



## **Exploring the Essence of Ali Aye Ligang: A Cultural and Agricultural Perspective**

**Urbashi Lachit**

M.A in Folklore, University of Kalyanis, India

**Agnimitra Bora**

M.A in Theatre Arts, University of Hyderabad, India

### **Abstract**

The northeastern region of India is a vibrant landscape of folk literature, where each ethnic group carries a rich oral tradition shaped by its history, environment, and way of life. Among them, the Mising community has nurtured a distinctive and dynamic folk heritage, deeply embedded in their cultural fabric. Their oral literature, songs, narratives, and ritualistic expressions reflect their close relationship with nature, agricultural practices, and collective identity. However, as globalization progresses, traditional practices are undergoing shifts in their modes of transmission, influencing how cultural knowledge is preserved and shared. One of the most significant expressions of Mising cultural life is Ali Aye Ligang, an agricultural festival that marks the beginning of the sowing season. It is not just a celebration but a reflection of the Mising people's deep-rooted connection to the land and their agricultural traditions. The festival, observed with ceremonial rituals, music, and dance, is a cultural expression that binds the community together, passing down collective memories and values through generations. Yet, evolving socio-economic conditions and modern influences have brought changes to the ways this festival is observed. While it continues to hold cultural importance, its role within the community is adapting to contemporary realities. This paper explores Ali Aye Ligang in the context of Mising livelihood, analyzing its cultural significance and the challenges it faces in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** Folklife, Mising Tribe, Agricultural Festival, Ali Aye Ligang, Cultural Identity.



## Introduction

Mising folk life revolves around rivers, farming, Changghar (stilt house), Murangghar (youth dormitory), looms, cooperative systems, and festivals, shaping their oral traditions, songs, and stories. Among these, Ali Aye Ligang is a major agricultural festival marking the start of the sowing season. It reflects the Mising people's bond with the land, promoting communal harmony, teamwork, and prosperity. More than just a festival, Ali Aye Ligang embodies Mising folk life. It features rituals, feasting, the Gumrag dance, and folk songs expressing gratitude, joy, and hopes for a good harvest. It also highlights the community's collective farming practices and strong social ties. Nature plays a key role, with rivers, fields, and seasons woven into their narratives. Love is expressed through Oi Nitom folk songs, while religious and spiritual ideas, both old and new, also shape their traditions. These elements make Mising folk literature a rich reflection of their way of life and cultural identity.

## Aims and objectives

To explore the cultural essence of **Ali Aye Ligang** and its evolving significance within Mising traditions.

1. Understand its role in folk life and identity.
2. Examine its connection to agriculture and community life.
3. Trace the impact of modern influences on its practice.

## Area and Methodology

The present study has been carried out mainly using primary data from the field. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques have been used. Mostly qualitative data has been used in this study, and some secondary data from some books and articles has also been taken into account to supplement the primary information. During the course of the study, both participant and non-participant observations have been taken into account. The study is conducted in Afala gaon Disang Mukh , Kuwamora Handique gaon and Kankan Nagar of Sivasagar district of Assam.



## **Disussion**

### **History of Mising Community**

The 'A:bang' songs serve as an unwritten history of the Mising people, revealing five ancient locations where they once lived. These places—K:ji Pa:taang, Ki:ling-Kaange, Ta:paam-Dumban or Tachug-Dumban, Chirki Patang, and Rig-Rigam—are also found in Mising legends, folklore, and folk tales. Some scholars argue that Kokonor Lake, in northeastern Tibet, may be the Mising-named 'Koji Patang.' The lake is situated about 40 miles from Kanchu province, China, with the Huang-He River flowing to its south. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee suggests that the original homeland of the Sino-Tibetan Mongoloid race was the basins of the Huang-He and Yangtze-Kiang rivers in northwestern China.

