevalent in Mising society.

According to the *Pegu-Chiang* narrative, several tribes of the Misings lived for a long time on the shores of Lake Pegu Chiang in the Kark region. It is believed that they migrated to the plains after experiencing consecutive years of poor agricultural output in this mountainous region. The *Bahtum and Bahli* folklore also mentions that the Misings settled in the Karko-Chimong mountainous region.

Similarly, the legend of *Mikapalat* describes how they killed members of their own community under the influence of *apong* (traditional rice beer) and later fled to the plains, where they eventually gained the patronage of the Ahom kings. The *Ranu and Kaku* legend mentions that the Misings migrated in large groups from the Kiling Litung region to the plains in search of fertile land. The *Donyit Puhmi* legend states that they descended from the hills and settled in the village of Dayitpuhmi, north of Sadiya.

All these legends prevalent among the Misings indicate that their earlier settlements were in the mountainous regions. However, there is no clear reference to when they first settled in these hills. It is generally believed that they migrated due to a shortage of suitable habitation and food scarcity caused by population growth. Another significant factor behind their migration to the plains was inter-clan conflict, as suggested by the story of Kepchi and Matbang. These legends clearly indicate that the Misings lived in the mountainous regions before coming to Assam; however, they do not provide any indication of where they resided before settling in those hills. It is evident that they must have lived elsewhere prior to their settlement in the hilly regions of present-day Arunachal Pradesh. The legends of their society remain silent about their earliest place of origin, but historical interpretations suggest that their original homeland may have been in China.

Dr. Nomal Pegu strongly supports the view that the Misings migrated from China, drawing attention to similarities between certain social and cultural practices of the Misings and those of ancient Chinese society. The similarities he points out include:

(a) During the period of 1500–2000 BCE, the Chinese lived in long rectangular, two-storied tents made of wood, bamboo, and cane, similar to traditional Mising houses.

(b) The agricultural year among the Misings begins with the sowing of seeds during the festival of Ali-Aye-Ligang, which falls in the month of Fagun (February), similar to seasonal agricultural cycles in ancient China.

(c) The Chinese calculate a month from the full moon to the new moon.

(d) The Misings believe in the concept of two souls, similar to certain Chinese traditional beliefs.

(e) Consanguineous marriage practices are still found in Mising society, although such practices were restricted in ancient Chinese society, where marriages between close kin were generally prohibited.

The fact that the Misings migrated from China first to Arunachal Pradesh and later from Arunachal Pradesh to Assam will become clearer in the next part of this discussion entitled “The Mongolian and Kirat Context.”

2.1 Mongolian and Kirat Contexts:

Before discussing the Mongolian and Kirat contexts of the Misings, it is appropriate to present a brief account of the classification of Indian ethnic groups. Various anthropologists have attempted to classify the population of India in different ways, but the classification proposed by ethnologist Dr. Biraja Shankar Guha is widely accepted. The classification is as follows:

1. Negrito
2. Australoid
3. Mongoloid:
 - a) Archaic Mongoloid – (1) Long-headed (2) Broad-headed
 - b) Tibetan (also included within the Mongoloid group)
4. Mediterranean:
 - a) Paleo-Mediterranean
 - b) Mediterranean
 - c) Eastern Mediterranean
5. Western Broad-headed:
 - a) Alpine
 - b) Armenian
 - c) Dinaric
6. Nordic

The Misings belong to the Mongoloid group in the classification proposed by Dr. Biraja Shankar Guha. The Mongoloid groups are believed to have entered Assam through two main directions. Anthropologist Bhuvan Mohan Das describes the migration routes of various ethnic groups into Assam as follows:

“To the west lies the vast route of the Brahmaputra and Ganga valleys, through which Caucasoid groups entered Assam from time to time. To the north, the mountain passes of Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan in the western sector were used by the Mongoloid groups. The Mongoloids also entered through the mountain passes of the Patkai range in the northeast. The southeastern mountain ranges connect Assam with Myanmar and Southeast Asia, while to the southwest lies the sea route.” [Ibid, p. 15]

The Misings, belonging to the Mongoloid group, are believed to have entered Assam through the mountain passes of the Patkai range in the northeast, as suggested by Dr. Bhuvan Mohan Das. It is further believed that they migrated from the Yangtze (Yangchi) and Huang He river basins of China and initially settled in the hilly regions along the northeastern frontier of India.

