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**Socio-Historical Study of Ethnic Nationalism in
Assam with special Reference to the
Karbi Ethno-Cultural Expressions**

**A thesis submitted in part fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Prafulla Kr. Nath
Registration No. 014 of 2013**



**Department of Cultural Studies
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Tezpur University
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Abstract


This research is an attempt to study the current ethnic ferment in Assam, a state of India in its north-east corner, which is marked by organized political movements and cultural activism on the part of the various communities of the state. Assam has been witnessing a series of socio-political movements in the ethnic line since the time of independence of the country. Almost every community of this province is seen to be resorting to such movements (either in the form of insurgency or democratic protests) for registering its demands for specific kinds of empowerment (from sovereign territory to limited autonomy). Such demands of a particular group are also noted to be changing with the passing of time, responding to changing socio-political contexts. These political aspirations and activities have been redefining the borders of the *self* and the *other* by continuously changing, recreating and, if necessary, inventing the requisite cultural narratives to foster the desired ethno-national identities.

This study is firstly an endeavour to engage with the question of whether these proliferating ethno-national movements can be understood as the simulations of the top-down model of nationalism of the larger Indian state or they can be read as something more organically evolved at their local specific situations. This core issue of this study has been attempted by analyzing the socio-historical contexts of the processes of identity formation and cultural differentiation among the population of Assam. Secondly, this study is especially interested in understanding and describing how *the culture* has remained both as the *cause* as well the *effects* of these changes and ethno-political aspirations. This second query of this research is sought to be explored with the specific contexts of the ethno-cultural manifestations of the Karbi community of Assam in current times.

DECLARATION

I do hereby declare that the thesis titled “Socio-Historical Study of Ethnic Nationalism in Assam with special Reference to the Karbi Ethno-Cultural Expressions” submitted by me to Tezpur University in part fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies under the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, is a result of my own study and research on the subject and that it has not been submitted to any other institution, including this University in any other form or published at any time before.

Date: 03/12/2014



(Prafulla Kr. Nath)

Date of Revised Submission: 15/5/2015

Registration No.- 014 of 2013



DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL STUDIES
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY
NAAPAM, TEZPUR-784028
ASSAM

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Socio-Historical Study of Ethnic Nationalism in Assam with special Reference to the Karbi Ethno-Cultural Expressions” submitted to the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tezpur University in part fulfillment for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies is a record of research work carried out by M_r Prafulla K_i Nath under my supervision and guidance

All help received by him from various sources have been duly acknowledged

No part of this thesis has been submitted elsewhere for award of any other degree

Signature of Supervisor

Designation Assistant Professor

Department Cultural Studies

School Humanities and Social Sciences

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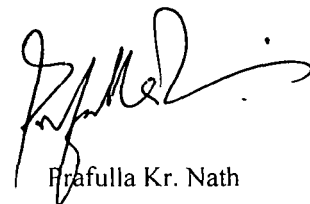
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Chapter 1

Conceptualizing the Study: Theory and Contexts

1.1 Introduction:

Though the *Communist Manifesto* brushed aside the necessity of nations in the sense that the “working men have no country” (Marx & Engels 2007, 28), Marx had realized the unstoppable stimulus of national consciousness, as he had written in a letter to one of his friends: “I assure you that even if one can feel no national pride, one does feel national shame...” (Marx 1843).

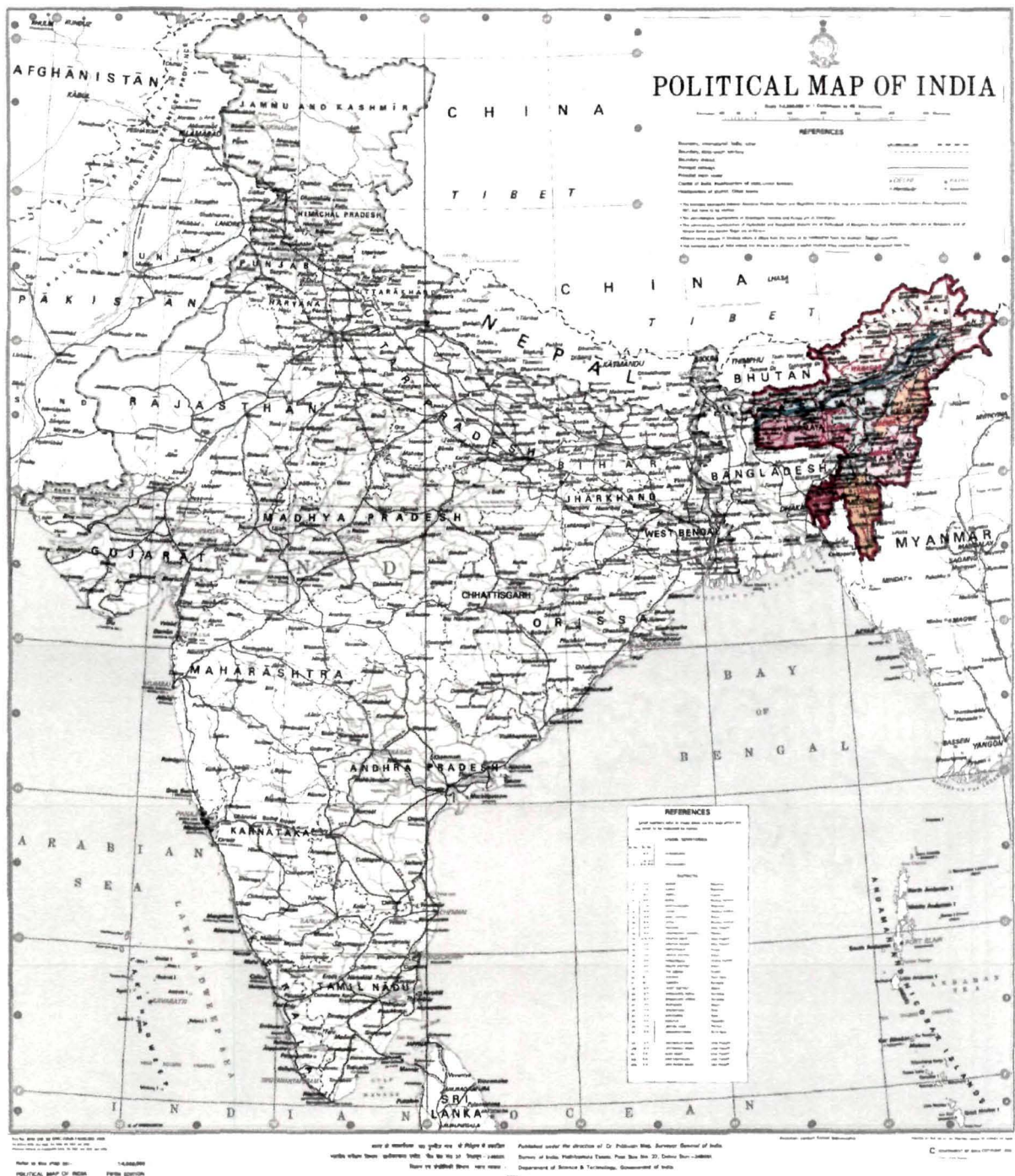
Nationalism, as an ideology and part of the superstructure, is a false consciousness in classical Marxist idioms. However, the identity of the self, or relating oneself to the group that one belongs to, is an irreducible psyche of every human being in the time of capital. In this line it can be argued that ‘man is a (r)national animal’ (Connor 1994, 195). The articulation of identity, ethnicity or nationalism in such rhetoric takes place either in the form of glorification or in the anxieties of national shame. During the 18th and 19th century, the western world invented the design of nation and brought to its colonies; although a definite social sense of belonging had existed either in community or regional line much earlier which later favoured the eruption of nationalism in these colonies. Hobsbawm argues that nationalism comes much earlier than nation (Hobsbawm 1990, 10-11). The temporal national consciousness took a concrete shape when the necessary conditions were created by the colonialism. Mahmood Mamdani, in studying the colonial legacy in Africa, asserts how the institution of law was reinforced by the colonial state to its different groups of citizens who were classified on the basis of ethnicities and races; and how these distinctions became sharper in

articulating ethnicity in the post-colonial times (Mamdani 2001, 654). In the case of India too, different forms of colonial modernity brought in by the British regime later became the sources of articulating identity by the different Indian communities in India in the postcolonial situations. Those structures and categories of colonial modernity may be seen in the forms of cartography, law, bureaucracy and education. Conversion of non-state spaces¹ into parts of state was initiated through these instruments during the colonial regime. This resulted in a definite hierarchy of spaces and peoples in the administrative register of the state, which is now being used for articulating counter-hegemonic assertions from the bottom with the negation of the top down paradigm of nationalism authorized by the Indian state.

Assam is a state of India in the North-Eastern region, surrounded by six other States: Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya. Till 1963, all these seven states were one single state, known as Assam. However, the state was divided into seven different states as mentioned, in the post-Independence times due to regional aspirations of the diverge populations. This unit of the seven states, which is now frequently referred as North-East India, is connected to the rest of India through a narrow strip of land called *Siliguri Corridor* or *Siliguri Chicken-neck*.

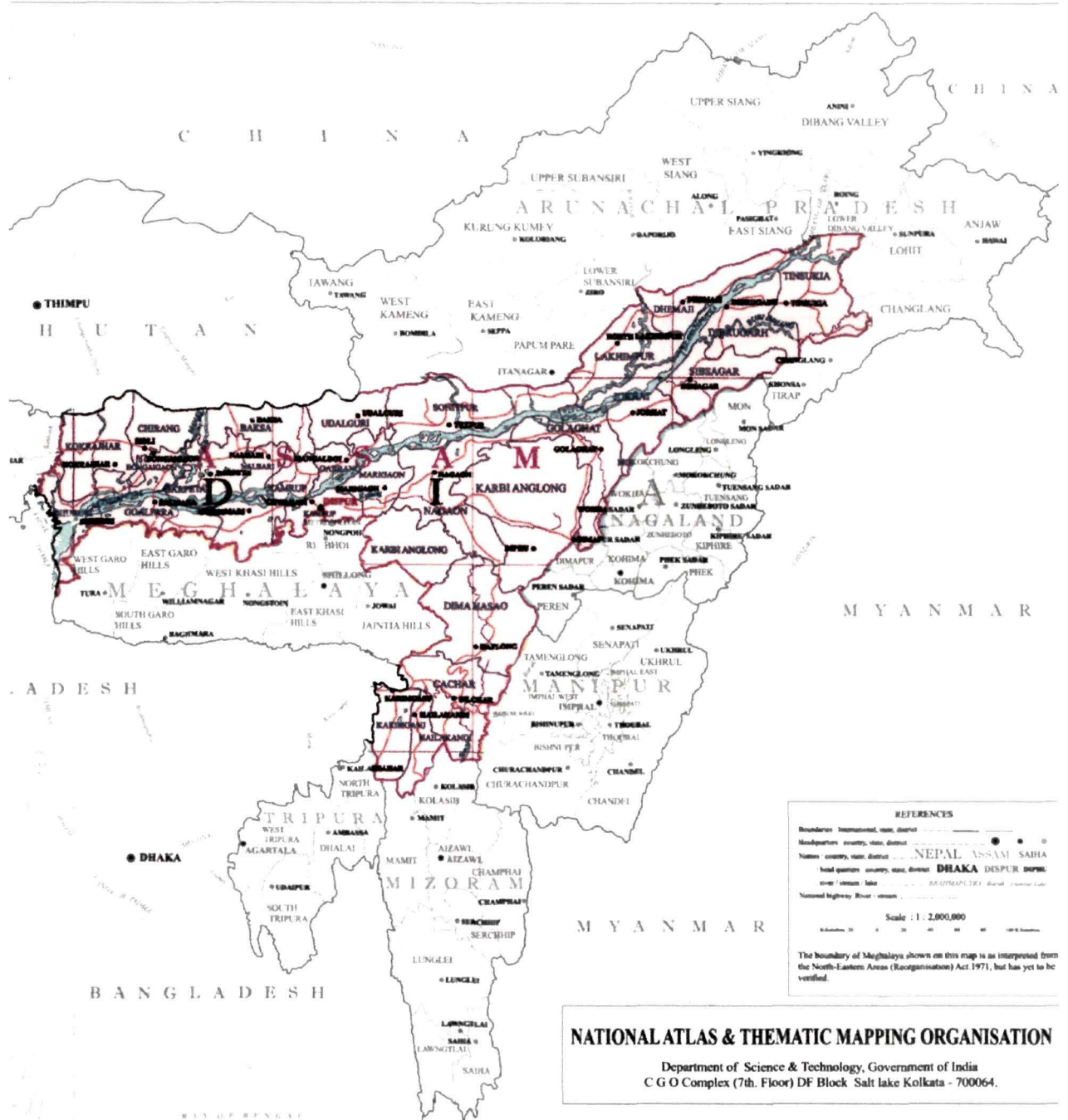
This region of North-East India, in general, is the homeland of several communities who are all distinct in terms of language, religion and traditional expressive cultural forms. Most of the native populations, who were described as Indo-Mongoloids by early historians and ethnographers, demonstrate cultural similarities more with the people of South-East Asian regions than with their counterparts in the mainland India. When these various communities, distinct with their respective traditional values and practices, were subjected to the process of *Indianization* or the nation-building process

¹ The spaces from where the state gets no tax. James Scott, in his study of the *jhum cultivation* (Slash and burn) in South East Asia, considers the hills as the non-state spaces and the population as anarchists (Scott 2009).