The exact origins of the Mising people remain uncertain. However, insights from historians, archaeological evidence, cultural elements, and Mising legends offer a broader perspective. According to A. H. Dani, the tribal people of North Assam migrated from China, aligning with Chatterjee's claim regarding the original settlement of the Sino-Tibetan Mongoloid race. Given that the Mising are a branch of this race, their original homeland likely included the Huang-He and Yangtze-Kiang river basins. Like other Mongoloid groups such as the Adi (Pasi, Padam, Miyang, Bori, Pailibo, Bokar), Nishi, Apatani, Galo, and Tagin, the Mising people trace their lineage to the Abotani. The Abotani resided in the eastern Himalayas before migrating to the Siang and Dibang valleys of NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh). Scholars believe their ancestors arrived in these valleys from western China via Tibet. Archaeological discoveries in Shadia, the Abor Hills, and the Mising Hills include tools made of stone, limestone, bone, and jadeite, suggesting an ancient presence. A. H. Dani, in 'Pre-history and Post-history of Eastern India' (Calcutta, 1970), notes similarities between these tools and those found in Yunnan province, China, as well as Southeast Asia, reinforcing a historical link between North Assam's inhabitants and China. Cultural parallels between the Mising and the Chinese further support this connection. Professor E. H. Parker highlights the Mising prohibition against marrying within the same clan, a practice also observed in ancient Chinese society. C. P. FitzGerald draws additional parallels, such as the two-storied wooden and bamboo houses built by the Mising, resembling those constructed in China from 2000 to 1500 BC. Both societies also



believe in dual souls: in Chinese tradition, the 'P' soul remains near the body, while the 'Hun' soul ascends to a higher realm. Similarly, the Mising believe in 'Iji:' (biological) and 'Yal:' (spiritual) souls. Researcher Nomal Pegu suggests that the ancestors of the Mising-Adi people inhabited South China around 2000 BC before migrating to Tibet and settling near Mansarovar during the Ramayana and Mahabharata eras. The Mising legend of the 'Yalum Chiang' river aligns with the Chinese 'Yangtze-Kiang' river, further affirming these historical links. Mising folklore mentions the collection of precious 'Dagni' and 'Tadag' stones from this river, which were traded in Chinese markets along the Jade Road. These stones continue to hold religious and ceremonial significance among Mising families.

Based on historical accounts, archaeological findings, and cultural elements, three conclusions emerge:

1. The original homeland of the Mising people was near the Huang-He, Yangtze-Kiang, and Yalum-Kiang rivers in China.
2. The Mising people lived along the Yalum-Kiang River until approximately 300 BC.
3. Extensive cultural exchange occurred between the Mising and Chinese societies due to prolonged interaction.

The Mising migration southward involved crossing multiple rivers, including the Yangtze Kiang, Mekong, Lancang Kiang, and Chaviruna. The latter's strong currents initially impeded their movement, leading them to settle temporarily in a place called Deken, located at the confluence of China, India, and Burma. Over time, the Mising divided into two groups. One group successfully crossed Chaviruna and reached the Tsangpo River in Tibet, settling there for many years. Mising legends reference a river named Koji-Patang, which some scholars identify as the Tsangpo River. The second group remained in Deken before further dividing into three smaller groups, some moving westward to Mying on the China-Burma border and others reaching Assam via the Patkai Mountains before the Ahoms. Historical records indicate the Mising arrived in Assam in multiple waves. They primarily entered through the Abor Hills and the Siang and Chikan (Dibang) rivers. The term 'Miri'—often confused with 'Mising'—originally referred to hill dwellers and was mistakenly applied to various tribes. Hamilton categorized the Miris into four groups (Ghasi, Charak, Panibatia, and Tarbatia), arguing that



the term was a misinterpretation. J.F. Nidam noted that Miris around Sadiya and along the Brahmaputra, Dihing, and Dibang rivers are identified as Mising. The Abor (Adi) and Mising share linguistic, cultural, and historical ties. Scholars like Mackenzie and Hamilton argue that they originate from the same lineage. Dalton explicitly states that the Mising were refugees from the Abor Hills under a leader named Gam. The journey from Yalum-Kiang to Assam spanned thousands of years and required navigating various terrains, including valleys, rivers, mountains, and forests. Significant locations in this migration include the Yangtze Kiang, Mekong, Chaviruna, Deken, Namchararwa Peak, Champa, Po Valley, Yunnan, Pemaku, Doshing La, Jayul, and the Chindruk Valley. The Mising likely lived longest in the Yalum-Kiang and Dibang-Sikang and Dihang-Siang valleys. The Mising continued migrating into Assam until the 16th century. Although the exact timeline of their arrival remains uncertain, different Mising clans arrived at different times. Sonaram Payang Kotoki, in 'History of the Miri Tribe,' suggests that their descent into the plains coincided with the Mans' invasion of Assam. However, further research is needed to pinpoint precise details of this historical migration.