There is no mention of the terms “Mising” or “Miri” in ancient Sanskrit texts of India. Although legends and certain historical interpretations suggest that the Misings might have entered India before the composition of these ancient texts, they are not directly referred to in written literature. However, these texts mention a group known as the “Kirat.” According to scholars, the term “Kirat” in ancient Sanskrit literature referred to non-Aryan tribes inhabiting the Himalayan foothills and northeastern India. It is also believed that these Kirata groups belonged to the Mongoloid racial stock.

As a written historical source, the **Yajurveda** is the first text to mention the Kirats. It states that the Kirat people were required for the *Purushamedh Yajna*. Similarly, Kirats are also mentioned in the **Atharva Veda**, where it is stated that a Kirat girl was seen collecting herbs on the top of a mountain. [Ibid, p.15] It is worth mentioning that the Mising people still use medicinal herbs extensively.

In the **Mahabharata**, the *Sabhaparva* mentions that Nakula met the Kirats, and that Bhima crossed the kingdom of Videha and encountered the Kirats as he moved eastwards with the intention of conquering the world. The Kirat episode in the Mahabharata bears witness to this. The Mahabharata also mentions that Bhagadatta, the king of ancient Assam, Pragiyotishpura, sided with the Kauravas in the Battle of Kurukshetra. The soldiers or warriors of Bhagadatta consisted of Kirats.[Ibid, p.15]

According to the **Vishnu Purana** and the **Markandeya Purana**, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras lived in the central part of India, while the Kirats lived in the eastern region, and the Yavanas settled in the western region.[Ibid, p.15]

Thus, in addition to being mentioned in ancient Sanskrit texts, several medieval texts also refer to the Mongols as Kirats. The *Rajmala*, a 16th-century account of the kings of Tripura, also mentions the Kirats. Similarly, Kirats are referred to in the **Yogini Tantra**. [Ibid, p.16]

These Kirat people mentioned in various ancient and medieval Sanskrit texts are generally identified with Mongoloid groups. They belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family, and their original homeland is believed to be in China. They are thought to have first entered India from China through various mountain passes in the northeastern region and settled in the hilly areas. Later, they moved through the foothills of the Himalayas and entered the Brahmaputra Valley, i.e., Assam. There is, therefore, little doubt regarding this migration trajectory.

Miri and Mising: An Analysis

The first mention of the word “**Miri**” in written literature after the arrival of the Misings in Assam is found in the works of **Srimanta Sankardeva**. He refers to the liberation of all human beings through *Harinam* as follows:

*Kirat Kachari Khasi Garo Miri
Yavan Kanko Guwal.
Assam muluk rajak turuk
quas mlesha chandal. (53)*

[Keshabananda Devagoswami (Ed.), *Srimad Bhagavat* (Dwadasa Skandha), p.33]

The word “**Miri**” is also mentioned in the **Namghosha** of Madhavdeva: *Hariname nahike niyam adhikari.*

Ram buli tore Miri Asom Kochari.

[Surjya Kanta Hazarika (Ed.), *Kirtan Ghosha aru Namghosha*, Shri Shri Sankardeva aru Madhavdeva, p.748]

After the mention of the Miri people in the literature of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, the term “Miri” appears in various historical texts and chronicles. There are several references such as *Miri Sandikoi*, *Miri Kotoki*, etc., in Assamese historical records. In the context of **Miri Sandikoi**, the *Purani Assam Buranji* (p. 44) mentions that during the reign of the Ahom king Swargadeo Pratap Singha, the Bargohain family from Baruka destroyed the

house of Bhokola Gohain and settled him in Dihing. Since he had no son, he adopted a child from the Miri community and named him **Miri Sandikoi**. His descendants are still known as Miri Sandikoi.

Similarly, in the *Six Hundred Years of History of Prince Sarbananda*, it is mentioned that Miri Sandikoi was a clan under the Bargohain Khel of the Ahom administration. His descendant, Miri Sandikoi of Nagaon, fought bravely against the Mughals as a co-commander under **Lachit Barphukan** in the Battle of Saraighat.

It is also mentioned that during the reign of the Ahoms, Swargadeo Pratap Singha first employed **Miri Kotoki** to convey messages to the mountain Miris.