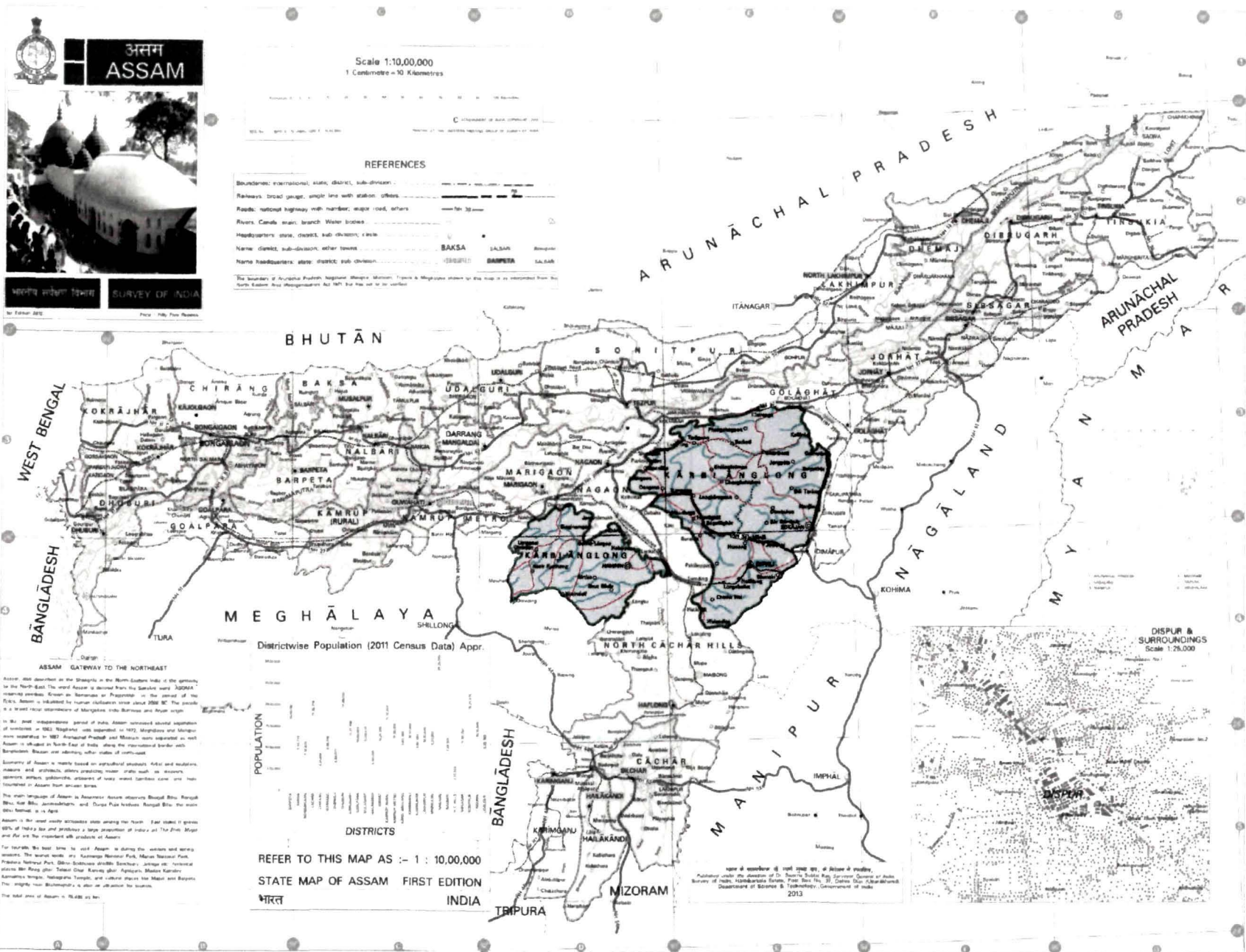


Location of North-East India (highlighted in color)

Map source: Survey of India (<http://www.surveyofindia.gov.in/upload/downloads/Download-36.pdf>)
 (Color rework by researcher)



The state of Assam, highlighted in color, within the North-East India
 Map source: Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Government of India
 (http://www.mdoner.gov.in/zoomimzgemap/imagemap.php?map=NE/NE_Region)
 (Color rework by researcher)



असम ASSAM

सर्वेय ऑफ इंडिया SURVEY OF INDIA

1st Edition 2014 Price: 1/10/- Five Rupees

ASSAM: GATEWAY TO THE NORTHEAST

Assam also described as the Shanghai of the North Eastern India of the country for the North East. The word Assam is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Asama' meaning overheat. Known as Assam or Pragjyotish in the period of the Epic, Assam is believed to have civilization since about 2000 BC. The people in a broad river system of Assam, the Brahmaputra and other rivers.

In the post independence period of India, Assam witnessed several acquisition of territories in 1953. Nagaland was separated in 1957, Manipur and Mizoram were separated in 1957. Assam (Pragjyotish and Mithila) was separated in 1956. Assam is situated on North East of India, along the international border with Bangladesh, Bhutan and adjoining other states of northeast.

Geography of Assam is mostly based on tropical monsoon. Rice and rubber, tea, jute and other crops, along with various other products like silk, etc. are grown in Assam. The main language of Assam is Assamese. Assam also speaks Bengali, Hindi, English, Urdu, etc. The main language of Assam is Assamese. Assam also speaks Bengali, Hindi, English, Urdu, etc. The main language of Assam is Assamese.

The total area of Assam is 78,438 sq km.

District of Karbi Anglong, highlighted in color, within the map of Assam
 Map source: Survey of India(<http://www.surveyofindia.gov.in/files/Assam.pdf>) (Color rework by researcher)

of India after its independence in 1947, many things didn't go smoothly in the region. The recent political history of the region is not only marked by several state-reorganization exercises but also an increasing number of unresolved political crises, pertaining to the demands for greater autonomy, visibility and access, on the part of the different ethnic groups of the region.

Nationalism can be looked as the set of experiences that illustrates 'congruence between culture and power' (Gellner 1983, 52-53). As a result of discontents of varied nature, the on-going ethno-political scenario in the Indian context reveals that the idea of 'Indian nationalism' or that of 'India as a nation state' increasingly came to be realized not more than a myth; and the cultural heritage is materialized as a powerful weapon to negotiate with the state. This myth of nationalism, or the nationalized sense of belonging to the state, was created through the invention of homogeneous identity- with the creation of singular national anthem, national symbol, national language or culture, which came not from the people within, rather imposed from the top. The 19th and early 20th century Indian nationalism was based on certain classical elements of a nation which Stalin holds as the prerequisites. Stalin argues that nation is a "historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in community of culture" (Stalin 1991, 6). The Indian national leaders had left no stone unturned to create a nation in India by incorporating the western ideas of nation. It created the misnomer viz. -'unity in diversity'. In the cases of historiography, language, religion, culture and so on - it created oneness. These were the parts of such national imagination to create India as a nation to fight against the colonial rule. But once the colonial regime ended, the top down model of nationalism and nation building was challenged from various corners of the sub-continent. Phadnis and Ganguly argues that,

"The rise of ethnic nationalism and the formation of ethnic political movements in many developing states can in large part be attributed to the legacy of western colonization and decolonization which created sovereign states incorporating many ethnic groups by ignoring

existing ethnic and cultural divisions and popular political aspirations. different ethnic groups found little in common to bind them together once independence was achieved and common enemy (the colonial power) had departed. In their post-colonial political history, many of these states have had to deal with increased nationalistic assertiveness on the part of ethnic or subordinate minorities because such groups felt badly treated and, hence, came to regard the dominant cultural groups as new colonies” (Phadnis & Ganguly 2001, 16-17).

The Dravidian movement and the movement for independent Nagaland were some of the early challenges for the newly independent Indian state and these movements paved the road for later ethnic assertion movements and several other new social movements in ethnic line in the entire subcontinent during post-independence times. In North-East India, several movements in ethnic line emerged. In case of Assam, the region was Balkanized by increasing number of ethno national forces after the historic Assam Movement which lasted for six long years during 1979-85. In post 1990's situation, almost all the ethnic groups of Assam viz. Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Mishing, Sonowal Kachari, Thengal Kachari, Tiwa, Rabha, as well others were seen to be asserting their respective ethnic identities having political goals of greater autonomy of variable intensities. Sharma argues that the idea of self-rule is quite an ambiguous term when it is put in relation to the ethnonational movements of Assam or the North-East. Historically, the term 'self-rule' is ambiguous for both the state and the representatives of these movements; as sometimes it talks about autonomy of different level, sometimes separate state or sometimes sovereign territory (Sharma 2005, 41). While the elites of a particular ethnic group mobilize the members of the group and aspire to negotiate the political demands, the Indian state looks such issues from the point of view of law and order, or more from a developmental framework. Sanjib Baruah argues that the region North-East India is framed in terms of development and militarization (Baruah 2009, 1-2). In the popular policy making as well academic discourses also it is looked with the similar outlooks.

In such disjuncture, the ethnic assertion and ethnonational character of these different movements get complicated and become sites of dissonant worldviews from within and outside. This leads to a number of different approaches to understand and interpret these ethno-political mobilizations, such as:

- whether the currently proliferating ethno-national assertions can be understood as the simulations of the top-down model of nationalism of the Indian state, or they can be understood as something rooted in the local specificities pertaining to colonial-nationalism and beyond in the context of Assam.
- How the communities are (re)imagining themselves through these kinds of movements? How culture, tradition and history are being asserted, opposed or negotiated to articulate the desired ethnicities?

Centering to these questions, I want to argue that the production of ethnicity or the phenomenon of ethnonationalism in Assam is not simply a question of acquiring or gaining of political spaces as argued by the instrumentalist theorists of ethnicity. On the contrary, there is definite socio-historical lineage of this rhetoric of revolting against the hegemony and exclusion of the dominant sections. As such, to understand the present ethnic upsurges we need to historicize the social and political formation in Assam, which opens up the issues of ethnic questions. While I try to locate the genesis of this political consciousness in the colonial and the pre-colonial, I also emphasize that the nuances of the new economic and political regime after the 1990s, popularly known as *globalization*, can never be excluded from this historicization.

Thus, the basic objective of this thesis is to understand the present ethnic ferments in Assam through examining pre-colonial, colonial and the post-colonial temporalities. The pre-colonial situation had elevated the politics of inclusion of various groups; the colonialism made sharp distinctions among communities whereas the post-colonial affairs led to the politics of exclusion. The 19th century Assam is one of the major focuses in this thesis as political

consciousness in modern sense started with the introduction of colonial modernity during this time. The creation of distinction in the colonial situation continued in the post-colonial phase with an exclusive ethnic politics. It has been attempted here to look at how different social situation is articulated by the emerging elites in ethnic line as well as the role of different neo-liberal intrigues for such political articulation. More emphatically, the thesis also argues that the process of cultural hegemony of dominant sections also worked as catalytic factor to articulate ethnicity as a counter-hegemonic instrument. After studying the ethnic situations of Assam in general, this research work explores, as a special case, the specific contexts of the ethno-cultural manifestations of the Karbi community of Assam in current times.

1.2 Defining the Concepts:

In the following pages, the different theoretical concepts and arguments, which will be extensively used in the later chapters, have been conceptualized and defined. Different terminologies such as ethnicity, ethnonationalism, nationalism, ethnic assertion movement, identity movement etc. are used frequently to understand different kinds of group formations in diverse socio-historical and political contexts. These concepts are interconnected in nature; and in many literatures of social sciences they are often seen to be used synonymously. However, they do bear nuanced variations in their connotations in different context.

1.2.1 Ethnic Group & Ethnicity:

An ethnic group is a group of people who share a common belief of ancestry. So it can be best understood in terms of collectivity – in being member of a group. The collectivity may be bounded by blood relations, kinship ties, language, religion, and some other material and non-material cultural similarities. The ethnic groups often carry a common myth of ancestry which relates all individuals of the group and strengthen the identity as well the sense

of belongingness. The origin of the term *ethnic* can be traced back to Greek word *ethnos*, which was used to refer a group, tribe, race, a person or a swarm. The meaning of the term changed radically throughout history. Eriksen refers to the use of the term in 19th and 20th century in the USA to the migrant population as well as the non-western or northern descent. Although in the 1960's decade the term got a new turn when D. Riesman in 1953 coined the term *ethnic* and it came to popular domain during the 1960's and 1970's.

Weber defined an ethnic group as one whose members "entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration in such a way that this belief is important for the continuation of non-kinship communal relations" (Weber 1922, 389).

Hutchinson and Smith consider six characteristic features of an ethnic group:

- i. a common *proper name*, to identify and express the "essence" of the community;
- ii. a myth of *common ancestry* that includes the idea of common origin in time and place and that gives an ethnies a sense of fictive kinship;
- iii. Shared *historical memories*, or better, shared memories of a common past or pasts, including heroes, events, and their commemoration;
- iv. one or more *elements of common culture*, which need not be specified but normally include religion, customs, and language;
- v. a *link* with a *homeland*, not necessarily its physical occupation ancestral land, as with diaspora peoples; and
- vi. a *sense of solidarity* on the part of at least some sections of the ethnies's population (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, 6-7)

The popular definition given by Schermerhorn on 'ethnic community' or 'ethnies' to understand the content of an ethnic group is useful. He holds, "An ethnic group is defined here as a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a

cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Examples of such symbolic elements are: kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as a localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypical features, or any combination of these. A necessary accompaniment is some kind of consciousness among members of the group” (Schermerhorn 1978, 17).

In classical anthropological literature, an ethnic group is understood with the following attributes:

1. Is largely biologically self-perpetuating
2. Shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms
3. Makes up a field of communication and interaction
4. Has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as a continuing category distinguishable from other categories of the same order. (Narroll 1964, quoted in Barth 1969, 12-13)

Thus these literatures on ethnic group were mostly dominated by the idea of ancestry and cultural ties. In the essay ‘Ethnic Group and Boundaries’ Barth opened up the idea of ‘boundary’ to understand ethnic group. For him, it is not the cultural markers or descent rather the boundary of a group that makes it distinct. The subjective belief of common descent was replaced by Barth and holds that the boundary makes a group distinct. He further extends the debate by arguing that it is not the cultural features that make a group distinct, on the contrary the social interactions that make a group distinct. He holds, “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (Barth 1969, 15). As such, Barth is not concerned with the fixed cultural traits which define a group; rather, he emphasizes on the processing of the boundaries which differentiate a group from other groups. Hence, ethnicity is largely based on the social interactions between the groups. Barth further considers ethnic group as an organizational type, a form of social organization. Ethnic group is largely understood in relation to cultural differences to other,

but Barth holds that there is no one-to-one relationship between cultural differences or similarities between ethnic units. He argues "...one cannot predict from first principles which features will be emphasized and made organizationally relevant by the actors.ethnic categories provide an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio-cultural system" (*ibid*, 14). Moving away from the objective markers of an ethnic group, he shifts the attention to subjective understanding of belongingness. This leads to the idea that ethnic group is not found in isolation, rather found in relation to other groups only.

Anthony D Smith defines *ethnie* (ethnic communities) as "a named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity" (Smith 1986a, 32). Here, Smith refers to the ethno-symbolic importance of a group, where shared past and the history which bind the members of the group.

Cohen defines ethnic group as "a collective of people who share some pattern of normative behaviour and form a part of a larger population interacting with people from other collectivities within a framework of a social system" (Cohen 1974, 9). By normative behaviour Cohen implies different activities and other symbolic formations or forms may be kinship, marriage, ritual and so forth.

In a nutshell, ethnic groups thus can be looked as a throng of people who shares common assumptions of their lineage and/or are bounded by certain variants of feelings of belongingness through different cultural markers or economic or political situation(s). It is best understood or expressed in relation to other groups or people. It has become more apparent in current times that an ethnic group or the expression of its *ethnicness* is more political to serve the purpose of the contextual political negotiations.

1.2.2 Ethnicity:

In common parlance, ethnicity is understood as the sense of belongingness of the individuals to its group. It may be referred to the affiliation of an individual or set of people to its group as per the ascriptive quality. Glazer and Moynihan define ethnicity as "the condition of belonging to a particular ethnic group" (Glazer and Moynihan 1974, 1).

Ethnicity and race are two diverse concepts used extensively in social science discourse. Both are treated as biological in nature by the primordialists. While the notion of race is understood to imply the biological characters of an individual such as skin colour, and other physical traits viz. hair, nose, jaws and so forth; the notion of ethnicity refers to the cultural traits of a community or group viz. language, religion, ancestry myth and so on.

Eriksen defines ethnicity as an aspect of "social relationship between agents who *consider themselves* as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interaction. The first fact of ethnicity is the application of systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders; between 'Us' and 'Them'. If no such principle exists there can be no ethnicity" (Eriksen 2002, 12-19).

1.2.3 Theories of Ethnicity

There are two different categories of theorists, viz., the primordialists and the instrumentalists, who offer two different perspectives in interpreting the phenomenon of ethnicity. These two schools hold a polar opposite positions in relation to one another. The primordialists believe ethnicity to be a given category. On the other hand, the instrumentalists hold that ethnicity is a social/political/cultural construction. In the debates of these two paradigms, a third approach got developed which is known as situative-primordial

approach. All these perspectives, which are discussed in the following pages, hold good in varying degrees for interpreting different ethnic situations in different contexts.

1.2.3.1 Primordialist School of Thought: The primordialist school of thought considers ethnicity as innate. One's ethnic identity is determined by the deep-rooted primordial attachment to a group or culture. Thus, primordialists argue that the ethnicity is ascriptive and hence the ethnicity of an individual is permanent. If a child is born in a particular ethnic group, s/he will identify himself/herself with the identity of that group only. As such, ethnicity is biologically given or a natural phenomenon. For them ethnic identity is a "subjectively held sense of shared identity based on objective cultural and regional criteria" (Phadnis & Ganguly 2003, 23). Shils, Glazer, Moynihan, Rex, are some of the names of this school of thought.

