Journal of Polity & Society (2025) 17(2), 189-211

Reconstructing Mising Identity: Elite Mobility, Community Organisation, and the Politics of Recognition in Post-Assam Accord Period in Assam

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The identity movement of the mising is not a post-colonial development. However, it gained momentum during the post-Assam Accord period, which marked the end of the six-year-long anti-foreigner movement in Assam. The current study investigates the evolution and complexities of the mising identity movement since 1985. There is a significant research gap in understanding the socio-political contexts that have shaped the identity formation and mobilisations of the mising tribe in Assam. The paper argues that the post-Assam Accord period has contributed to the rejuvenation of organised elite among missing, who have become instrumental in mobilising the mising community and pursuing its aspirations before the state. The paper mainly aims to understand the changing dynamics of elite mobility and their role in the mising Identity movement through various community organisations. To achieve this objective, the paper employs a qualitative methodology based on archival analysis. The paper highlights that the movement's success in preserving identity, political representation, and extended autonomy was possible only because of changing patterns of elite mobility and strategic shifts in their capacity to regulate and lead the community's interests through community organisations. This research contributes a new and ethnic-specific perspective to the existing body of literature on tribal elite mobility and identity in Northeast India by discussing the role of mising elite mobility and mising national organisations in mising identity in the post-Assam Accord period. The study finds that the post-Assam Accord period witnessed the emergence of an educated and organisationally mobile Mising elite that played a decisive role in reconstructing and articulating Mising ethnic identity.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Mising Autonomy, Northeast India, Organic Intellectuals, Recognition Politics, Sixth Schedule

Introduction

The reconstruction of ethnic identity among marginalised tribal communities in post-colonial Northeast India represents a multifaceted political process influenced by colonial legacies, contested federalism, and, above all, the educated elite (Gogoi & Gogoi, 2023). In this context, organisational elite groups adeptly use cultural capital to navigate asymmetrical power relations with state structures. The mising tribe, the second-largest *Scheduled Tribe* (ST) population in Assam after the Bodos, provides a relevant case of identity formation mediated by elite groups. This study examines how Mising organisational elites have redefined community identity in the post-Assam Accord era (1985–present), focusing on the interplay among elite mobilisation strategies, state containment mechanisms, and the paradoxes inherent in recognition politics. The missing, an Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group (Mipun, 2012), reside in the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, including Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Majuli, Golaghat, and Tinsukia (Borah et al., 2020). They share unique linguistic, cultural, and social organisational characteristics that distinguish them from the predominant Assamese-speaking Hindu majority (Saikia, 2011).

The Assam Accord, signed on 15th August 1985, marked the end of a six-year ethno-nationalist movement that spanned 1979 to 1985, driven by concerns over illegal migration, demographic transformations, and the rights of indigenous communities (Nath, 2020). The Accord, while primarily addressing illegal migration from Bangladesh, also established constitutional requirements to protect the cultural and territorial rights of indigenous communities (Doley & Medak, 2019). Nonetheless, the period following the Accord has highlighted persistent discrepancies between the constitutional commitments and their tangible implementation. Moreover, the indigenous tribal communities of Assam expressed scepticism regarding the Assam movement and the subsequent Accord, perceiving that the leaders failed to sufficiently represent the interests of the tribal populations inhabiting the Brahmaputra Valley (Gogoi, 2018). The campaigns that promote the preservation of identity witnessed a significant surge in momentum following the Assam accord. The fear and trepidation prevalent among the indigenous tribal communities in Assam have spurred considerable movements advocating for recognition and substantial autonomy, organised by various national organisations. This culminated in the formation of the *Tiwa Autonomous Council in 1995*, the *MisingAutonomous Council in 1995*, and the *Bodo Autonomous Council in 2003* (Gogoi, 2018). This culmination indicates heightened awareness of ethnic identity among Assam's indigenous tribal populations.

The existing literature on ethnic movements in Northeast India primarily emphasises militant insurgencies (Baruah, 2005) or overarching policy frameworks (Saikia, 2011), thereby deliberately overlooking the micro-political

dynamics of elite-mediated identity reconstruction within grassroots mobilisations. Although anthropological and historical research has thoroughly documented Misingcultural practices and migration histories (Mipun, 2012; Pegu, 2022), a systematic analysis of the strategic capitalisation of cultural capital by organisational elites to navigate state structures remains underdeveloped. Contemporary scholarly studies reveal that educated elites have historically leveraged ethnic identity for socio-political development; however, the precise mechanisms by which mising elites function as Gramscian organic intellectuals remain largely unexplored. Moreover, the interplay among symbolic recognition, cultural festivals, linguistic rights, and substantive empowerment through territorial autonomy and resource control within the framework of India's ethnic federalism remains to be thoroughly articulated theoretically. There is a paucity of scholarly study on how recognition politics interacts with institutional design, co-optation, and the emergence of novel intra-community hierarchies within marginalised groups, exemplified by the missing.

Consequently, this research explores three interconnected gaps. Initially, it formulates conceptual frameworks that clarify the dynamics of elite mediation within marginalised communities, synthesising Gramscian organic intellectualism with Bourdieusian capital theory and Anderson's concept of imagined communities. Secondly, it analyses the strategies the state employs to manage ethnic demands through mechanisms of institutional co-optation and containment, rather than authentic power-sharing (Fraser, 2000). Third, it addresses the interplay between contemporary cultural initiatives and long-term struggles for autonomy, elucidating how symbolic recognition may supplant rather than enhance demands for political empowerment.

The primary objectives of this study are to assess the role of Misingorganisational elites in reconstructing community identity in the aftermath of the Assam Accord, with particular emphasis on their strategic mobilisation and cultural initiatives. Furthermore, it aims to examine the state's responses to demands for autonomy, revealing the mechanisms of institutional containment and the selective co-optation of elites. This research strengthens the area of ethnic studies by developing a conceptual framework that synthesises Gramscian organic intellectualism with Bourdieusian cultural capital theory. This study reveals the interactions between elite groups and grassroots movements within marginalised communities, demonstrating that peace accords can serve as catalysts for renewed mobilisation rather than simply resolving conflicts when their implementation is insufficient. Moreover, it elucidates the micro-politics of recognition within the framework of federal democracy.