### **Social and Agricultural Life of the Mising Community**

Agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for the missing people. Historically, they practiced Jhum cultivation. When they lived in the hills. Upon settling in the plains, they transitioned to plow-based farming. Initially, they relied on hoes for cultivation before fully adopting plowing methods. The fertile valleys of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri rivers provide ideal conditions for growing various crops. The Mising people cultivate ahu (autumn rice) and bao (deep-water rice), particularly in riverine areas such as Majuli. Machans (raised platforms) are constructed in fields to monitor crops. Their primary sources of income include mustard and pulse cultivation, along with vegetables like chilies, gourds, and pumpkins. Cotton cultivation was historically significant, providing material for their cultural craft, "Mirijim" (Gadu), showcasing their textile artistry. A unique feature of Mising agriculture is cooperative labour, known as Brigm (Saria) and Mumbari Ya:mer (Maine Brigm). These traditional systems involved the youth working collectively on different farms. The host would provide a feast of rice, fish, meat, and apong (rice beer) in gratitude. This system strengthened social



bonds and increased the village fund, which was used for social and cultural festivals like Dobur Ui and Pohrag.

The social structure of the Mising community revolves around cooperation, traditions, and cultural festivities. Hospitality is a core value, and young men and women are actively involved in community affairs. In the past, elderly individuals retired from household chores while the youth managed work through cooperative efforts, fostering unity. The Mising have a democratic social governance system called Mrumbo-Ya: me, similar to the administrative structure of the Ahom kingdom. Young men are led by a Deka Bora, assisted by a Chut Bora, while young women are supervised by a Borani. These leaders oversee cultural activities and ensure discipline. Judicial matters among the youth are handled by Udaru (male judges) and Udani (female judges), who mediate disputes and enforce community decisions. Punishments for minor offenses often include offerings of apong or livestock. The ultimate penalty for severe misconduct is excommunication. Unlike the formal village panchayat, this governance system focuses on maintaining traditions and social harmony among the younger generation.

## **Folk Festivals**

Music and dance play an integral role in Mising cultural life. Collective performances of traditional songs and dances mark celebrations such as Pohrag, a post-harvest festival celebrated over three to five days. The festival begins with ritual offerings of apong to deities by community leaders, followed by grand festivities in an open house called Murang. Similarly, Ali Aye Ligang, another significant festival, marks the beginning of the agricultural season and is celebrated with traditional songs, dances, and feasting. Dobur, a ritualistic community gathering, is performed to seek divine blessings for prosperity and protection from natural calamities.

## **Ali-ai Ligang and Its Significance**

Ali-ai Ligang is a major festival of the Mising community. The Mising community, worshippers of Donyi-Polo (Sun-Moon), always hold Mother Earth, who provides food and livelihoods, in high regard. She is eternally worshipped. This is the primary objective of Ligang. With the arrival of the spring season, the entire earth seems to come alive. Therefore,



the Mising community celebrates this festival on the first Wednesday of the month of Phagun. Wednesday is considered a sacred and auspicious day for the Mising people. Currently, the state government has also recognized this sacred festival of the Mising community, or 'Ali-ai Ligang,' as a local festival and has declared it a government holiday.

The meaning of 'Ali-ai Ligang' is: 'Ali' means seeds or seedlings, 'Aye' means fruit, and 'Ligang' means the first day of sowing seeds or seedlings. The combined meaning of these three words is 'the first day of sowing seeds.' Today, the first seeds will be sown in Mother Earth (soil) for the upcoming year. This festival is celebrated to pray to the mother or nurturer and ancestors so that the seeds remain safe in the soil and are not harmed by pests, wild animals, or natural disasters. In fact, during 'Ali-aye Ligang,' the cultivation of summer rice begins. This cultivation is done by the Mising people using the jhum cultivation method, both in the past and at present. It is not just rice; they also plant 'enge' (taro), 'tapa' (pumpkin), 'murchi' (chili), 'take' (ginger), 'angun' or 'ali' (yam), bananas, and other necessary crops and seeds.