The idea of 'primordial' was first developed by the American sociologist Edward Shils in 1957. In his essay "Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties: Some particular Observations on the Relationship of Sociological Research Theory", he developed the idea of the *primordial* and different kinds of social bonds between members in modern society. Shils examined the public civil ties in modern societies and in existing primordial ties of family, religion and ethnic group which are manifested in their symbols and ceremonies (Shils 1957, 130-145). For Shils, primordial ties may be real or imaginary, but it relates the community to its historical origin, and the kinship ties bind the members to a common ancestor. These primordial ties are available in the modern societies also. Moreover, the culture that is shared by the members is considered as naturally given. Thus for him ethnic bonds are *natural* and *given* – not acquired. Henceforth, primordialism gives the scope to identify a community in terms of kinship relations, and ancestry.

The idea was further developed by the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. He argues that,

"By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the "givens"--or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed "givens"--of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves." (Geertz 1964, 259-60).

Primordial school of thought thus, looks ethnicity as a natural phenomenon. It presents ethnicity as static and naturalistic. But the primordialists fail to explain why different kinds of identities emerged in different points of time and also get decayed. People's imagination to construct various identities in various situations also can't be explained by the above theory.

A more radical version of primordialism is presented by the sociobiologists who argue "genetic reproductive capacity as the basis of, not only of families and clans, but of wider kinship- groupings like *ethnies*" (van den Berghe 1981, 20). The radical primordialists suggest that these groups are bonded by nepotism and inclusive fitness. Myths of descent which underpin *ethnies* correspond with such nepotistic reproductive strategies. But the sociobiologists face criticism on the ground that they have reduced the social and cultural behaviours into biological categories.

1.2.3.2 Instrumentalist School of thought: The instrumentalists look ethnicity not in terms of the primordial qualities; rather they consider ethnicity as a necessary instrument in achieving certain goals. They treat ethnicity as the social, political and cultural resources for different interest groups.

The instrumental school of thought largely belongs to the ideas of Barth, Paul Brass, Ted Gurr, Abner Cohen and so forth who consider ethnicity as

construction; constructed by the elites of a group for economic and political gains. Barth (1969) defines ethnic identity as an “individualistic strategy” in which individuals move from one identity to another to “advance their personal economic and political interests, or to minimize their losses” (Jones 1997, 74)

Paul Brass on the other hand argues that the

“cultural forms, values and the practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantages. They become symbols and referents for the identification of members of the group, which are called up in order to create a political identity more easily. The symbols used to create a political identity also can be shifted to adjust to political circumstances and the limitations imposed by the state authorities” (Brass 1991, 15).

For Brass, ethnicity is constructed by the elites of a group with the motive of sharing/occupying state resources – which may be political and/or economic. Hence for Brass, ethnicity is purely a construction as he maintains that “ it is quite obvious that there are very few groups in the world today whose members can lay any serious claim to a known common origin, it is not actual descent that is considered essential to the definition of an ethnic group but a belief in a common descent” (*ibid*, 70).

In the similar way, Abner Cohen looks ethnicity and ethnic formation as an approach to the situational interest group approach. He argues that the “..earning of livelihood, the struggle for a larger share of income from the economic system, including the struggle for housing, for higher education and for other benefits and similar issues constitute an important variable significantly related to ethnicity” (Cohen 1974, xv). The interest groups form “in the perennial request for livelihood in a divided labour market, competition for a greater share of income results in the formation of interest groups”. As opposed to Barth, he claims himself as a normalist and Barth as realist. He argues that the role of the interest groups remains as instrumental in the

formation of ethnicity. For him, it is the process where "some interest groups exploit parts of their traditional culture in order to articulate informal organizational functions that are used in the struggle of these groups for power" (*ibid*, 91). Thus for Cohen, ethnicity is useful to serve the goal of individual as well collective agenda.

1.2.3.3 Situative-Primordial Approach: Both the instrumentalist and primordial school are agreeing in some points, like considering ethnicity as group formation. But both the approaches raise many questions instead of answering them in the contemporary global scenario. As a result, a third approach emerged which came to be known as situative-primordial approach developed by Carsten Wieland. Wieland examined the ethnic situation in India, Pakistan as well in Bosnia (Balkan region) and discovered the problems of the primordial and instrumental school of thoughts (Wieland 2006, 17-43). The primordial idea considers ethnicity as given, objective and ethnic group as a solid unit. As such, "[i]n comparative politics they can thus be used as independent variables which influence political outcomes" (*ibid*, 18). On the other hand the instrumentalist approach considers ethnicity as construction, "a common origin of people recedes into the background or is dismissed from the beginning" (*ibid*). As such, for the instrumentalists ethnicity is subjective and ethnic groups are flexible and constructed for political gains by the elites. In such case, ethnic group can be seen as an interest group. Wieland hence argues that an ethnic group and the ethnicity are products of exterior influences, they are dependent variables. He further extends the problems of both the schools, especially regarding primordialists that for them ethnicity is given or natural or ethnic group as fixed. But the primordialists "cannot explain why some ethnic group decay, some appear anew and others merge. Neither can they tell us why some characteristics seem more important than others and why some ethnic groups (seemingly as a whole) fight each other and others co-operate." He criticized the instrumentalists also on the ground of negating the factor of origin. He holds: "[t]his approach gets into trouble when it comes to explaining why masses tend to be mobilized so easily with appeal to origin

and culture and why people are even ready to die without any material reward”(*ibid*, 20).

Wieland, responding to both these approaches, has developed the situative-primordial approach where it sees ethnicity both as a dependent and independent variable. The proponents of the approach see ethnicity not as older phenomenon rather is an invention and formed, where selective ‘old materials are used ’to articulate the same. Examples can be given from the use of selective past events interpreted and finally sold as “common history”.

The situative-primordial approach gives the scope to see ethnicity both as dependent and independent variable. Ethnicity is an independent as well dependent variable in the sense of primordial quality of a group which gives the scope to mobilize the people by the elites of the group (dependent variable).

1.2.4 Nation and Nationalism:

In the discourse of nation and nationalism, Anderson’s pioneering work *Imagined Communities* opened up new dimensions to see the formation of a nation. For him nation is an ‘imagined community’ and a cultural artifact. He defines nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 1991, 6). Anderson viewed emergence of nation not as a result of given sociological conditions like language, religion or race which had been in the entire globe rather imagined into existence. He considers nation as imagined as “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”. Hence, for Anderson, nation is a particular kind of abstract phenomenon where members of the community imagine themselves as a member of the community. He also holds that “the nation is imagined as

limited because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” (*ibid*, 7). Nation is sovereign as the very idea of the same came up in the age of enlightenment destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Finally, Anderson contends that nation is imagined “because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (*ibid*).

On the development of nation and spreading of nationalism in the western world, Anderson refers to the rise of print media capitalism in West. He refers to the rise of the printing press, which he calls as print media capitalism. The business of print requires a large market and wanted to maximize profit. Thus print language brought the imagination of national consciousness, where print language is mutually intelligible for its members though spoken language may vary and may not be intelligible for each other. Through the printed books and newspaper it became possible for them to comprehend one another. “In the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community” (*ibid*, 44). Moreover, in the development of the subjective idea of nation, the print capitalism created a condition for fixing the language to build the image of antiquity.

Partha Chatterjee, on the other hand, criticized Anderson’s view on imagined community. He criticized the idea of nationalism put forwarded by Anderson as ‘modular’ form developed in Europe and later adopted by the colonies, which left no space for the colonies to imagine in the name of nation. Chatterjee questions if “the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain ‘modular’ forms already made available to them by

Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?” (Chatterjee 1993, 5). This leads to the fact that the colonies of Asia and Africa are only the perpetual consumer of modernity, and the imagination is also always colonized. Moreover Anderson ignores the spirituality – the space inside the internal domain, when he views nationalism focusing much on outside material domain. Chatterjee, thus proposes a new idea of nationalism on the spiritual domain which he views as fundamental feature of anti-colonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa. The inner domain bears the essential marks of cultural identity. Chatterjee, brought the examples from the context of Bengal to see Indian nationalism in the colonial period by giving examples of language, drama, schools, family roles and the women. If the case of language is taken, Chatterjee accepts the idea of print media capitalism of Anderson for the development of ‘national’ language. In Bengal the first printed books in Bengali were published by the East India Company and by the Christian Missionaries in the end of 18th Century. The bilingual Bengali elites by the mid-century made it a cultural project “to provide its mother tongue with the necessary linguistic equipment to enable it to become an adequate language for “modern” culture” (*ibid*, 7). Outside the purview of the state a large number of magazines, newspapers, printing presses, and literary bodies came up and a standard shape of the language was given. One’s own language is the inner domain of one’s *cultural identity* where the colonial power was kept out. In case of different literary genres like drama which gave the opportunity to promote the standard version of the language as well also gave the space to sustain the cultural tradition (Sanskrit).

From the second half of the 19th century the new elites had started establishing schools to produce “suitable educational literature” before the state became the contention. Outside the domain, of the state these schools were the space for generalizing and normalizing the new language and literature.

Another inner domain Chatterjee looks as a part of national culture is the family. The European scholarship was mostly known for criticizing the

'barbaric' traditions, religious practices of Indian society specially related to treatment of women. The early nationalists were not ready to give the burden to the colonial state to legislate the reform of the traditional society. They believed that only the nation itself has the right to intervene in the cultural domain of the society. Moreover, the role of women was also important to create the national and cultural identity though a new patriarchy which was brought into existence. The *new women* need to be modern but essentially differ from the western women who, along with the idea of *being new*, "have to display the signs of national tradition" (*ibid*, 9)

Thus Chatterjee, twisting the Anderson's theory of the western and modular form of nationalism, offers an alternative in case of Indian nationalism, which argues that the nationalism in Indian context has a spiritual base. There were certain forms already available for which it was easier to imagine a nation out of these.

Gellner defines nationalism as primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent (Gellner 1983). He looks at the rise of nation and nationalism as a sociological condition of the industrial world. He views human civilization in three stages: pre-agrarian, agrarian and industrial. The pre-agrarian and the agrarian societies could not offer any space for nationalism. As per his modernist theory of nation the 'agro' societies were divided horizontally: rulers and ruled and cultural differences were marked. No one had an interest to promote the cultural homogeneity at social level; as well it seldom offered division of labour. As such, Gellner holds, "there is little incentive or opportunity for cultures to aspire to the kind of monochrome homogeneity and political pervasiveness and domination for which later, with the coming of the age of nationalism, they eventually strive" (*ibid*, 13) (Durkheim, however considers it as mechanical solidarity). But the industrial age offers high division of labour in society. Gellner finds nationalism in the root of "*certain kind* of division of labour, one which is complex and persistently, cumulatively changing" (*ibid*, 23). As modern

society based on division of labour, it requires cultural homogeneity to function and can create necessary condition for an ideology. The role of state is also important in promoting education to create nationalism. Gellner views the same as “some organism must ensure that this literate and unified culture is indeed being effectively produced, that the educational product is not shoddy and sub-standard” (*ibid*, 38). The modern state offers standardized education system to its members that fulfill the demands of the industrial world: mobile, educated, technically equipped people. These different sets of economic people need a common community as well a common culture. Education is the tool for promoting the homogeneous high culture.

Hobsbawm, accepting Gellner’s definition of nationalism, holds that nation is neither a primary nor an unchanging social entity. For Hobsbawm, nation belongs to an exclusively particular and historically recent period. It is modern construction and a social entity only; it relates to a certain kind of modern territorial state – the ‘nation state’ and it is pointless to discuss nation and nationality except insofar as both relate to it (Hobsbawm 1990, 10-11). He further argues that artifact, invention and social engineering make a nation. That is why nationalism comes before nation and nation state appears later. He views the national question as “situated at the point of intersection of politics, technology and social transformation” (*ibid*, 10). As a Marxist historian Hobsbawm, points out that nation and its associated phenomenon must be studied in terms of political, technical, administrative, economic and other conditions and requirements. Moreover the top-down model to understand nation is though very much practiced but it should be looked at from bottom-up such as the “assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist” (*ibid*, 10). In contrast to Gellner’s model of modernization, which is a top-down model, Hobsbawm feels the necessity of the bottom up model which can be defended as firstly, the state ideologies and movements are not guides how the people feel; secondly, we cannot assume that for most people national identification is above other identities which constitutes the social being and thirdly, national

identity is not static rather changes over time even in the course of quite short period.

Historicizing the very idea of nation, Hobsbawm found the use of the term from 1830 when it took its modern meaning. It linked the people to a state. Hence, he proposed the equation as *nation = state = people* (*ibid*, 19) which links sovereign people to a nation and to a territory. In that point of time, however, two different ideas of nation were operating *viz.* revolutionary democratic and the nationalist. “The equation state = nation = people is applied to both, but for nationalists the creation of the political entities which would contain it derived from the prior existence of some community distinguishing itself from foreigners, while from the revolutionary democratic point of view the central concept was the sovereign citizen – people = state which, in relation to the remainder of the human race, constituted a ‘nation’” (*ibid*, 22)

In the chapter entitled “Popular Proto nationalism” Hobsbawm starts with the question “why and how could a concept so remote from the real experience of most human beings as ‘national patriotism’ become such a powerful political force so quickly”? Answering the question he refers to the proto-national bonds. Proto national bonds are certain variants of feelings of collective belonging in macro political scale, which were suited for the modern ideas of nation and state. As such, its need to discover the sentiment of the illiterates as vast majority of the population was illiterate. These proto-nationalist bonds may be language, ethnicity, religion, holy icons and the most important the consciousness of belonging or having belonged to a lasting political entity (*ibid*, 51-73). But for him the proto-nationalism is not enough to nationalities or nation. He further discusses the “Government Perspective”. The systematic shape of a modern state came into existence after French Revolution which can be characterized by a territory over all whose inhabitants it ruled separated by clear borders with other territories. By 19th century, the state kept records of each person through census, which made direct contact of the population to

the administration, and subjects were ruled through the same institutions and administrative machinery. State also needs the subject either as tax payer or as soldier. Standardization of language and a 'civic religion' (patriotism) for the modern state were necessary so far. The national language became a soul of a nation.

The two major principles of a nation, after 1830, were i) "every nation a state" and ii) "only one state for the entire nation. But the nationalism of 1880-1914 shows major difference in three aspects: a) anybody of people considered themselves as nation can claim themselves and meant the right to a separate territory of their own b) ethnicity and language become the central c) a sharp shift to the political right of nation and flag (*ibid*, 101-102). Moreover "in the second half of the century ethnic nationalism received enormous reinforcement, in practice from the increasingly massive geographical migrations of peoples and in theory by the transformation of that central concept of nineteenth century social science, race". He argues that the nationalism gained ground so rapidly from the 1870-1914, that it became a function of social and political changes "not to mention an international situation that provided plenty of pegs on which to hang manifestos of hostility to foreigner" (*ibid*, 107-108). Hobsbawm considers 1918-1950 as the apogee of nationalism, where he brought Woodrow Wilson's views on nation and nationalism. Most of the nation got independent in this period. The sentiment of nationalism, for him, was more anti-imperialist rather than nationalistic. The more unifying meaning of nationalism before 1914 in Europe became more separatist later. In so far, mass media also had a significant role for the situation.