This study employs a qualitative methodology to examine organisational documents, government records, and historical sources from 1924 to 2024, with particular emphasis on the period after 1985. The data collection process employed solely secondary sources, which were classified into the following categories: Historical documents, including organisational records, resolutions,

and memoranda, are available from the following entities: *Mising Ba:né Kébang* (MBK)[1] covering the period from 1924 to the present; *Takam MisingPorin Kébang* (TMPK)[2] from 1971 to the present; *Mising Agom Kébang* (MAK)[3] from 1972 to the present; *Mising Mimag Kébang* (MMK)[4] from 1993 to the present; *Takam Mising Mimé Kébang* (TMMK)[5], and *Mising Dírbí Kébang* (MDK)[6] from 1990 to the present; and additional records from 1980 to the present. Government records, including the *Assam Accord* (1985), the Mising *Autonomous Council Act* (1995), constitutional amendments, and official correspondence between Misingorganisations and government authorities (1924–2024). Organisational publications: *Lí:sang* (TMPK mouthpiece, 2006–2024), conference proceedings, and policy documents produced by mising organisations. Contemporary initiatives such as *Mising Youth Festivals*[7], *mising Sports Carnivals*[8], and *A:bang*[9] workshops. The peer-reviewed academic studies that constitute a significant body of scholarship on the contemporary socio-cultural, political and historical life of the mising community, as well as comparative analyses of tribal autonomy movements in Northeast India.

The selection of documents was guided by three criteria: direct relevance to the reconstruction of identity post-Assam Accord (1985–2024); reliability, encompassing organisational resolutions, official government records, and peer-reviewed scholarship; and the potential to elucidate elite mobilisation strategies

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[1]The *Miri Sanmilan*, later known as Mising *Ba:né Kébang, was* founded under the presiding of Sri Sri Pitambar Dev Goswami, then Satradhikar of Garmur Satradhikar in 1924, at Gezera, Majuli.

[2]*Takam Mising Porin Kébang*(TMPK); the student apex body of Missings. It was formed in 1971 under the leadership of Medini Mohan Doley and Sunadhar Patir.

[3]*Mising Agom Kébang*(MAK); the Literary Organisation of Missings. It was formed in 1972 under the presidency of Agom Migang *Taburam Taid*.

[4]*Mising Mimag Kébang* (MMK); the Action Committee of Misings. It was formed in 1993 at Jonai through the fourth national conference.

[5]*Takam Mising Mimé Kébang*(TMMK); the women's wings of the Misingcommunity. It was formed in 1991.

[6]*Mising Dírbí Kébang* (MDK); the cultural organization of the Misingcommunity. It was founded in 1980

[7]The *MisingYouth Festivals* (MYF) is a significant cultural festival of the Misingtribe in Assam, aimed at preserving and promoting the legacy of the Misingpeople.

[8]The *Mising Sports Carnival* is a significant athletic event for the Mising tribe in Assam, orchestrated by the *Takam MisingPorin Kébang* (TMPK) (All Mising Students' Union) to promote youth empowerment, unity, and talent identification through sports such as football, volleyball, and traditional games, intending to cultivate athletes for advanced competition while enhancing community development and cultural pride.

[9]The *A:bang* of the Mising tribe is holy: deep, priestly hymns and oral histories narrating creation myths, ancestral travels, and cosmology, performed by the priest (Mibo).

and state responses. This systematic emphasis facilitates a study of how the Assam Accord served as a pivotal moment, transforming mising political awareness and organisational strategy. The analysis was conducted in three distinct phases, adhering to established thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clark, 2006). Initially, the historical contextualisation entailed a chronological mapping of organisational formation, notable mobilisation events, governmental responses, and cultural initiatives from 1924 to 2024, thereby establishing temporal patterns that connect the Assam Accord to the heightened mobilisation of the mising community. Secondly, thematic coding revealed consistent patterns, encompassing elite mobilisation strategies, state containment mechanisms, organisational dynamics, cultural revival initiatives, and expressions of autonomy demands. Third, the theoretical interpretation utilised Gramscian and Bourdieusian frameworks to analyse how empirical phenomena reflect broader dynamics of organic intellectualism, the deployment of cultural capital, symbolic violence, and the responses of hegemonic states.

This study predominantly utilises secondary and archival sources, which are subject to fundamental methodological limitations. The lack of firsthand ethnographic interaction with grassroots community members, studied with an exclusive emphasis on documentary evidence, engenders valid scepticism about the accuracy of the findings. Documents produced by elite groups, including organisational resolutions, memoranda, and published materials, predominantly convey the perspectives and ideological orientations of leadership. They often fail to encapsulate the diverse voices of the community, particularly those of marginalised subgroups such as women, rural populations, and economically disadvantaged individuals.

Nevertheless, this methodological approach can be justified for several reasons. The primary research objective of this study is explicitly centred on the reconstruction of identity mediated by elites and the organisational strategies associated with it. Consequently, documents produced by these elites serve as pertinent primary data sources for examining how educated leaders articulate their demands, construct narratives, and navigate the complexities of state structures. Secondly, the extensive temporal framework spanning a century (1924–2024) requires a thorough historical documentary analysis; ethnographic methodologies are insufficient for retrospectively documenting the evolution of organisations and the state's responses over multiple decades. Thirdly, archival sources provide systematically documented evidence regarding formal political positions, strategic decisions, and interactions among state organisations, which are challenging to reconstruct solely from oral histories. Fourth, the research employs triangulation by incorporating various documentary sources, including organisational records, government documents, and scholarly literature, to strengthen analytical rigour and address the limitations of relying on a single source type.

Further studies are needed to enhance this documentary analysis by incorporating ethnographic fieldwork that prioritises grassroots perspectives. Such research should delve into the internal dynamics of organisations, evaluate the gender dimensions of elite leadership, and explore the reception, negotiation, or contestation of identity narratives articulated by elites across various community constituencies. This identical research would yield a more thorough comprehension of the reconstruction of mising identity, incorporating both elite and grassroots perspectives.