On the day of 'Ali Aye Ligang,' in the morning, the main housewife of the house starts sowing new crops with a hoe in a corner of the field. While scattering the seeds, she digs the soft part of the soil with the hoe and says this 'penam' (chant):

- (1) "Upika, Shuchin Gamma:ngi tal bal lanka. Chil Tagaying Tangak Dapi Tri:pinamim Chiddung. Apan A:benim Kaga:manggam Bichueku."
- (2) "Kumdang Vri:ngngi Ka:ta Tatalaanka, Chini Yagani Ta:ta Ya:ya Niluti Ka:la-Talaanka."

(May sorrows, adversities, failures, and obstacles go away from here. I am starting to sow crops to eat for the next five to ten years. I will donate to the poor, needy, and beggars. May Goddess Lakshmi, or the protector of the house, keep watch. May the dead ancestors protect the crops.)

### **"Ui Machak" (Worship Arrangement and Observance)**

For 'Ali Aye Ligang,' daily food items are collected a month, fortnight, or a week in advance. That is, 'apong' is prepared separately almost a month before 'Ligang.' It is kept in such a way that it does not become impure in any way. A week or fortnight before, one male person from each family goes for 'dam' (fish-meat) 'apta' (hunting). This hunting is actually done for the



community, and later it is divided among the members. The hunted fish and meat are dried. Dried fish is called 'ngchan,' and dried meat is called 'drican.' Similarly, the women of each family also prepare 'angkhel' or 'ampì' (bora rice), 'ambun' (rice), 'take' (ginger), 'murchi' (chili), etc., a month in advance. About two days before 'Ligang,' the people who go for 'apta' return home with a bundle of leaves. It can be mentioned here that such hunting or festival arrangement activities, songs, dances, and postures can be shown in the 'Lugan Ch:mant' (Lügang Bihu). Among these, 'inviting Aptaal and fishing, and hunting deer with bow and arrows' are notable dances.

On the morning of 'Lugan,' the daughters-in-law of the house take a bath and get busy cooking the food items brought for worship or the festival. For 'Nrügang,' small bundles of 'Ampi' or Akkel (Bora) rice are tied. Actually, 'P:r Apang' (Chhaimad) is used for this festival. A chutney is prepared by mixing dried fish and 'take' (ginger), which is called 'Tr:m.' Besides that, fish or meat curry is cooked. After preparing all these foods, a piece of land is dug up and cleaned behind the house, and the soil is raised to resemble a small path. On top of that path, small bowl-like structures are made with leaves, counting how many ancestors or people have died in a house. Those ancestors or people who died unnaturally, i.e., without any fever or illness, are given separate or different places. On the day of 'Nrügang,' exactly after noon, the head of the household or the son performs the ritual of offering water to the spirits 'Um Apin' (offering water to the spirits) at the mentioned land area. The meaning of 'Um Apin' is 'Uram', meaning deity or spirit, and 'Apin' meaning rice. Pouring 'P:r' Apang (Chhaimad) into the small bowl-like structures made of leaves mentioned above, and sprinkling 'Ackel' or 'Ampi' (Bora) rice, the 'Penam' (chant) begins. In this chant, the names of the deceased ancestors are recited. That is, if there was an old grandfather named Men in a house, then it will be said in his name like this:

- (1) "China, Chil Ta:t Mentan Nam, Dritalaki Pu:nam Jernam Lagi Dad Tri:dpi Akkel Ammunilang P:r Ap:lak Uram Apin Biduhniki."
- (2) "Kumdang Vringngi Aipi Duhmtaika, Akum Rangim Achar Bi:ri Mtaika, Uram Apin Bima: Amma Mri:ma:langka."



(This is today, grandfather Mekton. I am offering you water with Bora rice and Apang for eating and drinking with the year's production and improvement. Do not think that it does not give strength for people to live well, and does not give water or offerings to the dead.)

Similarly, the 'Uram Apin' or Jalpinda is done by reciting the names of all the deceased ancestors.