Anthony D. Smith, on the other hand, rejects both primordial and instrumental views of ethnicity and nationalism, showing a midpoint arguing for the ethnic origin of nation. He argues, "we can no longer regard the nation as a given social existence , a 'primordial' and natural unit of human association outside time, neither can we accept that it is a wholly modern phenomenon, be it the

‘nervous tic of capitalism’ or the necessary form and culture of an industrial society” (Smith 1986a, 3). As such, enquiring the strength and limitations, Smith holds a different approach and position by examining the nature and role of ‘*ethnie*’, as well formation and characteristics of nation. He draws a trajectory of the ethnic groups in the pre-modern time and the situations “that typically give rise to them” (*ibid*, 4). He again argues, “ethnicity and nations are not fixed and immutable entities ‘out there’, nor neither are they completely malleable and fluid process and attitudes, at the mercy of every outside force”. Smith holds that modern nations are not as ‘modern’ as believed by many modernists. He views it with the following points: a) Nations are not static targets to be attained once-for-all. They are long term process: mobilization, inclusion, territorialization, politicization, and so forth which are never concluded and redefined in each generation; b) nations require ethnic cores to survive, in case of lacking it needs re-invent one; c) nation needs homelands d) nation needs heroes and golden age (*ibid*, 211-213).

1.2.5 Ethnonationalism:

When a nation is defined in terms of ethnicity, we can simply call it ethnic nationalism or ethnonationalism. Here, the nationhood is defined in terms of ethnicity, religion, language and so forth. Ethnic nationalism is thus largely based on cultural sameness and common descent. The term was invented and widely used by Walker Connor. However, Connor interchangeably has used the term nationalism and ethnonationalism. Nationalism has been defined by him as a “group of people who believe they are ancestrally related. Nationalism connotes identification with the loyalty to one’s nation as just defined. It does not refer to loyalty to one’s country” (Connor 1994, xi). For him, all kinds of nationalisms have an ethnic relation. Elaborating on Connor’s ideas of ethnonationalism, Conversi wrote,

“This denotes both the loyalty to a nation deprived of its own state and the loyalty to an ethnic group embodied in a specific state, particularly where the latter is conceived as a ‘nation-state’. In other words, ethnonationalism is conceived in a very broad sense and may be used interchangeably with nationalism. For instance, Connor subsumes within the same spectrum anti-EC feelings in Denmark, Britain or Norway as well as anti-immigrant feelings such as emerged, say, in Switzerland in the 1970s (Conversi 2004, 2).

The classical works on nation used to reveal that nation co-insides with the state and both are same. Many scholars have misinterpreted nationalism simply equating it with the loyalty to the state. Ethnonationalism, on the other hand, is loyalty to the ethnic group. It relates to number of other relevant political concepts like ethnonational group, primordialism(s), tribalism, regionalism, communalism, regionalism, parochialism, sub nationalism (Connor 1994, 72). Connor, one of leading authors of the contemporary ethnonationalism theories, has exclusively criticized the classical ideas of nation building and its problems. In his essay ‘Nation Building or Nation destroying’, he holds that the scholars, who have associated nation with the nation building, “have tended either to ignore the question of ethnic diversity or to treat the matter of ethnic identity superficially as merely one of a number of minor impediments to effective state recognition”(ibid, 29). Connor’s view is further corroborated by Conversi as he points out that the “‘classical’ notion of nation-building viewed ethnic difference as a pre-modern pattern of social differentiation which stood in the way of development and therefore should (and eventually would) be overcome” (Conversi 2004, 562). Emphasizing on the ethnic validity of a nation, Lentz foresees that “in the years to come, ethnicity in whatever concrete form and under whatever name, will be so important a political resource and an idiom for creating community that today’s social scientists and anthropologists have no choice but to confront it” (Lentz 1995, 303-28).

Sanjib Baruah also defines Ethnonationalism as “a term that refers to a wide range of political phenomena including what may be called nationalism, separatism, secessionism, sub-nationalism, ethnic insurgency, ethnic militancy or sometime simply regionalism. It is best thought of as ‘a heterogeneous set of “nation” oriented idioms, practices and possibilities that are continuously available or “endemic” in modern cultural and political life” (Baruah 2010, 1).

Many scholars perceive ethnonationalism as a phenomenon opposed to civic nationalism. Civic nationalism can be defined in terms of shared values, commitments, loyalty to the state and to the public institutions. Ignatieff, in defining civic nation, holds that “the nation should be composed of all those regardless of race, colour, creed, gender, language or ethnicity who subscribe to the nation’s political creed.it envisages the nation as a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens, united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values” (Ignatieff 1994, 6). Ethnic nationalism is defined as “a place of passionate attachment, peoples pre-existing characteristics: their language, religion, customs and traditions” (*ibid*, 3-4). He further extends the view by observing that the “ethnic nationalism claims that an individual’s deepest attachments are inherited, not chosen. It is the national community which defines the individual, not the individuals who define the national community”.

Hans Kohn distinguished the Western and Eastern forms of nationalism where he viewed Western form of nationalism as an occurrence of political necessity, which in later phases developed in the form of nation state. But in Eastern world it came quite late, in many cases in response to colonialism, where cultural similarities or dissimilarities (may be constructed or invented), traditional ties, kinship got a significant position (Kohn 1945). The dichotomy between ethnic and civic nationalism become more contextual with the fall of Berlin wall, collapse of the USSR and the rise of new nations in the ethnic lines as well the rise of ethno national politics throughout the globe.

1.2.6 *The Concept of Elite and Elite Theories:*

The Elite can be defined as dominating or influential group of people in a society in terms of politics and other aspects. Teun Van Dijk defines elite as the group of people having “property, income, decision control, knowledge, expertise, position, rank, as well as social and ideological resources such as status, prestige, fame. Influence, respect and similar resources ascribed to them by groups, institutions, or society at large.” (Van Dijk, 1993 quoted in Malesevic 2004, 117)

The classical elite theory was conceptualized by Pareto, Mosca and Michels. The other notable later elite theorists were C.Wright Mills and Durhendruff. However, their work did not connect with the politics of ethnicity but related with the power and its relation with the state.

1.2.6.1 Conceptualizing Elite: Pareto, Mosca and Michels: Pareto defines elites as a class of the people who have the highest indices in their branch of activity. He talks about two kinds of elites, viz. governing and non-governing elites. The elites are always in competition for power and status by manipulating the masses. Thus, the power circulates from one elite group to another which Pareto calls as circulation of elite. He provides a life cycle theory of the rise and fall of elites. Elites decay over time when they become “milder, more humane and less apt to defend their own power” (Pareto 2009, 59). The elites of a particular society are in constant conflict where a group of elite is replaced by the other. Mosca talks about the personal characteristics of elites; where an organized group (elites) rules over the unorganized masses. He holds that even the most primitive society was ruled by a numerical minority. Mosca named this minority group as the *political class*. The elites are influential in the sense that they have the intellectual, moral and material superiority. Mosca divided the society into *ruling class* and the *class that is ruled*. He defined the modern elites as the superior organizational skill holders

who can manage power in the modern bureaucracy. The minority may be military, priest, aristocracy of wealth of merit. Every elite section tries to develop a set of values and principles which is legitimized, and then accepted by the masses – which can be called as *political formula* of the political groups. He has discussed two kinds of political formula. *Rational* and *supernatural* - the rational formula may be self-determination and sovereignty where supernatural formula believes in the divine origins of monarch (Malesevic, 2004). The organizational quality of elites makes it possible and convenient for them to exploit the masses. Michels, however, developed the idea of *iron law of oligarchy* where social and political organizations are run by a handful of individuals (Michels 1949). He holds that all organizations are elitist and elites have three basic principles, such as:

1. Need for leaders, specialized staff and facilities
2. Utilisation of facilities by leaders within their organizations
3. The importance of the psychological attributes of the leaders.

1.2.6.2 Ethnicity and Elite theory: Though the works on elite of the Italian sociologists did not refer to the ethnicity question, they, however, set the paths for further study in this line. Abner Cohen, Teun Van Dijk, Paul Brass, Ted Gurr explored the relationships between culture, elite and ethnicity in their study. Cohen considers symbols as the integral part of power relations where he defines symbols as “objects, concepts, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of disparate meanings, evoke sentiments and emotions, and impel men to action” (Cohen 1974, quoted in Malesevic 2004, 115). His understanding on the “two dimensional man” implies the bivocal nature of symbols satisfying both existential and political end. Symbols are expressive and instrumentalist simultaneously. He has linked between the symbolism and power relations in society. For example, it is well experienced in the collective rituals and other social gatherings which aimed at the group mobilizations.

Apart from Cohen, Teun Van Dijk focuses on the link between power relations and the cultural productions. The ethnic antagonism, are for the most part, a product of subtle symbolic reproduction controlled and directed by the elites. He claims that the elites dominate the key means of symbolic reproduction, such as education system, mass media, business corporations, the churches, political institutions, trade unions and even welfare offices; they are in a position to control the content the structure of message disseminated in the public arena (*ibid*).

1.2 7 Cultural Hegemony

The concept of cultural hegemony was fostered by the Italian Neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his *Prisons Notebook*. Apart from being critical to the orthodox Marxism, Gramsci was instrumental in shaping the fundamental perspectives of *neo* Marxism. Marx believed that with the development of capitalism, class polarization would be held in terms of bourgeoisie and proletariat, which would lead to class struggle and proletariat will eventually capture power. However, the proletariat win was never materialized at least convincingly and that apparent *fallacy* of Marx's Utopia was subjected to rigorous scrutiny and re-theorization by several Marxist scholars, including Gramsci, of post-Marx time.

Gramsci initiated the concept of hegemony which was first used by Lenin. Gramsci conceptualized the entire concept of hegemony in relation to the capitalist mode of production. In a simple understanding, hegemony can be defined as domination of one group over another with an apparently mutual consent. It is such a state that a special thought or process gets emphasis so that the concept of reality distributed in a particular society influences the morality and ideology of the rest.

In Gramscian sense, “hegemony is the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental groups; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.ruling groups impose a direction on social life; subordinates are manipulatively persuaded to board the “dominant fundamental” express” (Lears 1985, 567-593).

For Gramsci state is not only a system of relying upon the domination through army, police legal system; rather a political or culturally hegemonic system. This hegemony sometime becomes so hidden that the domination becomes legitimized and population gives consent towards such dominations of the state. Though Lenin also talked about such kind of domination, Gramsci is regarded as more fundamental contributor to this notion of ensuring mutual consent.

Gramsci divides society into emergent, traditional, civil, political, subaltern dominant and so and so forth. In the Marxist understanding of society of base-superstructure model described by Marx in the *Contribution to the critique of Political Economy*, 1889, men inevitably enter into definite relations, namely, the relations of productions, independent of their will. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of the society, the real foundation, on which arises a political and legal superstructure and which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life (Marx 2010, 26). However, Gramsci divided the superstructure into political society and civil society. The social structure between the economic base and ideological superstructure has been called as historical bloc. The two levels are basically the same except the superstructure being divided by Gramsci into Political society and civil society. For him the historical bloc is

an alternative interpretation of the elements of social structure: dialectics between base and superstructure. Gramsci holds that the “material forces are content and ideologies are the form, though the distinction between form and content has purely indicative value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces”(Gramsci 2009, 377).

With such understandings of superstructure as mentioned above, Gramsci divided it into political and civil society where the first one covers the dominating groups like army, police, court, judicial system, bureaucracy and so forth; whereas civil society implies the church, school, political party, union etc. Althusser however, defined these two societies as two different state apparatuses, *viz.* Ideological state apparatus and Repressive state apparatus (ISA and RSA) (Althusser 2006). For Gramsci, both civil and political society is related with hegemony. The state as mentioned does not sustain, relying upon the dominating forces (political society) rather, along with the power, hegemony is also exercised which become the key tool for functioning the state. It is possible to run the state machinery by the domination of political society for a period of time but in a stratified society the ruling class generally through the economic, political and cultural hegemony takes the consent of the masses and run the state. Gramsci believed that if the proletariat could able to establish the rule by defeating the capitalists still there may have no revolutionary change in the structure of the system. Only through capturing power, a class cannot establish all kinds of social or ideological dominations in the society. With the power, a class has to establish the ideological, cultural and moral domination to the other classes. Otherwise it is not possible to rule the entire society only with the power. As the other class with the class domination can challenge the counterpart. Thus, Gramsci interpreted the concept of hegemony and domination in a class divided society.

The hegemony generally is imposed by a class through church, schools, cultural institutions etc. In this entire process of distributing hegemony, the intellectuals play a vital role. Gramsci considers two kinds of intellectuals in society viz. traditional and organic intellectuals. The ruling class through these two kinds of intellectuals propagates hegemony to the subaltern masses.

1.3 Methodology of the Study:

This study is guided by the conceptual and theoretical arguments discussed above in this chapter. Taking different perspectives on the formation of ethnicity and nationalism, the study draws the theoretical understanding from the situative-primordialist school, where it looks ethnicity as neither primordial nor instrumental but both. The situative-primordialist theory argues that, in ethnic politics selective cultural materials are used by a community to mobilize members for articulating their identity. The politicized ethnicity converts the community to a pressure group and thereby political negotiations occurs with the state for more economic and political benefits. The process of mobilization and articulation of ethnicity involve defining of boundaries, invention of tradition, re-writing history, ethnicization of space, cultural revivalism and so on. In this study, how different communities in Assam are articulating their respective ethnicity is explored bringing some empirical cases such as the Bodo, the Sonowal Kachari, the Adivasi, the Thengal Kacharis. The Karbi ethnicity and its cultural expressions is looked here as a case study.

An ethnic group is not found in isolation but in relation to other groups only through maintenance of various boundaries. In societies like the ones in Assam, which are multicultural in nature, the ongoing ethnicity movements need to be seen from various other associated issues related to multiculturalism. In a multicultural society, some groups are dominant and others are marginalized. The similar situation is experienced in Assam where almost all ethnic groups complain about their marginality in relation to the

larger dominant caste-Hindu Assamese society. Hence, Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony is used here as an important 'ideal type'¹ to theorize the hegemony of the dominants over the marginal groups. As such, different literatures of the 19th century as well as of the last century such as novels, ethnographic works, and news-items are brought in the study to investigate the issue of cultural hegemony. Along with the same, the attitude of the Assamese gentry and their position in different social and cultural moments of history towards other communities are also scrutinized for theorizing the working of cultural hegemony in the context of Assam. Moreover, various established theories of ethnicity and nationalism given by Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, Eric Hobsbawm, Paul Brass and Carsten Wieland are frequently brought in for analyzing the cases discussed in this thesis.

In addition to relying on the perspectives articulated by the scholars mentioned above, this study also incorporated with relevant data collected from different published books, journals, newspaper, archival materials, leaflet, web-portal, web-sites are consulted which have been duly acknowledged.

The primary data for the Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, which collectively comprise a case study in the Karbi ethnonationalism, are collected through fieldwork in various locations of the Karbi Anglong District. The Karbis, who mostly reside in the Karbi Anglong District, can be divided into three subgroups in terms of their settlement areas: – Eastern (Bokajan Sub-division), Western (Hamren Sub-division) and the Central (Diphu, the District Headquarter). The primary data were collected from Diphu town and different fringe villages around Diphu. For the necessary comparison, ethnographic data were also collected from the Hamren sub-division as well as in the Bokajan sub-division of the district.

¹ Weber conceptualized the idea of 'ideal type' to understand different social facts like bureaucracy, capitalism etc.