Organic Intellectuals, Cultural Capital, and Identity Politics: A Conceptual Framework

This study develops a unified theoretical framework that synthesises three complementary traditions to analyse elite-mediated identity reconstruction and state-society relations in contexts of ethnic mobilisation. Each framework addresses distinct analytical dimensions while forming an integrated explanatory model.

Gramscian Organic Intellectualism and Hegemony

Gramsci's (1971) notion of organic intellectuals provides an insightful framework for analysing the functions of elites in mediating the voices of marginalised communities. Unlike conventional intellectuals, who derive their authority from established institutions, organic intellectuals organically arise from within their communities. They act as "*deputies*," fulfilling essential roles in political governance and social influence, notwithstanding their subordinate status (Gramsci, 1971). These individuals leverage their educational qualifications and institutional affiliations to express collective grievances, translate the concerns of subaltern groups into structured political demands, and navigate elite political spaces while preserving connections to grassroots communities. Contemporary scholarly studies into indigenous movements depict these leaders as balancing the dual obligations of serving their communities while simultaneously addressing the potential for co-optation by prevailing power structures (Rappaport, 2004).

This framework justifies the analysis presented in the sections titled "*Elite Mobilisation in the Post-Assam Accord Period*" and "*Findings: Elite Mediation Dynamics*" by using the Gramscian concepts to analyse the roles of *TMPK, MBK, MAK, MMK, TMMK,* and *MDK* leaders as organic intellectuals who facilitate the connection between community needs and state structures. Their presences enable effective engagement with bureaucratic processes, legal frameworks, and policy discussions, whereas ethnic identification fosters trust and credibility within grassroots communities. The dual orientation generates political potential alongside internal contradictions; elite mediation facilitates collective action while concurrently giving rise to new intra-community hierarchies (Gramsci, 1971).

Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which explores the dialectics of consent and coercion that underpin power relations, gives valuable insights into the state's responses to ethnic demands. Hegemonic power primarily functions through the establishment of cultural leadership and the attainment of ideological consensus, employing coercive measures when mechanisms of consent prove ineffective (Gramsci, 1971). This framework elucidates the subtitle, "*Findings: Institutional Containment Strategies*," by examining the state's use of divide-and-rule tactics, selective elite co-optation, and violent repression. It illustrates the complexities of power balancing and underscores how governments navigate ethnic diversity through a combination of accommodation and containment strategies.

Bourdieusian Capital Theory and Symbolic Violence

The theoretical frameworks of cultural capital and symbolic violence, as articulated by Bourdieu (1986), provide productive analytical tools for evaluating the elite's manoeuvring within asymmetrical power dynamics. Cultural capital comprises embodied dispositions and tendencies (habitus), tangible cultural objects (objectified cultural capital), and formal qualifications (institutionalised cultural capital), all of which can be transformed into social advantages, as Bourdieu articulates. Symbolic violence elucidates the mechanisms through which the imposition of meaning and the establishment of classifications serve to legitimise prevailing power dynamics, all while ostensibly maintaining a facade of neutrality (Bourdieu, 1986).

This framework contains insight for three analytical sections. Initially, in the discourse titled "*Post-independence marginalisation and elite formation*," Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence elucidates the manner in which the *Assam Official Language Act of 1960*, which established Assamese as the exclusive official language, represented an act of symbolic violence directed towards marginalised tribal communities, notably the misings. This legislation undermined Misinglinguistic practices, resulting in significant barriers to access to government employment, education, and political representation, thereby imposing tangible limitations on social mobility. Secondly, the term "*Contemporary cultural initiatives*" draws on Bourdieu's (1986) notions of symbolic capital, honour, prestige, and recognition, which can be transformed into other forms of capital, to analyse the dynamics of cultural festivals and the recognition they receive from the state. The *Mising Youth Festivals* and *Mising Sports Carnivals* serve to generate symbolic capital, encompassing aspects such as visibility, cultural legitimacy, and community pride.

Nevertheless, the transformation of this symbolic capital into tangible political concessions depends on the state's readiness to convert recognition into concrete policy measures. Third, the analysis demonstrates how mising elites utilise various forms of cultural capital: educational qualifications that promote engagement within bureaucratic frameworks, linguistic competencies that enrich

policy discussions, organisational affiliations that facilitate mobilisation, and traditional authority that bestows legitimacy within the community.

Anderson's Imagined Communities and Cultural Politics

Anderson's (1983) conceptualisation of nations as "*Imagined Communities*," wherein individuals, too numerous for personal acquaintance, must foster a sense of collective belonging through shared symbols, narratives, and rituals, offers an insightful analytical framework for examining cultural initiatives within geographically dispersed ethnic communities. This framework provides a basis for analysing cultural festivals, sports competitions, and workshop series, which are conceptualised as mechanisms that facilitate connections among community members who are spatially separated (Anderson, 1983). These occurrences function as platforms for expressing shared heritage and fostering emotional connections, thereby strengthening collective identity. The *mising Youth Festival*, which commenced in 1996 and has experienced considerable growth, as evidenced by the ninth edition in 2024 attracting thousands of artists and large audiences, serves as a pertinent illustration of what Anderson (1983) refers to as the "*ritual of imagined community*." Nonetheless, Anderson's framework necessitates modification to accommodate subaltern contexts.