The 'Nrügang' starts eating around 2 or 3 p.m. This work is also started by a rule. For example, no one can start eating in anyone's house until the 'Li:ng' 'Babang' (a type of plate-shaped musical instrument) is played from the village headman's house or 'Gam's house. The sound of 'Li:ng' 'Babang' signals the start of the festival and the order to eat. After playing this 'Li:ng Babang,' each head of the household is given a bowl of Apang (local rice beer) and a bundle of Purang (Ampi rice bundle). He starts eating in the house first. After that, 'Mrizing Bark' (the old group's messenger) calls each 'Mrizing' (old person) from the other end of the village and starts eating from the other end. Every old man in the house has to join this group.

After the elderly finish eating, the younger members of the family begin their meal. It is a rule that the young cannot start eating before the elders. After finishing the meal, the youth of the village start dancing and singing. The dance performed during 'Ali-ai Ligang' is called 'Gumrag Soman.' This dance is led by young men and women in traditional Mising attire. They move in rhythmic steps to the beats of drums and cymbals while singing traditional Mising songs. The festival continues for five days, during which different community-based activities take place. One of the key features of 'Ali-ai Ligang' is the sense of unity and joy among the people. It is a time when everyone comes together to celebrate the blessings of nature and pray for a prosperous harvest. The last day of the festival, known as 'Lilen,' is marked by a grand feast and various cultural performances. People exchange food, visit relatives, and express gratitude to their ancestors and nature. The festival concludes with the hope of a fruitful year ahead, and the rituals performed ensure a successful agricultural season.

Thus, 'Ali-ai Ligang' is not just a festival; it is a celebration of life, nature, and community bonding. It signifies the deep-rooted cultural and spiritual connection of the Mising people with the land and their ancestors.



## **The Gumrag Dance**

The Gumrag dance is central to the Mising festival, Ali Aye Ligang, marking the first day of paddy sowing. Also called Gumrag So:nam, its name comes from the drum sounds used in the dance. It was previously known as Ali Nrigang So:man or Ligang So:man, and in 1956, the Ba:ni Kiba:ng decided that Ali Aye Ligang would be celebrated collectively on the first Wednesday of Phagun (February-March) each year. The dance follows six drum beats, with Ag So:nam depicting paddy cultivation movements. Traditionally performed with drums, cymbals, linang, and marbang, modern variations also use pepa and flute. The song "Lalaale Laale Laale Daab", originally not part of Gumrag, was later introduced by Airaam Bori's folk troupe and officially incorporated in 2004. The dance portrays agricultural activities like hunting, sowing, bundling paddy, threshing, husking, and the swaying of paddy in the wind. The beats guide the dancers, whose movements do not emphasize specific hand gestures, neck movements, or excessive bending. The posture follows a set pattern, alternating the left and right foot with controlled movement. Dancers turn their feet twice, once inward and then outward, with hands initially at waist level. Performed during Ali Aye Ligang and Porag festivals, the Mising people first pray for a good harvest before celebrating with the Gumrag dance. In Porag, the Murang house is purified, and the Mibu (priest) performs rituals. Young men and women dance five times around the Murang house, while the Yamnam drum welcomes the Mibu and cultural troupes.

To preserve Gumrag, its beats, lyrics, and movements must be documented, recorded, and archived. The Mising Durbur Kibaang is working to establish Gumrag as a national identity dance, standardizing its form based on 2004 and 2008 workshops. Training programs across Assam have developed nearly two thousand trainers, who are training more dancers. A structured plan aims to unite 10,000 drummers and dancers, ensuring synchronized performance for national recognition. More than a dance, Gumrag embodies Mising culture, unity, and equality, reflecting a society without distinctions of rich and poor, high and low. Systematic preservation efforts aim to keep this tradition alive for future generations.