This study is primarily a qualitative one. Therefore, more emphasis is given on textual and discourse analysis of the historical texts, literary and other representational narratives to analyze the ethnicity question in Assam in general, and among the Karbis in particular. Interview and observation are the major techniques used in collection of data. People of different age and sex were interviewed in different social and cultural settings. No special technique of sample design was done, rather purposive sampling becomes the major interest along with clinical interviews in the study. Most of the leaders of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) movement (1986) and some other cultural activists of present were interviewed during the course of the study. Through it, it is tried to understand the trajectory of the Karbi ethno-political situation in historical context. Moreover, interviewing different cultural activists, the study seeks to relate to interrelationship of the movement and the cultural definition and redefinition. Ethnographic observations on different cultural functions, rituals, festivals were carried out during the course of the study and randomly people were interviewed to understand their perspectives toward ethnicity and related issues.

As observation is an important tool used in the study, hence, the researcher kept close eye on the different events, protests as well as other cultural expressions in articulating ethnicity during the days of the research. The manner in which the Karbi community as a whole are exploiting different cultural forms (both tangible and intangible) in both private and public spaces are observed and analyzed in context. Such cultural categories are dress pattern, food habit, use of cultural symbols in public and personal life are critically seen.

The historical evidences of Assam and the North-East show that, almost all the ethnic and nationalistic movements are led by students' organizations or different students' organizations are actively engaged in the ethnic assertion movements of the respective community in the post-colonial period. Karbi ethnicity articulation is also heavily influenced by the participation of the

students and students' bodies from the very beginning of the movement. The script movement of the late 1980's and the ASDC movement started in 1986 the role of the students are seemed to be quite active. As such, to look into the perspectives of the students as well as their contribution in the present context and also to map the future course of the Karbi ethno-politics, students (irrespective of the affiliation to different Student bodies) of different colleges and University were interviewed and questionnaires were distributed to a select age group of 20-30 years. The questionnaires were descriptive and divided into four sections – the first section carried questions to know the experience of the individual in the multicultural society and placing of himself/herself as a Karbi individual. The questions were objective queries about informant's reading habits (preferred language), entertainment habit of the individual as well as relationship with other community, and any kind of hegemony in any form that the individual experienced from other community or vice-versa etc.

The second section of the questionnaire dealt with questions pertaining to the ideas of the individual which separated them from *other* and establish the Karbis as a distinct cultural group. Their understanding, views on the evolution, migration, religion, national icon/hero of the Karbis were tried to be known. More emphatically, different folklore or oral forms such as songs, narrative prevalent in the Karbi society which the individual is aware of are collected through the questionnaire.

The third section of the questionnaire carried questions to taste the political consciousness of the students and their views on the different issues such as development, statehood movement, demands and the stance of the individual on the above issues.

The final sets of questions were asked to see the role of the respondent in Karbi ethnicity discourse. How the individual contributes in the entire project of Karbi ethnicity through various expressions of *Karbiness* in terms of food

habit, dress pattern, language, festival, ritual, religion etc. It also asked their participation in the rallies/procession and the process of motivation.

The questionnaires were distributed amongst the Karbi students of the University campus at Diphu and also in Kheroni College of West Karbi Anglong. As the questionnaires were descriptive, hence qualitative data and information could be collected from the responses. These are analyzed in the later chapters.

1.4 Organization of the Study:

The present study is an attempt to make a historical-sociological account of the contemporary ethno-national politics in Assam. In this study it is endeavoured to locate those historical and social processes in Assam, from the medieval period till the post-colonial times, of which the present-day ethno-national dynamics can be seen as the cumulative effects. It has also taken into account how the expressive or material cultural forms play the vital roles to create an alternative identity and thereby shapes the political articulations. Although the nature of most of the movements is same *viz.* how and to what extent the state resources can be exploited and the cultural expressions also are similar in nature, there are variations in terms of the amounts and intensities of demands, and local-specific nuances. The creation of otherness, creation of alternative discourses and the negotiations with the dominant hegemony are experienced in such movements.

The second chapter of this thesis is an attempt to delineate the general historical overview of Assam, highlighting the emergence and development of the relevant socio-political process which are to be seen later as the contributors to the contemporary ethno-political consciousness in Assam. The third chapter examines the patterns of articulation of such ethno-political

consciousness through the various expressive cultural forms by different ethnic communities of Assam like the Bodos, the Sonowal Kacharis, the Tea Tribes and the Thengal Kacharis, along with their respective political demands. It engages in a discussion of the exploitation of oral resources like myth, folksong, folktale and other genres as the handy resources to construct history and to create otherness. The increasingly heterogeneous nature of the locally renewed territories; and production of diverse socialities of the region bring interesting issues in the fore. Examples can be drawn from the study of the political movement of the Karbis where with the signing of the Accord with Indian State and UPDS (an insurgent group of the Karbis), it converted the medium of instructions in schools of Karbi Anglong from Assamese to English. But some of the non-Assamese organizations of Karbi Anglong, like the Bodos, Tea Garden Community opposed such moves, whereas the same Bodo group is demanding the same in Kokrajhar or in BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Area District). The same model is seen to be at work in the context of the Bodos in BTAD, as after the signing of the Accord with the Central Government, BPF (a political party formed by Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force) came to power but it did not work in Karbi Anglong (United Peoples Democratic Solidarity could not come to power).

The fourth chapter examines the Karbi ethnonationalism in the format of a case study, highlighting the specificities of the political history of Karbi Anglong as well as the present political discourse. The fifth chapter is an illustrative discussion on the use of the different cultural forms in the public and private sphere of the Karbi population to articulate the contemporary Karbi ethnicity.

The conclusion in the sixth chapter is primarily a summary of the understandings, pertaining to the issues discussed in the previous chapters. However, a holistic understanding of the ethno-nationalism in Assam is attempted here by putting these apparently local political and cultural dynamics within the larger context of global processes at the macro level.

Chapter 2

Ethnonationalism in Assam: A Historical-Sociological Account

The past is the explanation of the present and the present is knowable through the genesis rooted in the past. F. Braudel contends that “past and present illuminate each other reciprocally” (Braudel 1980, 37). Within the discipline of history in recent times, diverse perspectives seem to be at work to look history from multiple points of view, whereas the traditional historiography was realized to be subverting many alternative ways of doing history. The subaltern study or history from below, social history, gender history, ethno history purposefully deviate from the conventional chronological recordings of kings and queens and dynasties; and look history from the people’s perspective(s). On the other hand, sociology looks at the human relations as a more complex societal affair; emphatically in present. The collaboration of both gives the scope to see the social moments and movements from various outlooks. Paul Sweezy defines sociology as an “attempt to write the present as history” (Mills 2000, 146).

The historical sociological approach that has been adopted in this chapter is to understand the synchronicity of the present events and movements, through examining the past temporalities. The task of chaining the past moments of different occasions elevates to understand present blurriness. Taking the theoretical arguments from the previous chapter, once we historicize the present political situations of Assam, it gives the scope to theorize the context. Here in this chapter, thus, bringing the historical moments, it is attempted to understand the ethnonational questions in present context.

The present-day Assam is the outcome of the colonial cartography of late 18th and early 19th century. Prior to that, this region was ruled by numbers of dynasties in medieval period. The medieval Ahom dynasty in Assam could

bring all the small territories under the same administrative purview, especially of the Brahmaputra valley. But a concreté shape of Assam came through colonial cartography which was again reframed in due course. If we examine the societal formation, mode of production and the colonial heritage as well as the conditions created by colonialism, it can provide us a reasonable understanding of the historical inevitabilities responsible for the present ethno national turmoil which is characterized by a series of new-social movements¹.

In this chapter, it is attempted to construct a historical account of the societal development in Assam, starting with the migration and settlement of different communities and further development in the medieval, colonial and post-colonial situations. The effort is to see the formation of Assamese nationality through the inclusion of different groups and subsequent exclusionary politics that later brought the ethnic questions into the fore. Emphasizing on the 19th century Assam and the colonial processes during that time, this work examines the issue of modernity and identity question – especially how the colonial rule provided the scope for articulating the notion of nation and identity, which consequently became too sharp for an exclusive identity politics.

2.1 Migration History in Assam

It has been established, as evident in various literatures, the earliest settlers in the present-day territory of Assam were the Bodo stock of peoples. The present demographic composition bears testimony to the fact that Assam and its surrounding states were the destinations of several communities, in different points of time in the past. These communities, who are frequently clubbed together under the label of *Indo-Mongoloids* and who had made Assam their homeland in their respective territories, are distinct by virtue of

¹ New Social Movement: In the late 1960's and 1970's a new paradigm in the social movement began. As a part of the structural condition of the post-industrial society, these movements "are not primarily constructed around social class or concerned with economic redistribution" (Bruce and Yearley 2006, 213); they represent new collective actions, new goals on issues like gender, identity, sexuality and environment.

their traits of language, religion, customary practices and expressive cultural forms. By the beginning of the last millennium, large scale Aryan migration from central and northern India to Assam started. A major significance of this migration is that the Aryans brought along with them advanced methods of agriculture, experts in administration as well as priests. The coming of Ahoms in the 13th Century AD brought further decisive changes in the administrative as well as social structure in the society in Assam. The Ahom kings brought almost all the smaller communities, ruled by their respective dynasties, of the Brahmaputra valley under their rule (Sharma 2012, 287-309).

The final sets of ruling people came in the colonial period, with the coming of the British. The colonial rulers exploited this region in terms of natural resources and labour. Once the British took the custody of Assam, they started inducing the colonial modernity by introducing western administrative systems and by sponsoring the migration of the Bengalis to run the administrative offices. These Bengalis became immediate enemies for the newly educated Assamese section who also competed for the Government jobs. The coming of Bengali administrative staff and the development of enmity between the locals and outsiders helped to create otherness.

The discovery of tea in Assam by the British was one of the major events in 19th century Assam². The colonial government was quite enthusiastic for large scale cultivation of tea in Assam to break the Chinese monopoly. Already by 19th century tea became a popular beverage in Europe; and was exported from China as it was the only tea producing region at that time. British didn't have control on China and had to depend on the Chinese for tea. However, the essential requirement of trained and motivated labour force could not be made from the local population of Assam as the population in Assam was reduced significantly due to the civil wars of *Muwamoria* revolt³, *Kala azar*⁴ and

² Tea was used locally as a beverage by different communities in Assam. British, however, first cultivated it for commercial purpose.

³ *Muwamoria* revolt: Revolt of a particular sect of Vaishnavite monks, called *Muwamoria*, against the ruling Ahom king during 1769-1806.

Burmese incursion. Subsequently, Assam had enough waste land but insufficient labour force for large scale cultivation of tea. Different literatures⁵ also show that a major chunk of Assamese people was addicted opium consumption and therefore reluctant to work in the tea gardens. Hence, the British had to import labour force from north and central India. The growing tea industry also compelled the Government to build the basic infrastructure e.g. transportation and communication system in Assam to export tea to England via Calcutta. Thus railroad came into existence. As the *empire's garden*⁶, Assam began to see the faces of the new technologies of transport and communication; the travelling time between Assam and Calcutta (the mediating hub⁷ of that time) got drastically reduced from two months to two or three days. These pacified the colonial exploitation, flow of capital and also the migration of different categories of people. The export of tea was accompanied by incoming of Marwari traders, Bengalis and other labourers. The early capital formation⁸ in the region thus invited other contesting groups also. Capital is always the core of developing and defining the idea of modernity and development in traditional understanding. Capital was also

⁴ *Kala-azar* or *visceral leishmaniasis* (black water fever) was an epidemic which broke out in Assam during the last decade of the 19th Century. The name of Assam was crafted in the medical memory as this disease was named as *the Assam Fever* (Kar 2003, 2-4).

⁵ All the newspapers published in 19th century opposed the common addiction of opium of the Assamese people. Hemchandra Barua, wrote a book namely *Kaniar Kirton* (1861) (*Opium Eaters' Gossip*) through which he criticized the prevalent practice of opium consumption of the people of Assam irrespective of caste and class.

⁶ Jayeeta Sharma has conceptualized the colonial Assam as "Empire's Garden" through large scale tea plantation and production by the British in her book *Empire's Garden Assam and the Making of India* (2012).

⁷ Tea and other resources were first exported to Calcutta and from Calcutta it was sent to foreign countries. Capital also came through the similar path.

⁸ In plantation economy of Assam, along with many foreign planters, some local planters also emerged. Jagannath Baruah, Maniram Dewan etc. were the early tea planters in Assam.

responsible for the emergence of distinct categories of peoples, new work-schedules and lifestyles which were illustrated by the vocabularies like *labour*, *labour time*, *leisure*, *bureaucracy*, *holiday*, etc. Another important development due to colonialism in Assam was the implementation of monetized economy which helped in early capital exchange via exploitation of resources like tea and later coal and petroleum. It further developed other spheres of societal affairs, specially, institutionalized education and interactive public spheres which played crucial role in the formation of new political consciousness.

2.2 Social Formation in Assam:

The history of social formation in Assam is a history of the series of inter-community and intercultural processes amongst the earliest settlers in Assam in one hand, and the subsequent batches of relatively later entrants on the other. Such processes of interactions, which are still on-going, have been far from being symmetrical. Most often it's a story of confrontation, in varied intensities, of the indigenous population with the unstoppable influence of the later migrants of Aryan and western origin. Theoretical perspectives of social changes, like *universalization*, *parochialization* and *sanskritization*,⁹ have been found useful in understanding and interpreting the processes of social formation in this region. Some of the salient facts and features pertaining to these processes are discussed in this chapter.

⁹ *Universalization* and *Parochialization*: Elements of little tradition, indigenous customs, deities, and rites of passage circulate upward; the process is called *universalization*. Likewise, some elements of the great tradition also circulate downward to become organic part of the little tradition, and lose much of their original form in the process is '*Parochialization*'. These twin processes, which are complimentary to each other, were theorized by McKim Marriot for understanding Indian civilization. (Upadhyay and Pandey 1993, 376)

Sanskritization: A process of upward mobility of the lower caste people to upper caste in the caste hierarchies in Hindu Society. The idea was theorized by sociologist M. N Srinivas.(Srinivas 1956)

2.2.1 Sanskritization and Brahminism:

The making of the region into a paradise by settlement of numerous communities in different points of time of history possesses unique kind of social formation. The Brahmins came with the Aryan waves of migration and started the process of Hinduizing the tribal people who had been practicing different forms of animism. A visible social hierarchy began to emerge where the Brahmins occupied the highest position in the caste ladder; but they remained as a non-producing class who, by virtue of their knowledge of the Sanskritic texts, earned from the other caste groups in the Hindu fold. As such, to increase this Hindu fold by attracting the tribal animist people into it, the Brahmins in Assam created many myths and stories through which tribal people were linked to the classical Hindu mythology. In this way, the twin processes *universalization* and *parochialization* started in Assam. Illustrative to the process of *parochialization* is the fact that many tribal people, including their kings sometimes, adopted Hinduism. Bhaskar Barman, the 6th Century king of the Barman kingdom was a Bodo King who got converted to Hinduism. Many tribal dynasties also patronized the Brahmins, who had the knowledge of classical Sanskrit texts. The Ramayana was translated from Sanskrit into Assamese by Madhav Kandali in the 13th century where he was patronized by a tribal king namely Mahamanikya¹⁰. Along with such process of *parochialization*, the reverse process i.e. *universalization* also occurred. Many myths were created which linked the origin of the tribal people to the Hindu mythology. Many tribal Gods and Goddesses converted to Hindu god and goddesses. It is believed that the tribal goddess *Ka-me-kha* became Kamakhya, which is considered nowadays as the icon of Hindu mythology (Guha 1993, Gohain 1989, & Sharma 2006). Creating and linking up the tribal mythology to the mainstream Hindu mythology, different tribal practices and names were also sanskritized. Noted cultural activist Bishnu Prasad Rabha

¹⁰ Mahamanikya was a Sanskritized name, his tribal name was *Mahamanikpha*

opined that the Bodo name of the river *Bullung-Buthur* became the Brahmaputra.