Unlike nation-states that control print capitalism and educational frameworks, marginalised ethnic communities are compelled to establish alternative public spheres through the development of organisational networks and cultural events that operate concurrently with and in opposition to prevailing state structures (Anderson, 1983). This positioning elucidates particular dynamics: cultural expressions are compelled to manoeuvre amid state surveillance and the threat of repression; symbolic productions compete with prevailing cultural narratives; and community-building transpires within the constraints imposed by scarce resources and political marginalisation. This research synthesises these theoretical frameworks to examine three interrelated dimensions. Initially, it explores the dynamics of elite mediation, analysing how organic intellectuals utilise cultural capital to express collective demands while navigating the intricacies of internal community diversity. Secondly, it examines the strategies of state containment, the co-optation of institutions, the implementation of divide-and-rule tactics, the application of symbolic violence, and the use of selective coercion that are utilised to address ethnic demands while avoiding any significant redistribution of power (Fraser, 2000). Third, it reveals the paradoxes inherent in recognition politics, in which cultural acknowledgement may supplant authentic empowerment. Marginalised communities often find it necessary to assert cultural distinctiveness to substantiate their claims to rights, a process that may inadvertently lead to essentialisation and overshadow demands for material redistribution. This framework conceptualises the reconstruction of mising identity as a

multidimensional process encompassing cultural preservation, political mobilisation, elite-mediated representation, and the negotiation of dynamics of state power. The theoretical synthesis elucidates the challenges faced by mising organisations and their strategies for manoeuvring through structural constraints. It offers insights into state responses that reflect the management of federal ethnic diversity and highlights the contradictions that arise within recognition politics, where symbolic acknowledgement often replaces substantive empowerment.

Historical Foundations of Mising Identity Politics

Colonial Categorisation and Early Organisational Formation

The contemporary mising identity movement traces its origins to British colonial administration, which institutionalised ethnic categories through classificatory frameworks that divided populations into administratively legible groups such as "*backward tribes*," "*forest dwellers*," and "*non-tribal*" populations (Saikia, 2011). These categories functioned less as neutral descriptors and more as performative instruments of governance, aligning with Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality by bringing previously fluid social identities into bureaucratically managed political existence. Centralised planning and capitalist modernisation further led to the exclusion of various tribal communities from the mainstream (Biswas & Suklabaidya, 2008), and the *Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms* (1919) and *Simon Commission* (1927) further consolidated administrative differentiation, creating institutionalised distinctions that later served as foundations for ethnic mobilisations (Saikia, 2011).

Within this colonial context, the 1924 establishment of *Miri Sanmilan,* later renamed MBK under the chairmanship of *Sri Sri Pitambar Dev Goswami*, constituted a seminal moment in mising organic intellectual formation (Pegu, 2022). Educated elites leveraged religious authority, literacy, and networks connecting monastic institutions and colonial administration to galvanise collective action (Pegu, 2022). Through a Gramscian lens, early MBK leadership exemplified organic intellectuals translating dispersed grievances into coherent political demands while operating from structurally subordinate positions. The *North East Frontier Miri-Abor Sanmilan* was the first organisation to demand separate autonomy for the Misings, led by the late Padmeswar Doley, then the Sanmilan's Secretary (Pegu, 1998). Under the banner of this organisation, encompassing *Missing, Abor, Dafla,* and *Charaik* communities, it illustrates sophisticated ethnic coalition-building strategies and anticipates later autonomy movements by framing cultural preservation demands as claims to political self-determination.

Post-Independence Marginalisation and Elite Formation

Post-independence nation-building in India prioritised linguistically and culturally homogeneous states, frequently subordinating minority ethnic groups to dominant linguistic majorities (Mahanta, 2007). During this period, the

Assamese hegemonic structure consistently neglected the social and political needs of the tribal communities in the plains. Tribal groups such as the *Bodos, misings, Sonowal-Kacharis, Deuris, Rabhas*, and *Tiwas* have faced various forms of structural marginalisation, including land loss, economic hardship, debt bondage, unstable employment, and ongoing political subjugation. As a result, in the post-colonial context of Assam, ethnic communities began seeking ways to revitalise their identities and express their desire for political autonomy (Hussain, 1997). This revitalisation came from their marginalised status and increasing subjugation of the caste Hindu-led Assamese ruling structure. This shared consciousness emerged through identity-driven movements led by the newly educated leaders within these ethnic groups. The unwillingness to recognise smaller communities as unique nationalities, along with viewing ethnic claims as threats to the process of building an Assamese identity, deepened the divisions among communities (Gogoi, 2019). Thus, in the late 1960s, Plains tribal communities became more politically aware of their unique ethnic identities, using cultural differences to gain political representation and improve their socio-economic standing. The importance of linguistic and cultural markers, along with other fundamental traits, became evident in the evolving dynamics of the conflict among competing elite groups. The realisation of ongoing deprivation and the lack of attention from institutions drove leaders within ethnic communities to build strong bonds among their members, enabling them to come together and mobilise against the dominant community. Subsequently, the *Assam Official Language Act of 1960*, which declared Assamese the sole official language, exemplified symbolic violence against tribal linguistic communities, including the mising (Pegu, 2022). This policy devalued mising linguistic capital, constraining access to state employment, education, and political representation, thereby producing structured social disadvantage while masking its political origins.

Thus, the Middle-class mising elites interpreted linguistic assimilation as an existential threat, recognising that cultural erosion would accelerate political marginalisation (Pegu, 1998). The formation of *MAK* in 1972 as a literary and language-promotion body constituted a counter-hegemonic intervention that mobilised language preservation as a political strategy rather than nostalgic culturalism. *MAK's* efforts to standardise mising script, expand vernacular publications, and advocate for mother-tongue education exemplify how cultural capital creation (linguistic competence, literary production) can be deployed to contest symbolic domination and support broader claims for political recognition (Bourdieu, 1986).

Parallel organisational developments unfolded in youth politics. The establishment of *TMPK* in 1971 as a student organisation reflected a broader Northeast region pattern in which student unions serve as incubators for ethnic mobilisation. *TMPK* gradually evolved from an educational advocacy platform into a central actor in autonomy demands, leveraging community networks, legal

literacy, and organisational skills to articulate community aspirations (Borah et al., 2020). Like Gramsci's framework, *TMPK* leaders emerged as organic intellectuals, bridging community-based knowledge regimes and village-based constituencies, thereby re-scaling mising politics from local to state-wide arenas.

The Assam Accord and Catalysed Mobilisation

The Assam Movement (1979–1985) and subsequent Assam Accord marked a critical juncture in Northeast India's ethnic politics, transforming institutional opportunity structures for indigenous mobilisation (Nath, 2020). While agitation primarily targeted illegal immigration from Bangladesh, its ethnic-nationalist discourse and constitutional safeguards for "*indigenous peoples*" inadvertently heightened expectations among plain tribal communities, including the misings, regarding substantive self-governance. From a recognition politics perspective, the Accord simultaneously acknowledged indigenous distinctiveness while leaving ambiguous the mechanisms through which this recognition would translate into material autonomy, thereby generating fertile ground for renewed claims (Fraser, 2000).