However, there is some doubt as to whether the present Mising people were formerly known as “Miri.” The etymological meaning of the word *Miri* suggests that it may not have been the original name of the Misings. There are several opinions regarding the origin of the term “Miri.” According to historian **Edward Gait**:

“The Miris are found both in the plains, where they are peaceable British subjects, and also in the hills to the north, where they are quiet and inoffensive. They act as a channel of communication with the Abors, and from this circumstance comes the name by which they are known in Assam, which means a ‘go-between’. They have never given any trouble.”[Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, p.305.]

Gait’s comments suggest that the Misings acquired the name “Miri” because they acted as intermediaries in communication between the mountain Abors and the plains of Assam.

In addition to Gait, various historians have explained the term “Miri.” According to Mackenzie, under the Assam government, the Misings were called “Miri” because they maintained contact with the mountain Abors and acted as intermediaries between them and the merchants of the plains.[Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, cited in Nomal Pegu, *Misingsakalar Itibritta aru Sanskriti*, p. 4] However, the authenticity of the statements made by Edward Gait and Mackenzie cannot be fully established. Therefore, it cannot be conclusively stated that the word “Miri” is of Assamese origin, nor has any equivalent term been identified in English.

Another British historian, **Edward T. Dalton**, states that the Mirias of Odisha acted as intermediaries between humans and the gods.[Ibid, p. 4] Similarly, the Misings functioned as intermediaries between the people of the hills and the plains. On this basis, he argues that the word “Miri” may have originated from the term “Miria” in Odisha. Dalton’s view cannot be entirely dismissed. There is no doubt that the name “Miri” was assigned to the Misings by the people of the plains. This may therefore be one of the reasons why they were referred to as “Miri” in relation to their social function.

Various historians have offered different opinions regarding the origin of the word “Miri,” but none of these explanations have been fully accepted. The argument proposed by Dr. Nomal Chandra Pegu regarding its origin

appears more convincing. According to him, a rare dance and song ritual has been practiced among the indigenous peoples of the Chiang Valley since ancient times. The person who presides over this ceremony is called “Miri.” The term “Miri” is derived from “Miri” or “Miriv,” associated with this ritual.[Ibid, p. 6] It is further suggested that this sound pattern belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family and is difficult for Indo-Aryan speakers to pronounce correctly, as it does not exist in Indo-Aryan phonology. It is therefore assumed that the name “Miri” was given to the Misings by Indo-Aryan-speaking populations of the plains.

The Mising people prefer to identify themselves as “Mising” rather than “Miri.” A. Waddell, in his book *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley: A Contribution on Their Physical Types and Affinities*, notes that there was a tendency among the Misings to identify themselves as “Mising” and that they were referred to as “Miri” by outsiders. He writes, “They call themselves Mishing, but are known to the Assamese as ‘Miri’.” Waddell’s statement confirms that the Misings preferred the term “Mising” over “Miri” even earlier.

This observation opens the way for further research into whether “Mising” was their original ethnonym instead of “Miri.” In the future, it may be possible to determine their earlier identity by examining references in Chinese legends, ancient texts, mythology, and cultural traditions. If the name “Miri” was indeed given by the people of the plains, then the community must have had a pre-Miri name. However, the term “Miri” is not found in the historical records, myths, or legends of Northeast India.

Although they are referred to as Kirats, it is natural that they possess their own distinct ethnic identity.

After confirming that the Misings have identified themselves as “Mising” since the first half of the twentieth century, it is appropriate to discuss the origin of the term “Mising.” There are different opinions regarding its origin. According to Tarun Chandra Pamegam, people living in the mountains are generally fair in complexion. In addition, there is a natural tendency among people to consider themselves superior. Therefore, it is suggested that the simple Chetia term “Miri” may have been transformed into “Mi” (man), “Yaching” (white or good), and finally “Mising,” meaning “we are good people.”[L.A. Waddell, *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p. 65]

Indreswar Pegu also argues that “mi” means man and “ansing” means calm or peaceful; these two words are combined to form “Mising.” Both of these interpretations are acceptable to some extent. The Misings are traditionally considered a peace-loving community. For this reason, historian Edward Gait referred to the Misings as a “peaceable nation” in his *A History of Assam*. The term “Mising” appears to date back to the early twentieth century, although there is scope for further research to determine whether it was used even earlier to refer to the community.[Nomal Ch. Pegu, *Misingsakalar Itibritta aru Sanskriti*, pp. 10–11]