2.2.2 Neo-Vaishnavism in Medieval Period

Gohain (1989) holds that the seeds of the process of Assamese nationality formation are to be found in the old *Kamrupa* (a Sanskrit reference to the erstwhile Assam); and the colonial regime contributed to it by putting the final layer of linguistic nationalism. The Brahmins had started the process of Hinduization by converting the local and indigenous populace of the region. Evidences of the same have been found to have started from 6th Century AD and onwards. But the Brahminic model of Sanskritization was not absolutely compatible to many of the local groups; and copying of the Brahminic rituals was not possible beyond certain extent. For example, the Hinduized and Sanskritized order demands certain restraining food habits, in addition some other practices to be adopted and abandoned. The local masses of the old Kamrupa who practiced animism, could not be entirely converted to the Hindu fold. In a common parlance, Brahminism lost its attractions among the majority of the animist masses in medieval Assam. However, the seeds of the Brahminic philosophy sown in Assam for the propagation of Hinduism during this time were later nurtured fully by the neo-Vaishnavism from 15th century onwards. In contrast to the orthodox Brahminic model of Sanskritization, Sankardeva (1449-1568) and his disciples could successfully formulate a way of life which was much simpler and easier to follow for the local masses. In post-Sankardeva times, neo-Vaishnavism spread across the plains of the Brahmaputra valley with the establishment of hundreds of monasteries (called *xatra*, in Assamese) which spearheaded the processes of Hinduization and Sanskritization during the period of 17th century to 20th century.

The neo-Vaishnavite movement opened up several dimensions for a more inclusive society through its flexible and easy-going ideology. There were number of factors for its popularity: a) Sankardeva and his disciples used

easily intelligible language in their texts to propagate neo-vaishnavism, making the local masses free from cracking the classical Sanskrit texts; b) the practice of worshipping of huge number of Gods and Goddesses prevalent in traditional Hinduism was replaced with simpler monotheism by Sankardeva; c) though it didn't challenge the rigid caste hierarchies that allow the lower caste people to climb up only through tough accomplishments after generations, neo-Vaishnavism was successful in bringing in a relatively egalitarian and inclusive social environment under it; d) the complex and authoritative rituals (often involving sacrifice of life) of the Brahminic tradition were abandoned for much simpler ritual practices. Such simplicity and ease of the neo-vaishnavism was responsible for its tremendous popularity among the tribal populace who embraced Sankardeva's faith coming away from their traditional faith¹¹. Under the neo-Vaishnavism, the tribal neophytes were given entry by accommodating them in the lowest strata of the caste hierarchies. Sometimes, new caste groups were also created to accommodate the tribal neophytes. It was made possible for the lower new caste group to attain even the highest status of the caste hierarchy by emulating the practices of the higher castes in the order – a mobility which was not possible in Brahminic model of sanskritization. Historian Amalendu Guha (1993, 10) shows the scheme of climbing caste hierarchies for the tribal people, in the vaishnavite model of sanskritization, as follows (Guha 1993, 10):

Tribal → Sarania → Saru Konch → Bor Konch → Keot → Kalita → Kayastha

In the social formation of Assam these processes of neo-vaishnavism and sanskritization had a significant role. It brought the tribal population from shifting cultivation to settled cultivation, from dry rice to wet rice cultivation, from the use of hoe to the practice of ploughing using bullocks, from burial of the dead to cremation, from non-vegetarianism and alcoholism to

¹¹ *The Kirtan Ghosa* written by Sankardeva to propagate neo-vaishnavism is started with the story of *Ajamil Upakhyān* (The Story of Ajamil) where the protagonist, a sinner and dacoit got salvation only by chanting the name of God (*Narayana*) during the time of his death which he eventually was calling his son whose name was also Narayana.

vegetarianism and teetotalism. Further, a standardized language adopted in neo-Vaishnavite text, literature and performative communication, at the cost of other local dialects, became the foundation for a modern Assamese language in later times.

Through this process not only the royal dynastic groups like Ahoms and Chutias, but also the groups like the Moran and the Bodo-Kacharis embraced the Hindu fold (*ibid*). Though initially the ruling Ahom dynasty was not too favourable towards the vaishnavite saints and the *xatras*¹², the growing popularity of the faith among the common people compelled the dynasty to patronize the *xatras* generously in the later periods. The neo-vashnavism thus brought radical changes in the social life of Assam that contributed to the important developments like detribalization and feudalism, and the unification of the peoples in the plains of Assam.

It is especially important to note, as Gohain has pointed out, that the patronization of the *xatras* by state (the kingdoms of the Ahoms in the east and the Koch in west) in the later periods facilitated for something akin to the feudal exploitation. However, Gohain opines that the neo-Vaishnavism did not provide sufficient means to the tribal people for their transition from the primitive tribal stage to an absolute feudal structure and economy (Gohain 1989).

Referring to D. D. Kosambi and R. S. Sarmar's argument on Indian feudalism, Gohain came to the conclusion that if the Brahmins did not bring the tribal populace to the caste society as well as the tribal elements and rituals were not incorporated in Hindu traditions, the neo-Vashnavite saints would not have been much successful to propagate the vaishnavite philosophy. R. S. Sharma gives the example how Brahminism defined some acts as sin; e.g., killing of a cow is equal to killing of human. This idea stopped killing of cows. It further helped in agricultural development. For Gohain, religion or spirituality was

¹² A *xatra* is a Vaishnavite monastery in Assam, which may be of celibate or non-celibate order.

not only the base of spreading *Bhakti* movement in Assam or that of the pan-Indian situation during the medieval period. There was also a material base for this movement. The socio-economic developments opened up the doors for spirituality. Growth of commodity production was the base of *Bhakti* movement (*ibid*, b). A new social geography was created out of the development in the material conditions (commodity production) and exchange taking the heritage and uniqueness of the place. The regional literature created the psychological make-ups. The *Bhakti* Movement created such literatures. Looking the social formation in the light of Marxist interpretation, Gohain states that classical feudalism in Assam could not develop fully as the sources of feudalism in the tribal lifestyle was absent. The then Ahom dynasty ran a semi-feudal style with traditional flavours. Once it failed – the caste based feudal style was adopted. But the neo-Vaishnavite philosophy was responsible for weakening the rigid caste-ridden ideology to some extent, though it never came up with any revolutionary uprooting of the caste system (*ibid*).

As such, a semi-feudal society began to develop simultaneously along with the commodity production and spreading (*ibid*). The increasing number of *xatras* established by the disciples of Sankardeva after his death became the centre of Assamese culture. It was not only the centre of religious activities but part of the society as a whole beyond the domain of religion. The unfinished task of Sankardeva was carried out by the *xatras* by continuing detribalization and socio-cultural inclusion in the later period.

2.2.3 Mode of Production (MoP) and Social Formation:

Regarding the mode of production in Assam in particular, and North-East India in general, the scholars are in a consensus that multiple modes of production existed into the region. As discussed earlier, this region was dominated by indigenous population (most of whom were later identified as *tribal* from colonial times onwards) where the Aryan migration initiated an

advanced stage in terms of agriculture. Significantly, the process of detribalization had started during the 6th Century and got the peak in 16th - 18th century. If we are to look at the economy or the mode of production, it can be divided broadly into tribal and non-tribal; where tribal economy can further be subdivided into plains and hills.

The economy and the mode of production to some extent were similar in Brahmaputra, Imphal and Surma valley. As such, these valleys exhibit a different cultural and material style in comparison to the hill-regions of the North-East. These valleys were also largely dominated by the tribal societies. A tribal society is best understood in relation to the mode of production and self-sufficiency. Tribal societies generally go for dry rice and shifting cultivation which is relatively a primitive stage of human society. The dry rice cultivation hardly gives any scope for surplus accumulation, thus, it does not help in contributing to the economy of the non-working rulers. Wet rice gives more productivity and ensures surplus, offering the scope to feed the rulers. Hence state formation is also possible in such societies of latter kind. The advanced mode of agricultural systems and wet rice was brought by the Ahoms in the 13th Century with sophisticated technology. It also encouraged the peasantry to cultivate wet rice (Gogoi 2002: 37).

It thus converted the non-state spaces into the parts of the state spaces. The mode of production debates also show the relation of wet rice cultivation and state formation in general. James Scott in *Art of Not Being Governed* mentioned that the wet rice cultivation among the communities was the foundation of early state-making. He holds,

... wet rice cultivation provides the ultimate in state-space crops. Although wet rice cultivation offers a lower rate of return to labour than other subsistence techniques, its return per unit of land is superior to almost any other Old World crop (Scott 2010: 41)

As such, most of the tribal societies of the North-East India had been stateless people, but having independent villages, prior to the coming of the Ahoms.

Again, the hilly tribal communities were known to be practicing shifting cultivation, popularly known as *Jhum*, which was again part of non-state practice. James Scott in this regard considered the hilly populace as stateless and anarchist people. However, he is looking at it in terms of a continuum of hills and plains instead of a water-tight division between dwellers of the hills and plains. Many hilly people started residing in the plain with the introduction of the wet rice cultivation. Similarly many invaders pushed the plains people to the hills. The shifting of Dimasa Kachari kingdom from plains to the hills of North Cachar, and the Khasi kingdom to the hills of Meghalaya¹³ are some of the illustrative examples of this fact (Chaube 1999).

The societal development of different tribal societies was not similar and uniform. For example, among all the other hill tribes of the North-East, the Khasis and the Jaintias had a moderately advanced economy. Evidences are found about the linkages of trade and commerce of the Khasis with their neighbouring areas like Assam and Bangladesh. Similarly, different Naga groups had love-and-hate relationship with the then ruling Ahom dynasty during the medieval period. Moreover, significant difference was found in case of the Imphal valley of present-day Manipur with the other two valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Surma (Mishra, 2000).

Thus, the social processes fuelled by the changing mode of production in the Ahom period, and the *xatra*-centric Vaishnavite setup of culture and religion, gave the scope for formation of a more homogeneous inclusive society in the medieval period, where many tribal groups identified themselves with the singular identifier - the Assamese. However, as the processes of hinduization and sanskritization were not uniform and didn't happen in every tribal pocket, this process of the making of the *Assamese whole* was also not uniform in all

¹³ The Goddess Kamakhya was worshipped by the Khasis, which is nowadays worshipped by the Hindus. The temple is situated in Guwahati which shows that Khasis earlier resided in present day Guwahati. But the Khasis left the plains and entered in the hills. The possibility of living the plains may be they were pushed by the invaders.

places. For example, the process could not at large touch the tribal communities of the lower Assam, and most of the hill areas. In contrast, it was quite influential in the upper Assam, among the communities like the Morans and the Matakas, the Ahoms, the Mishings and even some of the Bodos in central and western Assam.

2.3 Colonial Period: Rise of Political Consciousness

The span of direct colonial rule in the India was almost 200 years, and the same in the context of the province of Assam was even less than that (121 years, to be precise). But this apparently short period had completely changed the past, the present and the future of the region. This period demarcates the subsequent history from the previous ones by the emergence of the era of modernism and nationalism, modern education system, bureaucracy and judiciary, printing press and public sphere, ideas of development and democracy. All the social phenomena and discourses, upon which the fundamental ideas of contemporary life are based, came through the colonialism.

With the acquisition of Diwani of Bengal in 1765, the East India Company came into direct contact with North-East, specially the medieval kingdoms of Manipur and Assam. These territories did not have enough economic worth or surplus revenue to attract the British. But the Burmese invasion during 1817-24 in Manipur and Assam, the East India Company had to change the policy as the security of Bengal became one of the major concerns of the Company. The ruling Ahom dynasty in Assam became weaker due to civil wars starting with the *Muwamaria* uprising in 1770. The invasion of the Burmese forces and subsequently their taking of control over Assam and Manipur created troubles for Cachher and Sylhet as these places were already parts of the Bengal province of British India. The ruling Ahom dynasty asked help from the East India Company. In such juncture, the British declared war against the Burmese. The wars took place during 1824-1826, between British and

Burmese and finally British won it and signed the Treaty of Yandabo¹⁴ in 1826 with the Burmese. With this treaty, the British took over the region by annexing Assam within their colonial empire (Guha 2006, 1). Once the Company took over the region, it introduced taxation, bureaucracy, modern education etc. which became the channels for colonial modernity. Bengal already had tested similar kinds of modernity and was more experienced than Assam by that time. As such, a set of new-trained personals were brought from Bengal to run the newly set up bureaucratic machinery in Assam province. They became the immediate enemy and contestants for newly emerged middle class of Assam, who also began to hunt for jobs within the colonial administration.

In the following paragraphs, a discussion has been attempted on how colonial rule fostered the Assamese identity through certain social, political and economic conditions; and also created the foundations for the articulation of ethno-national identities both during the colonial regime itself and also during post-colonial times of independent India.

Although the idea of nation and nationalism is convincingly historicized as products of the 19th century European developments, in many parts of the colonies of Asia and Africa it shows a deviation from the then western understandings. The social formations and the colonial exploitations in these regions provided the scope for emergence of a formulative ideological space – the creation of homogeneity vis-à-vis otherness. For instance, Mahmood Mamdani argues how the colonial rule in South Africa created different kinds of identities through the institution of law. In colonial Africa, races were governed by the civil laws and considered as part of the civil society, where ethnicities were governed by customary laws. Civil laws talk the language of

¹⁴ 'The treaty of Yandaboo' was signed in 1826 between the Burmese and the British; and the fate of Assam's future was decided but it. The British took over Assam and brought it under similar administration with rest of India. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an insurgent group, claims that Assam became a part of India accidentally, through the treaty where no representative of Assam was present. Hence, after the departure of the British, colonialism still continues. ULFA thus is claiming a sovereign Assam.

rights, where customary laws talk the language of tradition. To maintain the superiority of the whites over others, the distinction between races and ethnicities was made through such legal instruments. The epiphany of such kinds of distinction and diverse kinds of law is that one is governed by biology where other is by culture. It in turn set the limits of power. Mamdani argues “For civic power was to be exercised within the rule of law, and had to observe the sanctity of the domain of rights. The language of custom, in contrast, did not circumscribe power, for custom was enforced. The language of custom enabled power instead of checking it by drawing boundaries around it. In such an arrangement, no rule of law was possible” (Mamdani 2001, 653-654).

The story in the Indian context, and especially in Assam, is not too different from what Mamdani observes in the colonial interventions in South Africa. The multiplicities pertaining to the matters of community identity were created in Assam by the British colonial regime through transplantation of the categories like *primitive*, *backward* and *advanced* – which were to be used as the labels for identifying the peoples and their regions. Euro-centric episteme was vigorously at work; through the instrumental use of anthropology and ethnography to *discover*, *classify* and *document* the indigenous populations. On the basis of the ideas generated through such discourses, the system of Inner Line Permit¹⁵ was implemented to demarcate certain areas as protected zones. Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam 1937-1942, in an address to Royal Geographical Society of London on excluded and partially excluded areas of North-East, placed the people in civilizational scale, where he described some of the indigenous communities like the Dufflas, the Akas and the Miris as “very primitive people who respond hardly at all to the influences of civilization”. For him, the Nagas of the Tirap Frontier tract were “degraded, backward type”. In their “abode proper”, they were “frank and independent by nature, often a cheerful and hospitable disposition” (Reid, 1942 quoted in

¹⁵ Inner Line was a unique demarcation of governance, between the hills and plains, created by the Colonial Government in 1873. It is discussed in Chapter 3.