Mising elites rapidly reframed their long-standing demands within this new constitutional vocabulary. The 1982 Matmara Dhakuakhana resolution by *TMPK*, demanding the inclusion of mising areas under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, represented a decisive shift from appeals for cultural recognition to claims for institutional autonomy (Doley & Medak, 2019). The *Sixth Schedule* provisions grant district and regional councils legislative, judicial, and executive powers over land, forests, customary law, and local taxation, offering a robust framework for self-governance in tribal-majority territories. By anchoring their demands in this constitutional framework, *TMPK* leaders strategically linked ethnic identity assertion to structural power redistribution rather than symbolic concessions.

In May 1984, *TMPK* submitted a memorandum to the Assam Chief Minister outlining demands for Missing-medium primary education, protection from multidimensional exploitation, and the establishment of autonomous districts and regions to safeguard plains tribal cultures (Doley, 2015). This document exemplifies Gramscian organic intellectual practice: student leaders synthesised grassroots concerns, land alienation, linguistic marginalisation, and economic dispossession into legally articulated claims intelligible within state bureaucratic frameworks (Gramsci, 1971; Rappaport, 2004). Rather than framing autonomy purely as a cultural right, the memorandum advanced a multidimensional conception integrating land control, educational policy, and institutional design, thereby prefiguring later debates over *MAC*. Their memorandum includes a range of subjects, which are outlined below:

1. Immediate implementation of mising as a medium of instruction in the primary educational institutions of the Assam state.

2. Protection and safeguarding of the mising people from land, economic,

social, political, linguistic, cultural, and other forms of exploitation.

3. By establishing autonomous districts and regions, the cultural traditions of the plains tribes of Assam will be safeguarded and preserved, along with their status as independent entities (Doley, 2015).

By 1987, *TMPK* had launched sustained, non-violent campaigns for Sixth Schedule inclusion, utilising mass rallies, strikes, bandhs, and memorandum politics rather than armed insurgency (Borah et al., 2020). Comparative studies of tribal autonomy movements in Northeast India highlight that while several hill-based groups pursued militant strategies, plain tribal movements such as the misings largely remained within democratic repertoires. This divergence cannot be reduced to capacity constraints alone; rather, it reflects deliberate strategic choice shaped by organisational ideology and embeddedness in Brahmaputra Valley's electoral politics (Saikia, 2011).

However, non-violent strategies encountered structural limitations. Evidence from autonomy negotiations across Northeast India suggests that militant movements often secured more substantive territorial councils with legislative powers, whereas non-militant mobilisations frequently secured weaker, executive-dominant bodies lacking clear territorial jurisdiction. The experiences have been seen in the *BTC* movement and, to some extent, in *KAAC*, where the Dimasa's autonomy movement was neither as violent as the Bodo's nor as peaceful as the Mising's; in fact, the movement followed a middle path, neither intentional nor circumstantial (Saikia, 2011). However, the mising case conforms to this pattern, revealing paradoxical incentives within India's ethnic federalism: regimes appear more inclined to concede robust autonomy to groups that demonstrate disruptive capacity, while rewarding non-violent actors with symbolic institutional forms. This perverse incentive structure complicates normative claims that democratic, peaceful mobilisation yields superior political outcomes.

Elite Mobilisation in the Post-Assam Accord period

Following 1985, mising organisational ecology expanded significantly, with differentiated bodies addressing distinct yet interlinked domains. *TMPK* concentrated on student mobilisation and autonomy advocacy; *MAK* focused on language and literature; *MMK* (established 1993) operated as an action committee coordinating collective protest; *TMMK* (1990) addressed women's issues and gendered dimensions of mobilisation; and *MDK* (1980) prioritised cultural heritage preservation (Doley & Medak, 2019). This organisational specialisation illustrates what Bourdieu (1986) terms field differentiation, in which actors occupy distinct positions within a shared political–cultural field, accumulating varied forms of capital while pursuing overlapping objectives.

The third *TMPK* session at Jangraimukh (22–24 February 1985), where the organisation formally adopted the name *Takam Mising Porin Kébang* (All Mising Students' Union), marked the consolidation of student leadership as

central to mising political articulation (Doley & Medak, 2019). On 5 May 1985, TMPK leaders submitted a memorandum to the President of India, demanding an autonomous council under the *Sixth Schedule*, thereby scaling their claims from the state to the union level (Doley, 2015). These actions demonstrate conscious efforts by organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971) to inhabit multiple institutional fields, including universities, village councils, the state bureaucracy, and national constitutional discourse, thereby transforming scattered local grievances into a cohesive autonomy agenda (Rappaport, 2004).

MMK's creation in 1993 as an umbrella action committee incorporating representatives from affiliated organisations responded to recognition that a sustained autonomy struggle required dedicated coordination structures beyond student union capacities (Doley & Medak, 2019). *MMK*'s design, combining centralised strategic planning with decentralised implementation, seeks to reconcile Gramscian leadership with participatory decision-making, thereby mitigating the risk of elite disconnection from grassroots sentiment. *TMMK*'s emergence foregrounded women's leadership and gendered dimensions of identity politics, challenging patriarchal patterns within both state and community structures, though systematic scholarly analysis of these dynamics remains limited.

Through a Bourdieusian lens, mising elite mobility can be conceptualised as the conversion of educational, linguistic, and organisational capital into political capital. University degrees, professional employment, and Assamese English bilingualism enhanced elites' capacity to navigate bureaucratic procedures and engage with policy interlocutors, while organisational positions conferred symbolic authority within the community (Bourdieu, 1986; Pegu, 2022). *TMPK, MBK, MAK, MMK, TMMK,* and *MDK* leaders thus functioned as brokers of multiple capital forms, translating them into representational claims (Borah et al., 2020). This brokerage role, however, generated intra-community hierarchies. While Gramscian organic intellectuals emerge from subaltern classes, their upward mobility risks creating new status differentials between leadership and grassroots (Gramsci, 1971; Rappaport, 2004). Documentary evidence of policy negotiations, press statements, and festival speeches reveals recurring tensions between elite-defined strategies and village-level concerns, particularly regarding the pace of negotiations, tactical repertoire, and perceived compromises with state actors. These tensions underscore that elite mediation is neither frictionless nor unidirectional; instead, it operates within contested fields where leadership legitimacy must be continuously reproduced.