## Oi Nitom

Oi Nitom, the most significant Mising folk song, primarily expresses love and emotions between young men and women. Its simple, colloquial language and captivating melody make it an essential part of Mising cultural life. More than just a love song, Oi Nitom reflects the daily struggles, joys, and traditions of the Mising people. Deeply intertwined with Ali-Aye-Ligang, the festival marking the beginning of shifting cultivation (Ahu rice sowing), Oi Nitom serves as both a celebration and a historical record. During Ali-Aye-Ligang, Oi Nitom is sung to express love, agricultural hopes, and social unity. The festival, a time of joy and community bonding, finds its musical soul in Oi Nitom, which captures themes of farming, rivers, love, and spiritual devotion. Oi Nitom also preserves Mising history, narrating stories from the Ahom era, British rule, and socio-political movements. Through its spontaneous and honest expression, it continues to shape and reflect the Mising identity, ensuring that their traditions, beliefs, and struggles remain alive for future generations.

### **Celebration and Preservation of Ali-Aye-Ligang Today**

Ali-Aye-Ligang, the agricultural festival of the Mising community, has evolved over time, influenced by modernization and external cultural forces. However, Mising Ba:ni Kiba:ng has taken steps to preserve its originality by ensuring that the festival remains rooted in rituals rather than excessive glamour, fixing its celebration on the first Wednesday of the Fagun month across Assam. Despite Western influences shaping its festive atmosphere, the festival continues to hold deep cultural significance, with the younger generation actively participating.

Their way of life, shaped by language, folk culture, religious customs, and traditions, has gradually adapted to modern socio-economic systems. This transition has also posed challenges to their unique cultural identity. Today, the Mising community stands at a crossroads. Recognizing this, the Mising Ba:ni Kiba:ng organized a Mising National Convention in 2015 in Gogamukh, bringing together political leaders, writers, researchers, social workers, business figures, and elected representatives to formulate a collective national action plan, with another such initiative set for 2024. The younger generation, particularly students at higher secondary,



college, and university levels, holds the responsibility of preserving their community and cultural identity. Although they are more advanced in education and technology compared to past generations, awareness of their language and heritage remains limited. Language, literature, and culture define a nation's identity, and Mising folk traditions, particularly its rich musical heritage, significantly contribute to Assamese music. Folk songs such as A:bang, Kaban, Tib:tikaang, Bruni, Midang Nitom, Ch:lung Nitom, Gelaki Nitom, Deobor Dentalik Nitom, and the popular Oi:Nitom hold deep cultural significance. Their preservation depends on the younger generation's commitment to learning and promoting them.

Artists must not only perform for fame or money but also uphold their cultural responsibility. Unfortunately, such awareness is rare among today's Mising youth. Even those who do not sing can contribute by preserving and promoting these traditions. With the growth of media platforms like radio, TV, and digital formats, Mising folk performances, both accurate and distorted, reach a large audience. Young people must identify mistakes, correct them, and protect their culture from misrepresentation. While it is good that non-Mising artists appreciate these traditions, they should not alter them incorrectly. Some Mising individuals, lacking proper knowledge, unknowingly pass on incorrect versions, leading to cultural distortion. To safeguard authenticity, young Mising individuals must learn from experienced elders, understand the deeper meanings of folk songs, and actively correct misrepresentations. The future of the Mising community depends on an aware and responsible youth, and it is essential for them to embrace their cultural consciousness and take action to preserve their heritage.

## **Conclusion**

The culture of a society is reflected in its festivals, forming the identity of its community. The Mising people are known for their hospitality, uniting everyone with love and traditions. Folk culture continuously flows—from villages to cities and beyond—but the Mising people strive to preserve their original form over time. Their elders play a crucial role in safeguarding traditions, ensuring that disruptions are corrected and the cultural essence is maintained. May the language, folk festivals, folk dances, and folklore of this simple yet culturally rich community receive the global respect and recognition they deserve. At the heart of Ali-Aye-Ligang, the first seed sowing is accompanied by prayers and offerings to Mother Earth, water,



air, rain, the sun and moon, and the ancestors. P: r apong (rice beer) in kopaat (leaf bowls), ginger, eggs, and purang (packed food) are presented with hopes for fertile lands and abundant harvests—not just for the Mising people, but for all of humanity. This spirit of inclusivity reflects the essence of Assamese culture, where festivals like Ali-Aye-Ligang, Dobur, and Porag are celebrated alongside Kati Bihu, Magh Bihu, and Bohag Bihu. Just as the Assamese people embrace diverse cultural festivities, Ali-Aye-Ligang should be celebrated by all in Assam, fostering a spirit of unity and cultural harmony.



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