Baruah 2008, 15). Bodhisvatta Kar argues that the Inner Line 'was not only a line in territory; it was also a line in time. The advance of the Line on map was read as progress from pre-capital to capital, from the time of "no law" to the time of "law"' (Kar 2009, 60). He further asserts that inner line was "not only a territorial exterior of the theatre of capital - it was also a temporal outside of the historical pace of development and progress. The consequence was that the Anthropological wisdom of the colonial masters recognized some groups in Assam as tribal or backward and thereby keeping them outside the purview of governmentality, segregating the hills from the plains.

Another contributing factor in the germination of the local identity consciousness was to be seen in the context of emerging monetized economy and salaried services in government offices as well as budding industrial outlets (especially tea gardens). The modern discourse of *development* (and its threat) began to emerge and grow out of it, in which the newly emerging educated class participated and competed enthusiastically. However, increasing influx of *outsiders*, in the form of the Bengalis specially, and the subsequent installation of Bengali as the official language in Assam instead of Assamese, caused the anxiety of losing cultural identity. This led to a more inward-looking sense of political consciousness amongst Assamese intellectuals. Guha has rightly summarized that under the "constant shadow of a Bengali-Assamese conflict, the growth of nationalism in nineteenth century Assam was a two track process. People were increasingly turning as much to pan-Indian nationalism at the all-India level as to little nationalism at the linguistic-regional level" (Guha 2006, 56).

2.3 1 Migration in Colonial Period and Creation of Otherness

As mentioned earlier, Bengali office-bearers were imported by the British to fill in their office-setups in Assam. This migration of the Bengalis can be seen as triggering factor in creating the Assamese nationalism through the linguistic

route. The Bengalis were both the imitable models for the Assamese educated elites for accessing and exercising modernity; and at the same time, they were also the enemies who were dominating over the job-markets as well as the linguistic-cultural spaces of Assam.

The other important migrations occurred during colonial period were the tea garden labours, Marwari traders, Nepali grazers and Muslim population from the Sylhet. Regarding the coming of tea garden labours by the late 19th century and “the racialized creation of the tea labourers” Jayeeta Sharma argues that

“it was the catalyst for a large South Asian project of cultural redefinition whereby members of Assam’s gentry sought to insert their homeland into an imagined “Indo Aryan” community and a modern Indian political space. Local elites sought to assert their distance from aboriginal labouring coolies as well as indigenous low-caste and ‘tribal’ groups. Simultaneously they claimed kinship with upper-caste Indic groups elsewhere on the subcontinent. As college educated youths returned to Assam, now valorized as their beloved motherland *Asomi Aai* (Assam, the mother), they presented themselves as modern representative of Assam and India. Language became a fundamental part of the way they imagined the past and present. Based on their Asomiya mother tongue’s historical relationship to Sanskrit and Sanskrit derived languages, the dominant gentry elites claimed intimate ties with a broad swath of high status South Asian groups.” (Sharma 2012, 9)

The much-needed construction of the *self* and the *other* for creating identity consciousness was unmistakably stimulated by the above-mentioned series of migrations, and their consequent inter-cultural politics, occurred during colonial regime.

2 3.2 Development of Linguistic Nationalism in Assam.

In the year 1836, Assamese language was officially replaced by Bengali in schools and Administrative offices of Assam. Replacement of the native language, by a *foreign* one, brought dissatisfaction to the common people; and

especially to the newly emerged educated elites of the region. Assamese was a language of communication among different communities of Assam from the ages. It earned its written form in medieval Assam especially in the hands of Sankardeva. Though different communities of Assam had their own respective languages, Assamese was the *lingua-franca* among these communities. With such a background, the replacement of Assamese by Bengali language paved the road for further developments in terms of political and other related spheres.

Nationalism is a project of creating otherness – to strengthen the tendency of *we feeling* among the members of a community. The newly emerged elites and the middle class of Assam found the Bengalis as ‘*other*’. While the dominant and popular narrative of the replacement of Assamese language by Bengali points towards a conspiracy of the Bengalis, other scholars hold that it was part of the British administration to ‘divide and rule’.

Nonetheless, apart from the conspiracy theory, the tug of war on language helped shaping Assamese language to be a more sophisticated and standard form. Dictionaries and grammars of Assamese language began to be printed for the first time. The educated elites of Assam had to struggle a lot for establishing the distinctiveness of Assamese language. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan wrote a pamphlet which was published by the Baptist Mission Press entitled *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language* and distributed to the British officials.

The language politics in the 19th century and in the early 20th century made a significant contribution in formation of Assamese nationality. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua were the pioneers in the struggle for restoring Assamese language. Gunabhiram wrote a series of letters in *Orunudo* from Calcutta in support of Assamese language. Hemchandra Barua, with his hard efforts, could publish the first Assamese dictionary named *Hemkoch*.

Contemporary scholarship is divided over the root cause of language conflict in Assam in those times. While the leftists are inclined to hold the British government responsible for their *divide and rule* tactics, the nationalists point towards a Bengali conspiracy in removing Assamese language from the offices in Assam. Apurba Baruah argues for possibility of the both by opining that the Bengali elites of Bengal contributed in fixing Bengali language in Assam, in addition to the divide and rule policy of the British (Baruah 1988).

Apart from the educated Assamese elites, some of the British officials and Christian Missionaries contributed heavily establishing the independent existence of Assamese language. Nathan Brown published the first grammar of Assamese language under the title *Grammatical notices of the Assamese Language* in 1848 where he clearly rejected the official understanding of Assamese as a dialect of Bengali. He outlined the theoretical principles on which the identity of the language was to be sought and found. Miles Bronson published Dictionary in Assamese and English where he claimed that his thirty years of acquaintance with the Assamese people was the basis of his dictionary:

“..the fourteen thousand words here collected, will be found mainly in daily use by the people that no Bengali scholar will understand. Many of these words have been written as they dropped from the lips of the people. While I have thus endeavoured to give the spoken language, I have also inserted the more common Sanscrit words that are used in the Puthis, and therefore known to the people”. (Bronson 1867 quoted in Kar 2008, 39)

In 1854, when the British Government and the Christian Missionaries agreed for promoting vernacular education in Assam where the point of debate was language- the vernacular. Miles Bronson insisted that Bengali was not the vernacular rather a foreign dialect. “The common people do not understand that language, written or spoken.” On the other hand the British officials felt it on the other way round. With the constant efforts of the Christian Missionaries and from the then educated elites of Assam the first fight of Assamese nation

was overcome. In 1873 through a Gazette notification the British Government accepted the distinctiveness of the Assamese language and replaced Bengali by Assamese in the offices and schools of Assam. Thus the period 1836-73 may be considered the age of linguistic nationalism in Assam.

The language war served as a strong stimulant in fostering the Assamese identity conscious; it helped in affirming a line of divide that was necessary in imagining the *self* and defining the *other*. This is evident in the following exclamation of an Assamese intellectual of that time, Balinarayan Bora, who was otherwise an admirer of Bengali culture,

Bengali friends! Don't think that all the faults lie with the Assamese. You cannot clap with one hand. You are also there at the root of the dispute. Bengalis think of Assamese as uncivilized, when they meet a Bengali they forsake the Assamese; they don't learn Assamese because they think that it is the language of an uncivilized people. In such a situation how can there be any friendship between Assamese and Bengalis. Do Bengalis in Assam hate Assamese much that not to speak of Befriending Assamese. They don't wish even to learn Assamese." (quoted in Baruah, 1988)

After the triumph of establishing Assamese language as the official language, the organized intellectuals extended their nationalist mission in enriching a nationalist body of Assamese literature. The Calcutta based Assamese students formed *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati-Sadhini Sabha* (literally meaning "Forum for the development of Assamese language") in 1888, through which the students tried to establish the Assamese language as a rich language through publication of different genres of literature.

2.3.3 Print Media Capitalism

The emergence of the printing press under capitalism, both the newspaper and other vernacular printed resources played an imperative role in the construction of the image of a nation amongst its members.

The year 1846 was beginning of print media capitalism in Assam. The first Assamese newspaper *Orunodoi* was published by the Baptist missionaries from Sivsagar in upper Assam. While the overtly visible objective of the missionaries was to propagate the Christian faith in Assam through such publication, this led to the emergence of a standardized form of Assamese language which soon became the foundation for what we can call the Assamese nationalism.

Anderson's thesis of imagination can help in understanding and theorizing the processes of identity consciousness in Assam after the advent of printing technology. For the first time in *Orunodoi* the term *Asomiya* (Assamese) appeared; and started creating the boundaries of nation. After this benchmarked year of the *Orunodoi*, several other newspapers came up which contributed in imagining and constructing *the vernacular* through Assamese language in print. A list of the Assamese newspapers published during this time is given below.

Sl No	Name of Newspaper	Year
1	Orunodoi	1846-1882
2	<i>Assam Bilasini</i>	1871-1873
3	<i>Assam news</i>	1882-85
4	<i>Assam Bandhu</i>	1885-86
5	<i>Mou</i>	1871-73
6	<i>Junaki</i>	1889-1904
7	<i>Bijuli</i>	1890-1902
8	<i>Times of Assam</i>	1895-1949
9	<i>Asom banti</i>	1900-1944
10	<i>Advocate of Assam</i>	1905-12
11	<i>Usha</i>	1907-12
12	<i>Assam Bandhab</i>	1910-1916
13	<i>Assam Bilasini</i>	1913-24
14	<i>Asomiya</i>	1919-58

15	<i>Chetana</i>	1919-1927
16	<i>Milan</i>	1923-60
17	<i>Abahan</i>	1929-76
18	<i>Deka Asom</i>	1935-54
19	<i>Batori</i>	1930-37
20	<i>Jayanti</i>	1938-49
21	<i>Ramdhenu</i>	1950-67 & 1979-80

(Sharma 2006, 116)

It is interesting to note that after *Orunudoy*, the second Assamese newspaper *Assam Bilasini* was published by a Vaishnavite *xatra* of Majuli, primarily to counter the Christian aggression. It reveals how the spaces of the emerging print media were tried to fill in with the vernacular, establishing the boundaries between the self and the other(s).

2.3.4 Line System and Formation of the Tribal League:

By the early 20th century the Assamese middle class became concerned with the large scale Muslim migration that had been occurring from Sylhet to the Brahmaputra valley. With the large scale migration of Muslim population from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan & Sylhet) the indigenous people started losing their lands. This was a concern for the ruling British officials too, which is evident in the following comment of Mr. Llyod in the census report of 1921:

“In 1911, few cultivators from Eastern Bengal had gone Goalpara..... in the last decade (1911-1921), the movement had extended far up the valley, and the colonists now form an appreciable element in the population of all the four lower and central districts..... In Goalpara nearly 20% of the population is made of these settlers. The next favourite district is Nowgong where they form about 14% of the whole population. In Kamrup, waste lands are being taken up rapidly, especially in the Barpeta sub division. In Darrang exploration and settlement of the colonists are at

an earlier stage. They have not yet penetrated far from the banks of the Brahmaputra..... Almost all the trains and streamer brings parties of these settlers, and it seems likely that their march will extend further up the B valley and away from the river before long” (Census Report of 1921, quoted in Das 1986, 28-29)

C.S. Mullan, the Superintendent of 1931 census, holds that “it is sad but by no means improbable that in another thirty years Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam which an Assamese will find himself at home” (*ibid*, 30). Further Mullan made some derogatory comment towards the *Mymensinghias* (Mymensingh – a district of present-day Bangladesh, and *Mymensinghia* is a local term to refer to immigrants from Bangladesh). He holds, “wherever the carcass, there will vultures be gathered together. Where there is waste-land, thither flock the *Mymensinghiah*s” (*ibid*, 30). However, despite such comments and concerns of individuals, it seems that the tackling of the immigration issue was perhaps not a part of the core official agenda of the British at that time. But it created serious apprehension on the part of the Assamese middle class. The anxiety over the encroachment of the *alien* cultural groups was well depicted in the writings of Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury and others. Guha considers such apprehension of the Assamese middle class as the rise of the little nationalism. He holds,

“This apprehension sustained a powerful lobby of little nationalism both inside and outside the Assam Congress during the three pre-Independence decades. Assamese little nationalism no longer remained during these decades just a middle class or a nascent bourgeois phenomenon. It was fast reaching out to the peasantry, constituted of both autochthons and immigrants, and divided it” (Guha 1984, 42-65).

On the other hand, Udayon Mishra traces the root of Assamese nationalism in the later part of the Ahom rule. According to Mishra, the “process had started during the first Muslim invasion from the neighbouring Bengal in the 16th century, when the people were brought under an Ahom or Assamese banner against the common enemy” (Mishra 1999, 1264-65). However, regarding the

Assamese nationality question during colonial times, Mishra has not denied the role of the conflicts over language and land; for he maintains that:

the national consciousness in Assam started with two events during the colonial period (a) the struggle to regain the status of the Assamese language, and (b) the increasing pressure on cultivable land as a result of continued immigration of land-hungry peasants from neighbouring East Bengal which intensified from the early part of the 20th century. While the first was a struggle led primarily by the emerging Assamese middle class which would, in the succeeding decades, play an increasingly hegemonic role in Assamese society, the second factor affected both the tribal and non-tribal Assamese peasants who were being faced with growing land alienation (*ibid*, 1265).

The couple of decades of the early 20th century show that the tribal and the non-tribal fought together for the land question with the increasing number of immigrants and occupations of land. The then Congress leaderships frequently raised the questions of land alienation and the issue of migration – which they opposed very strongly though they were to be seen taking a different stand on the issue after the independence of the country. The emerging tribal political organization also demonstrated their serious concern and opposition to the increasing migrations. Consequently, the Colonial government introduced the Line System in 1920 to protect the land. It was initially applied in Nowgong and Barpeta sub-division of Kamrup district and gradually spread to other districts of lower Assam. As per the Line System the villages were divided into three types: a) Open Villages b) Closed Villages and c) Mixed Villages. In open villages as per the Line System, immigrants could settle freely. In close villages immigrants were not allowed to settle and in mixed villages a line was drawn where immigrants could settle on one side of the line (Das 1986, 31).

However, though the line system was devised to protect the land from immigrants, the coming to power of the Muslim League encouraged the waves

of immigration through the campaign of “grow more food”. In 1937, the Muslim League brought a resolution to abolish the Line System.

Meanwhile in the year 1933, a conglomerate tribal organization under the name and style of *Tribal League* was formed. Tribal educated elites from different tribal groups like Kalicharan Brahma from the Bodos, Semsonsing Engti from the Karbis, Bhimbor Deuri from the Deuri community were some of the illustrious leaders who represented, and raised voices for, their respective communities and areas, being associated directly or indirectly with the Tribal League.

The Tribal League strongly opposed the abolition of the Line System demanded by the Muslim League. Rabi Chandra Kachari, member in the Assembly, commented on the necessity of the Line System in the following words, “There should be a Line System to protect the weak and backward people. Without a Line demarcation it is not possible to look into the interest of the poor people who require special protection” (Pathak 2010, 65).