The 1995 Mising Accord and Institutional Containment

The 14 June 1995 Mising Accord, signed between the Government of Assam, the *Mising Autonomous Demand Committee* (MADC), and MBK, exemplifies state strategies of selective elite co-optation and divide-and-rule within ethnic movements (Doley & Medak, 2019). *MADC's* formation,

supported by the government and led by *MBK* leaders aligned with the ruling Congress Party networks, created alternative interlocutors more amenable to state-defined autonomy frameworks (Doley & Medak, 2019). Rather than engaging directly with mobilised organisations such as *TMPK*, *MMK*, and *TMMK*, Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia pursued negotiations with co-opted elites, fragmenting representational claims. The Bilmukh Conference (21–23 April 1995) illustrates these dynamics. Organised as a platform to announce MAC formation, the event became a site of contention when TMPK, MMK, and TMMK mobilised approximately 5,000 demonstrators in a 60-hour bandh opposing what they perceived as an illegitimate, elite-driven process (Pegu, 1998). The subsequent police and Central Reserve Police Force firing, which killed Boga Medok and Naresh Taid, marked a violent rupture in state-Misingrelations and revealed coercive underpinnings of hegemonic management when consent channels fail.

From a Gramscian perspective, the state initially deployed hegemonic strategies, including symbolic concessions and the recognition of selected representatives to incorporate segments of the mising elite into its governance project (Gramsci, 1971). When this strategy failed to neutralise opposition, coercion emerged as a complementary mechanism. Mass arrests and detention of over 500 TMPK, MMK, and TMMK leaders during the Accord signing further underscore how dissent is reframed as criminality, narrowing the legitimate political contestation space. The Accord's conclusion, while foremost mobilisation leaders were incarcerated, undermined democratic negotiation principles requiring inclusive stakeholder participation.

The Boundary-less Autonomous Council as Institutional Containment

MAC, established under the 1995 Accord, represents what this study conceptualises as "*institutional containment without concession*." Unlike *Sixth Schedule* district councils, which have clearly demarcated territories and legislative powers, MAC initially lacked a defined geographical jurisdiction and exercised primarily executive functions over limited subject lists (Doley, 2015). This boundary-less design severely restricted *MAC's* capacity to exercise authority over land, resources, and customary institutions, rendering it a symbolic rather than substantive autonomy mechanism. *TMPK–MMK* documentation repeatedly criticises *MAC's* institutional structure, demanding the inclusion of the Sixth Schedule, delineation of territorial jurisdiction, regular elections, and exemption from *Panchayati Raj Acts* that subordinate tribal councils to mainstream local governance structures (Doley & Medak, 2019). The organisations proposed a dual-tier system comprising village councils and district councils with powers comparable to those of the *Bodoland Territorial Council*, indicating sophisticated engagement with comparative institutional design across Northeast region autonomy arrangements. These proposals challenge characterisations of tribal movements as merely reactive, demonstrating their

proactive role in constructing alternative governance models. From a recognition politics standpoint, *MAC* exemplifies how states deploy symbolic institutional forms to manage ethnic demands without altering underlying power distributions (Fraser, 2000). While MAC's creation allowed the government to claim responsiveness to Misingautonomy aspirations, its weak design preserved centralised authority over core domains of land, security, and fiscal control. This dynamic reveals how multicultural recognition may coexist with, and even reinforce, structural inequality when not accompanied by redistributive reforms.

Contemporary Cultural Initiatives and Recognition Politics

Since the mid-1990s, Mising organisations have expanded cultural initiatives, notably the *Mising Youth Festival* (initiated 1996) and *Mising Sports Carnival* (launched 2023), as platforms for identity expression and community integration (Borah et al., 2020). The Youth Festival's ninth edition in 2024 reportedly attracted approximately 5,000 artists and large audiences, featuring traditional performances, attire, cuisine, and craft exhibitions, functioning as a ritualised enactment of imagined community by bringing geographically dispersed misings into shared experiential spaces (Anderson, 1983). These events reaffirm collective belonging while presenting curated images of mising culture to state officials and the wider public.

Bourdieusian analysis reveals that these events generate substantial symbolic capital, prestige, honour, and public visibility that can be potentially converted into political capital. The presence of high-ranking state officials, including the *Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma* and *Education Minister Dr Ranoj Pegu*, at the festival simultaneously affirms Misingcultural legitimacy and repositions the community within state-centred narratives of inclusive development (Sentinel Digital Desk, 2024). However, the persistence of autonomy impasses despite such high-profile recognition suggests that symbolic capital is still limited in its conversion into structural concessions.

The *mising Sports Carnival*, featuring nationally celebrated athletes such as *Hima Das* (Pratidin, 2023), *Lovlina Borgohain*, and *Mirabai Chanu* (বার্তা, 2024) as guests, illustrates how bodily practices function as cultural capital and vehicles of identity construction (Bourdieu, 1986). Sports participation disciplines bodies, inculcates collective discipline, and showcases distinctiveness within national sporting imaginaries. However, the presence of elite athletes also frames mising identity within the acceptable parameters of Indian nationalism, reinforcing narratives that celebrate ethnic pride as long as it enhances rather than challenges national unity.

The *A:bang* storytelling workshops and implementation of the *Gogamukh Declaration* (2015) exemplify more reflexive cultural revival initiatives. The Declaration articulated community aspirations for linguistic preservation, cultural transmission, and institutional reform, while *MBK's* decision to organise workshops across Missing-dominated districts (December 2024) sought to

strengthen traditional authority structures by recognising *Gam* leaders. These initiatives resemble "*archive as resistance*," in which communities curate their own knowledge repositories to challenge erasures in dominant historiographies and educational systems.