After discussing the terms “Mising” and “Miri,” one of Dr. Nomal Ch. Pegu’s views appears more acceptable. According to him, the term “Mising” is

older than the term “Miri.” Based on the *Ahbang* tradition prevalent among the Misings, Dr. Nomal Ch. Pegu states:

Podong Ane or Mother Podong had children named Dosing, Domi, Dopang, and Dobang. From Dosing descended the Misings, from Domi the Miangs, from Dopang the Padams, and from Dobang the Galongs. Similarly, the name Miang was derived from the last syllable of Domi, “Mi.” However, when Dosing became “Mising,” the original linguistic pattern was not fully preserved. Likewise, even when Dobang became Galong, the syllable “Bang” of Dobang does not appear in the name Galong. It is noteworthy that a fragment of *Ahbang* has been found among the Misings in which the names Dosing and Sidang are clearly mentioned. Thus, it is not impossible that “Mising” originated from “Mising,” the descendants of Dosing.

Dr. Nomal Ch. Pegu has made important observations regarding genealogical traditions that appear to have been partially lost during the transition from Dosing to Mising. He suggests that during their long migration history, the community faced various natural disasters and conflicts. As a result, the memory of certain ancestral names may have been lost over time.[Ibid, p. 11] Therefore, it was the responsibility of the *Mibu* class of society to preserve genealogies (*Purushanamas*), *Ahbangs*, and related oral traditions. However, it is not possible for the *Mibu* to preserve everything accurately over generations. This genealogical tradition found in the *Ahbang* system among the Misings strongly suggests that the community is more likely to have originally been referred to as “Mising,” rather than “Miri.”

3.0 Conclusion:

The study of the migration history of the Mising community reveals a complex interplay between myth, legend, and historical interpretation. Although there is no definitive written historical record that clearly traces the origin and migration routes of the Misings, the rich corpus of oral traditions, folklore, and legends provides valuable insights into their past. These narratives consistently indicate that the Misings originally inhabited mountainous regions—most likely areas corresponding to present-day Arunachal Pradesh—and gradually migrated to the plains of Assam due to ecological pressures, population growth, and inter-clan conflicts.

The analysis of myths such as those related to *Tapa Puhmang*, *Podong Ane*, and the *Do:nyi-Po:lo* belief system highlights not only cosmological ideas but also encodes memories of migration and settlement. Similarly, various folk narratives such as *Pegu-Chiang*, *Mikapalat*, and *Doyit Puhmi* reinforce the idea of a gradual movement from hills to plains. While these legends cannot be treated as empirical historical evidence, they remain indispensable sources for reconstructing the cultural memory and identity of the community.

Furthermore, the discussion on the terms “Miri” and “Mising” suggests that “Miri” was an externally imposed name, likely derived from their intermediary role between hill tribes and plains populations, whereas “Mising” represents the community’s self-identity with deeper linguistic and cultural roots. The association of the Misings with broader Mongoloid and Kirat groups,

as reflected in anthropological and textual sources, further supports the theory of their migration from East Asian regions through the northeastern mountain passes into Assam.

In conclusion, the migration history of the Misings cannot be understood solely through conventional historiography; it requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates folklore, linguistics, anthropology, and historical texts. Myths and legends, despite their limitations, serve as crucial cultural documents that preserve the collective memory of migration and identity, thereby offering a meaningful framework for understanding the past of the Mising community.

References:

- Das, Bhuvan Mohan. *Janagusthit Prajatiya Upadan*. In *Asomiya Jatir Itibritta*, edited by Giridhar Sharma.
- Devagoswami, Keshabananda (Ed.). *Srimad Bhagavat (Dwadash Skandha)*.
- Gait, Edward. *A History of Assam*.
- Hazarika, Surjya Kanta (Ed.). *Kirtan Ghosha aru Namghosha: Shri Shri Shankardeva aru Madhavdeva*.
- Mackenzie, Alexander. *History of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*.
- Pegu, Nomal Chandra. *Mising Sakalar Itibritta aru Sanskriti*.
- Waddell, L. A. *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley: A Contribution to Their Physical Types and Affinities*.
- Mili, Jyoti Ranjan. PhD thesis, Department of Assamese, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam. (unpublished)
- Kagyung, Brigumuni (Ed.), *Mising Sankritir Alekhya*, Urukha Paja, Birubari, ghy, 1989
- Pegu, Indreswar, *Mising Samaj Aru Sankriti*, Asom Janajati aru Anusushita jati Goveshana Pratisthan, 2003.