Like Anderson's ideas, *A:bang* workshops function as micro-public spheres in which oral narratives, ritual practices, and local histories are re-inscribed into collective consciousness, countering the homogenising effects of mainstream schooling and media (Anderson, 1983). At the same time, Bourdieusian analysis suggests that codifying and institutionalising "*authentic*" traditions risks essentialising Mising culture, potentially marginalising internal diversity and silencing dissenting interpretations (Bourdieu, 1991). The tension between preservation and ossification remains central to contemporary identity politics and requires continual negotiation within community organisations.

Comparative Perspective: Mising autonomy in the Northeast Indian context

The mising autonomy movement in Assam represents a distinctive trajectory within Northeast India's broader landscape of ethnic mobilisation, characterised by sustained non-violent strategies that contrast sharply with the militant insurgency patterns observed in comparable movements. This comparative analysis examines how divergent mobilisation tactics have shaped state responses and institutional outcomes, revealing systemic patterns in India's ethnic federalism.

The mising community, Assam's second-largest tribal group, has pursued autonomy demands through democratic channels since the colonial period. Unlike movements that leveraged armed struggle, mising organisations, notably the *TMPK*, have consistently employed peaceful agitation, memorandum submissions, and electoral participation. This strategic choice reflects deliberate organisational philosophy rather than capacity limitations, as evidenced by their sustained campaign for Sixth Schedule status despite repeated state refusals. The *MAC*, established in 1995, exemplifies the limitations of non-militant approaches. The state government imposed a boundary-less structure without legislative powers, restricting authority to executive functions over 34 subjects under the Eleventh Schedule. This contrasts markedly with territorial councils granted to militant groups, suggesting that peaceful mobilisation yields symbolic rather than substantive autonomy. The state's refusal to include *MAC* under the Sixth Schedule, despite constitutional provisions for tribal self-governance, demonstrates how institutional design discriminates against groups based on their movement tactics rather than their demographic or historical legitimacy. (Bhattacharjee et al., n.d.)

The Bodo movement's trajectory validates the hypothesis that militancy accelerates institutional concessions. The *Bodoland Territorial Council* (BTC), created through the 2003 Memorandum of Settlement, emerged after seven years

of armed insurgency by the *Bodo Liberation Tigers* (BLT). The Accord granted the BLT leadership immediate political control, with 2,641 cadres surrendering arms in exchange for autonomous governance over defined territorial boundaries. (Bhattacharjee et al., n.d.) This pattern repeated in the 2020 Bodo Accord, which further expanded BTR autonomy following decades of violence by the *National Democratic Front of Bodoland* (NDFB). Between 1993 and 2014, ethnic clashes in Bodoland claimed over 970 lives and displaced 840,000 people, creating humanitarian crises that pressured state authorities toward negotiated settlements. The correlation between violence intensity and institutional generosity suggests that state capacity constraints, rather than normative commitments to tribal rights, drive policy decisions. As Baruah (1999) argues, the Indian state's "*politics of nationality*" in Northeast India operates through crisis management rather than structural reform.

The *Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council* (KAAC), established in 1952 under the Sixth Schedule, theoretically represents the gold standard of tribal autonomy. However, empirical analysis reveals systematic implementation deficits. Despite constitutional empowerment to legislate on industries, land alienation, and social customs, *KAAC* functions remain constrained by state oversight mechanisms. The Governor's authority to reserve council laws for presidential consideration creates a veto system that undermines autonomous decision-making. (Government of India, n.d.)

The 2021 Karbi Anglong Agreement, signed after decades of insurgency by five militant groups, exposed these institutional weaknesses. While over 1,000 armed cadres surrendered, the Accord's implementation has been plagued by funding shortages and bureaucratic interference. Studies document council members accepting bribes and statutory support deficiencies that prevent ADCs from executing developmental functions. This implementation gap reflects what Sarmah (2002) terms the "*quirk of history,*" constitutional innovations undermined by administrative reluctance to devolve real power. (Pallathadka et al., 2025)

Comparative analysis reveals a troubling pattern: the state's willingness to grant autonomy correlates positively with movement violence rather than constitutional entitlement. The mising movement's non-violent approach, while morally commendable, has resulted in institutional marginalisation. Conversely, Bodo insurgents secured territorial boundaries and legislative powers after inflicting sustained violence. This suggests that Indian federalism in ethnically diverse regions operates through a "*hierarchy of recognition*" where ethnic groups compete for scarce state attention through escalatory tactics. (*Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) - Former Terrorist Group of Assam*, n.d.) The mechanism appears twofold. First, violence creates governance vacuums that threaten state legitimacy, forcing authorities to co-opt militant leaders through institutional concessions. Second, peaceful movements lack comparable leverage, allowing states to offer symbolic autonomy without substantive power

transfer. As Pegu (2021) demonstrates, the mising community's democratic struggle has been met with "*boundary-less councils*" and exclusion from Sixth Schedule protections, despite meeting demographic and historical criteria. (Bhattacharjee et al., n.d.)

Peace accords in Northeast India function paradoxically as both conflict-resolution mechanisms and mobilisation triggers. The Assam Accord (1985), the Bodo Accord (2020), and the *Karbi Anglong Accord* (2021) share a typical architecture of negotiated settlements without a genuine commitment to implementation by the state. This creates expectation-reality gaps that fuel renewed activism (Rajagopalan, 2008). The Bodo experience illustrates this cycle. The 1993 BAC accord's territorial ambiguities led to immediate rejection and intensified violence, culminating in the 2003 BTC accord. However, even the 2020 accord, which disbanded the NDFB, has failed to prevent continued ethnic tensions. Similarly, the *Karbi Anglong Accord*'s incomplete execution has sustained grievances among surrendered militants. As Das (2007) argues, such accords represent "*piecemeal and endless*" negotiations rather than sustainable peace frameworks (Ministry of Home Affairs, n.d.). This pattern suggests that strategically negotiated settlements, lacking institutionalised mechanisms for implementation, perpetuate rather than resolve ethno-political conflicts. The mising movement's persistence despite the MAC's formation exemplifies how incomplete accords can become "*catalysts for new waves of mobilisation*," as unmet expectations legitimate renewed demands.

These cases demonstrate that India's asymmetric federalism operates through selective institutionalisation, rewarding militancy while marginalising peaceful mobilisation. The Sixth Schedule's potential as an innovative constitutional mechanism for protecting indigenous rights remains unrealised due to selective implementation. This creates perverse incentives, in which rational ethnic actors may calculate that armed struggle offers higher returns than democratic advocacy (Pallathadka et al., 2025). The comparative evidence indicates that sustainable conflict resolution requires moving beyond crisis-driven accords toward institutionalised autonomy frameworks that treat constitutional provisions as entitlements rather than bargaining chips. Until then, Northeast India's tribal movements will continue cycling between mobilisation and managed containment, with violence remaining the most reliable path to substantive self-governance.

Elite Mediation, State Containment, and Recognition Paradoxes

This section synthesises empirical and theoretical insights into three interrelated findings that address the study's core research questions.

Organic Intellectuals as Double-edged Mediators

Mising organisational elites function as Gramscian organic intellectuals whose mediation is simultaneously enabling and constraining. Their educational

and organisational capital enables translation of diffuse grievances into legally articulated demands, coordination of mass mobilisation, and negotiation with state actors. Without the leadership of *TMPK, MBK, MAK, MMK, TMMK,* and *MDK*, the misingi dentity movement would lack institutional coherence and strategic direction. However, elite mediation also introduces new hierarchies and potential disjunctures between leadership strategies and grassroots expectations. Documentary evidence of internal debates over the 1995 Accord, *MAC's* design, and tactical repertoire reveals recurring tensions, particularly regarding perceived compromises and the pace of negotiations. This addresses theoretical claims that organic intellectuals inhabit ambiguous positions embedded within subaltern communities yet structurally pulled toward state-centred arenas, with attendant risks of co-optation. Elite mobility thus emerges as double-edged: necessary for accessing power but potentially distancing leaders from everyday experiences of marginalisation.

Institutional Containment without Substantive Concession

State responses to mising autonomy demands exemplify containment strategies that combine symbolic recognition with minimal power redistribution. The Assam Government's decision to create a boundary-less *MAC* with primarily executive functions, while publicly celebrating tribal culture through festivals and rhetoric, aligns with broader patterns in India's management of ethnic claims. This strategy allows state actors to claim responsiveness and inclusivity while preserving control over land, security, and resource regimes. The 1995 Accord negotiations demonstrate how selective co-optation of elites, divide-and-rule tactics, and coercive measures (including lethal force and mass arrests) operate in tandem to fragment movements and delimit acceptable demand repertoires. Comparison with militant-turned-negotiating groups in Northeast India suggests that the state's willingness to extend substantive concessions correlates strongly with perceived disruptive capacity, reinforcing perverse incentive structures.

Recognition Politics and the Culturalisation of Autonomy

Contemporary cultural initiatives generate significant symbolic capital, reinforce collective identity, yet contribute to paradoxical recognition dynamics. State-supported festivals and workshops affirm mising distinctiveness and offer important spaces for self-representation. However, they may also shift public discourse from autonomy and self-governance toward culture, tourism, and heritage management. This culturalisation of politics risks relegating structural questions of land rights, institutional design, and fiscal autonomy to the background. From a theoretical standpoint, it shows that recognition without redistribution can reproduce structural inequalities beneath multicultural veneers. In the mising case, the co-existence of vibrant cultural programming with stalled debates over *Sixth Schedule* inclusion illustrates how recognition politics can be

absorbed into state-managed narratives of inclusive development without altering foundational power relations.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the reconstruction of mising identity in the post–Assam Accord period is best understood as an elite-mediated political process shaped by asymmetric power relations within India's federal framework. This study shows that the elite-driven mobilisation, state containment strategies, and the difficulties of recognition politics all shaped the reconstruction of mising identity after the Assam Accord. Drawing on Gramscian, Bourdieusian, and Andersonian perspectives, the analysis shows that Mising organisational elites have functioned as organic intellectuals who translate dispersed grievances into intelligible political claims, mobilise collective action, and negotiate with state institutions. Their upward mobility and command over cultural, educational, and organisational capital have been indispensable for sustaining the autonomy movement and institutionalising identity claims. At the same time, this mediation has generated internal hierarchies and tensions, revealing the ambivalent position of elites who must continuously balance grassroots legitimacy with engagement in state-centred political arenas.

The state's response to Mising demands reflects a broader pattern of institutional containment rather than substantive accommodation. The creation of a boundary-less Mising Autonomous Council illustrates how recognition is strategically deployed to manage ethnic aspirations without meaningful redistribution of political authority. Through selective co-optation of compliant elites, fragmentation of representative claims, and the episodic use of coercion, the state has preserved control over land, resources, and governance while projecting an image of inclusivity. This confirms Gramsci's insight that hegemony operates through a calibrated mix of consent and coercion, and Fraser's argument that recognition divorced from redistribution risks reproducing structural inequalities. Contemporary cultural initiatives further illuminate the paradoxes of recognition politics. Festivals, sports carnivals, and cultural workshops have strengthened collective belonging and enhanced symbolic visibility, functioning as mechanisms of imagined community formation in Anderson's sense. However, their growing institutional acceptance has also contributed to the culturalisation of political demands, wherein identity is celebrated while substantive questions of autonomy, territoriality, and legislative power remain unresolved. Overall, the study argues that durable inclusion in a federal democracy requires more than cultural acknowledgment or limited executive autonomy. It necessitates a restructuring of power relations through territorially grounded self-governance, meaningful legislative authority, and control over resources. The persistence of the Mising movement, despite repeated accords and institutional arrangements, highlights the limits of surface-level pluralism and raises critical questions about the capacity of India's ethnic federalism to accommodate diversity through

genuine power-sharing. These insights carry broader implications for understanding ethnic mobilisation, recognition politics, and democratic governance in heterogeneous societies beyond Northeast India.

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