After several debates and discussions in the assembly, a committee was formed to review the Line system, taking F. W. Hockenhull as the Chairman and Abdul Matin Choudhury, Syed Abdur Rouf, Sayidur Rahman, Rabichandra Kachari, Mahendranath Saikia, Sarbeswar Baruah, Kameswar Barua and A.G. Pattron as the members of the committee. The Committee came up with a report in 1938 where a middle path was suggested as an alternative to Line System. As per its recommendations, a larger unit of restriction should be adopted (like a *Mouza* or block) so that they can be protected from the encroachers, instead of drawing a line. However, implementation of this report was set aside during to the political turmoil of the Second World War and the Quit India movement. In 1942 after the resignation of the Bordoloi Ministry in Assam for the Quit India movement, the Sadullah Ministry of the Muslim League came into power in Assam. The Sadullah Ministry not only encouraged migration but also allotted land on

payment of Rs. 5/ per *bigha*¹⁶. As such, the recommendations of the review committee on the Line System for creating tribal belts and blocks were taken for implementation only in 1949 (Das 1986, 37) when Bordoloi Ministry again came to form the state government of Assam in independent India. But by that time, the tribal belts and block were found considerably occupied by non-tribals. Amidst the creation of tribal Belts and Blocks, the Bordoloi Ministry formed an Advisory Committee which was headed by Gopinath Bordoloi, Rupnath Brahma, R. J. J. M. Nichols Roy, Aliba Imti, and A.V. Thakkar to look the issue of tribal development. This committee came up with a report and recommendations of forming Autonomous Councils and regional councils for the hill populations. In a retrospective analysis, Gohain has opined that the reason for creating tribal Belts and Blocks by the then Assam Government (i.e. the Bordoloi Ministry) was its intention to minimize the Tribal politics (Gohain, 2002).

2.3.5 Rise of Tribal Politics in Assam

Historically, the political articulation of different tribal identities (specially the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley) in Assam started with the emergence of Tribal League, which has been mentioned above. The League, headed by most of the Tribal elites, demonstrated a conglomerate tribal identity for the holistic development of the tribal population.

“The early 20th century saw the emergence of various associations within these communities, which culminated in the emergence of the Tribal League in 1933. A direct cause and effect relation cannot be established between those early quasi-political organizations and the Tribal League, but their importance, in shaping the nascent political and socio-cultural consciousness of the people is undeniable. The *Mels*, inspired tribal conventions (like the Kachari convention, Miri convention, etc), matured the nascent “tribal” consciousness, which resulted in the

¹⁶ a unit of measurement of area of a land

formation of the Tribal League as a mode of organized tribal politics” (Pathak 2010, 61-62).

Pathak again argues about the newly emerged educated and political elites. She holds, “In their effort to “develop”, “uplift” or “improve” the conditions of the tribes, various attempts were made by this emerging leadership to locate the reasons for their backwardness and to introduce reforms in social practices. Their attempts to redefine tradition, adjusting to colonial modernity, were also the first steps towards the construction of the tribal identity” (*ibid*, 62). The conglomerate tribal politics in the pre-independent situation dealt with the issues of land- encroached by the immigrant Muslims¹⁷, set up of schools in the tribal dominated areas and other such issues. Due to continuous increase and influx of Muslim population from the Sylhet region (presently in Bangladesh), who were documented as land-hungry people in the colonial records, the local especially tribal people started losing lands. Initially, some measures were taken by the British Government in pre-independence times to neutralize such tribal aspirations. An important measure was the introduction of the Line system in 1920, which was implemented to safeguard the tribal land. In the post-independence period, the state government of Assam under the Chief-Ministership of Gopinath Bordoloi further introduced the Tribal Belts and Blocks to safeguard the tribal land.

From its inception, Tribal League had been raising serious concerns towards the development of the tribal population of Assam. In response to the demand of the League, the then Government of Assam reserved four seats for tribal people out of 108. In 1937 election, Rupnath Brahma, Kark Chandra Doley, Dhirsing Deuri and Ravi Chandra Kachari elected as the member and Bhimbar Deuri nominated by the Government of Assam. While the rise of a new set of educated and political elites started raising the different issues of their

¹⁷ Immigrants from the Sylhet district of East Pakistan, presently Bangladesh

communities, it also contributed to the increasing visibility of the ethnic elements in the identity politics in Assam.

The rise of tribal politics in pre-independence times was an important turn which can be seen as the beginning of a new discourse of ethnic politics that later overshadowed the political landscape of Assam. A group of tribal educated persons came forward against the discriminations made by the caste Hindu society towards them. They highlighted the backwardness of their respective communities; and the Tribal League functioned like a pressure-group for the holistic development of the tribal population.

It is important to note that the formation of the Tribal League needs to be seen as a culmination of the increasing confrontation of the tribal population with the non-tribal caste Hindus. Prior to the formation of the Tribal League, the Bodo Students Union was formed in Cotton College in 1920 where Khagendra Narayan Brahma was the President and Satish Ch. Basumatary was the Secretary. The first Bodo journal entitled *Bibar* was published in 1924. The name of Kalicharan Brahma is associated with the renaissance of the Bodos during the late 19th and early 20th century. Influenced by the Brahma Samaj during his stay in Calcutta, he propagated the *Brahma Dharma*¹⁸ which got popularity among the Bodos. Kalicharan was concerned with causes of backwardness of the Bodos; and was critical about some of the practices of his community which he thought unhealthy. Sacrificing animals in different rituals, rearing pigs and poultry in unhygienic condition, drinking of liquor are some of the vices that he felt to be eliminated from the society. Moreover he encouraged to establish the first *Mahila Samitee* (Women's Forum) among the Bodos. For the unemployed youths, he established carpentry and weaving centres for generation of employment. Moreover, Bodo Mahasanmilan was also established taking Jadavchandra Khakhlary as the first President where 'Mahasanmilan' adopted different resolutions in its conferences on issues pertaining to women, such as, bride price and marriage by capture. Kalicharan submitted a petition to the then Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara A.G. Lainy

¹⁸ A cult of worshipping *Brahma* - one of the trinity of Hindu gods

to allow them to write the title Brahma which was subsequently granted (Banerjee 2006, 57).

The growing political consciousness of the Bodos about their distinctive existence well reflected in the memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission, which visited Assam in 1929. The Bodos of Goalpara district submitted a memorandum to Simon Commission. In the memorandum, the Bodos demanded separate identity in the Census. The text of their demands in the memorandum was as follow:

1. That the Bodo Community forms a considerable portion of the population of the district of Goalpara and its numbers is about 1 Lakh 50 thousands. In the whole province of Assam its numbers are eight Lakhs. A large number of Bodos live in the district of Jalpaiguri and Cochbihar in the province of Bengal. Out of One Lakh and fifty thousands, some thousands have been treated as Hindus which is the cause of decrease of Bodo population in the district of Goalpara. The Bodos have a distinct civilisation of their own. There should be a separate category as 'the Bodos' in the Census report. The history shows very clearly what part of this community is playing in the history of Assam during the time of great Epic, the Mahabharata. Many kings who rules over Assam belonged to this race. Bhisma Raja, Bali Raja, Ban raja and Viswa Singha all belonged to this race and history will prove how influential once they were.
2. The people of this race are born warrior and even now many people have listed their names in the military under the British Government. The original proprietor of the Bijni Estate and Cochbihar Estate were people of this race. But in the course of time, they styled themselves as Hindus. Their Estates are still existing but are totally ignored. We belong backwards, failed together to place the opinion of our community before. So we could not submit the memorandum in time and we hope that you will be pleased to accept it and to consider it favourably for your decisions as regard Indian constitution, will make a distinctly new stage in our political life.
3. Electorate: In our opinion, there should not be mixed electorate. Each section of the people should have the liberty of sending their representative in the local councils. The peculiar position in which we are placed offers as practically no chance of sending our representative in which, though there is large number of voters in our

community. Out of the total population of the whole district of Goalpara which numbers about six lakha eighty two, three lakhs sixty nine thousands three hundred ninety seven fall under the heads of non-Mohammadians. Non mohammadians means Hidus, Christian, Jains, Sikhs and the like. A liberal view of the thing shows that we cannot enjoy the advantage of the reform as other community does. In spite of our being in such a large number all advantages of the reform are being enjoyed either by the Brahmins or by the Khatriyas or by the Sudras. So in order to safeguard the interest of our community we should have a separate representative in the council.

4. In our opinion, there should not be a second chamber in the local council.
5. At present there are certain restrictions which debar many to exercise the right to franchise. This should be removed and more liberty be given for that purpose. There should be four seats in the central legislature one for Mhohmmadians and three for non Mhammadians; and one of the three non-Mhmmadian seats should be reserved for the Bodos of Assam.
6. Territorial pre-distribution: Some interested persons of our district are agitating for the transfer of the district of Goalpara over to Bengal. As far as we are concerned, we opposed it. Goalpara is a part and parcel of Assam and history will prove what part she has been playing since time immemorial. The habits and customs of the people of the district are more akin to Assamese than Bengalees. The transfer of the district to Bengal will be prejudicial to the interest not only of this community, but all the communities, and this transfer will seriously hamper our progress in all directions.
7. We also desire to put it before you that there be sub-division either at Kokrajhar or at Haltugaon within the sub-division of Dhubri. The community should be benefited as "listed community" and more opportunity of employment be given.
8. Education and appointment: We the undersigned beg to lay before you that this community should receive special treatment at the hands of the Government in matters of education and appointment. Our community is most backward in point of education. Such being the case, our people are always misled. They cannot understand the value of reform. They cannot save themselves from the hands of the foreign money lenders. To remove this drawback there should be compulsory pre-primary education and special scholarship for going facility

9. A large number of sepoy are included in the Gorkha regiment and are generally known as Gorkha. To our opinion, there should be a separate regiment as the 'Bodo Regiment' for the Bodo people of Assam.
10. Local Boards: The chairman of the Board during the term of their office-Big land holders should not be allowed to stand for election from general constituency. There is no objection if they are given special seats in the boards.
11. In matters of Board election under the Dhubri local Board, our community should have separate electorate just like the Mhammadians-under the thanas of Bilasipara, Kokrajhar, Bijni and Dhubri. The Bodo people who are in the majority in those areas should have separate seats at the Dhubri local Board. AS stated before, our peoples are illiterate and ignorant. So they are easily misled by others at the time of elections and consequently, the people of other communities are elected. In view of the literacy ignorance and influence of other communities are earnestly pray, so that we get separate seat in Dhubri Local Board. Such is also the condition of the Goalpara Local Board. There too we want separate seats.
12. In conclusion. We beg to lay before you that, if require, any one of us is willing to appear before you and to given evidence. (Das 2012, 116-119)

In the sixth point of their memorandum, they have identified themselves as Assamese. However, they were not enjoying comfortable space within the increasingly Hinduized societies of the Assamese-speaking populations. The culturally hegemonic attitudes of the caste Hindu Assamese compelled them to maintain sufficient distances in the society. The exclusionary politics and the hegemony of the dominant section will be discussed in the later paragraphs.

As discussed above the period is also responsible for a conglomerate tribal politics officially emerged in 1933. The different kinds of discriminations faced by the tribal students in the colleges, hostels from the upper caste Hindu Assamese fuelled the rise of Tribal League and it came up with different demands pertaining to tribal development for equal rights with other caste Hindu people. The life history of Bhimbar Deuri shows how he fought against the caste based discrimination by the tribal students in the hostels of Cotton College in the 1930's decade, as well as his fight against such discrimination.

2.4 Post-colonial Situation: Assamese Hegemony vis-à-vis Counter-hegemonic Politics of Ethnonationalism

After coming of the national independence in 1947, the reorganization of the states in linguistic line and adoption of developmental models were challenging agendas for the native law-makers in the context of the diversities of population in terms of race, caste, religion and geography. The pace of development in terms of education and other factors, and the accumulation of capital were not similar to all the communities and regions in colonial period. Theoretically it can be argued that the people who were sanskritized first were also westernized first¹⁹. But to some extent some tribal groups were also westernized directly by adoption of Christianity and western education. Through this direct route, a set of educated elites could come forward with their expectations for political placement. They reacted strongly against the hegemony of the dominant section. It however started with the language politics; and later grew bigger in Assam in the post-colonial series of political consequences.

2.4.1 Language Politics.

The language has always been a site of contestation in the politics of Assam, both in colonial as well as post-colonial situations. The Language Policy of the state, and its related politics in the post-independent period in Assam, was the major cause for the emergence and growth of the ethnonational politics in Assam. Assamese language had been the medium of communication among different tribal groups of Assam (both divided & undivided Assam). The different ethnic groups learnt Assamese spontaneously in the educational

¹⁹ The first Assamese version of Bible was translated by an upper caste Brahmin named Atmaram Sarma. Moreover, most of the Government officials, educated youth belonged to superior caste in the 19th century. It shows how the upper caste people were first influenced by the colonial modernity as its first consumers.

institutions. In the year 1960, the Assam Government tried to impose Assamese language as the official language, making it the medium of instruction in the educational institutions. With the continuous pressure from Asom Sahitya Sabha, the then Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha brought the Language bill in Assembly in 1960. Covertly, it was a part of the hegemonic agenda of the dominant Assamese for inclusion of the other non-Assamese-speaking groups under its fold. But it worked reversely.

The Bengalis of the Barak valley first asserted; and on 19 May of 1960 eleven Bengali people died in police firing. These 11 people are considered as *Bhasha Swahid* (martyrs of language) in the Barak valley. In addition to the Bengalis, the other tribal groups joined the Bengalis in the protest against the imposition of Assamese language as the official language. The different tribal groups including Khasi, Mizo, Bodo joined the All Assam non-Assamese Language Conference held in Silchar on 2 July 1962. It adopted a resolution which goes like that:

“The conference of the non-Assamese speaking people of Assame strongly opposes the move to impose Assamese as the official language for the state of Assam and that the status quo based on the intrinsically multilingual character of the state must be maintained for the peace and security of the eastern region of India” (Bhaumik 2010, 75).

Regarding the imposition of the Assamese language former Lok Sabha Speaker and an influential politician of Meghalaya hold, “We all spoke Assamese, we still can. But we are not Assamese, so we would not accept the imposition of Assamese, That’s why Assam broke up” (*ibid*, 75).

Protests were made, against this official step, from different ethnic groups who had been otherwise learning Assamese spontaneously. The imposition of Assamese language can be attributed to the hegemonic mind-set of the Assamese-speaking caste Hindus; and their political imagination to include the tribal groups under the Assamese label. However, this forcefully imposed

agenda of inclusive politics got a setback; and worked reversely with the emergence of the politics of exclusion amongst various tribal communities. The Bengalis of Barak valley started agitating against the imposition and eleven people died in police firing. All the tribal groups of the then undivided Assam viz. Khasi, Naga, Jaintia, Bodo, Mizo protested against this move of the Assam Government. The formation of the All Hills Party Leaders Conference (AHPLC) was a major move to divide Assam by taking all the hills as a separate state excluding Nagaland.

In the APHLC (All-Party Hills Leaders Conference) Meeting held at Tura in 1960 adopted the following resolutions, which show the grievances and the problems faced by the tribal students through the adoption of the language:

1. The position and conditions of the Hills people in Assam are such that the acceptance of the Assamese language, now or any time, which would place the Assamese in a more dominant position, will lead to the assimilation of all the Hills people in the Assamese community, thereby gradually leading to the disintegration of their identity as distinct communities in India, which identity has been recognition and protection under the Constitution.
2. The imposition of the Assamese language will overburden the Hills people with too many languages (Hindi, the Vernacular, English and Assamese) in different scripts.
3. The adoption of Assamese as the official language of the state will adversely affect the opportunities and prospects of the Hills people in the Government services and other avocations notwithstanding any amount of safeguards which can always be circumvented.
4. There is no justification for the declaration of Assamese as the official language even from the population point of view, as less than 50% of the population have Assamese as the mother tongue.
5. The move has already created discord, disruption and violence among the different language groups of the state, thereby defeating the very purpose which an official language is intended to serve.
6. The imposition of the language by law will more create more chaos and insecurity in this frontier states, which will be

catastrophic especially in view of the Chinese aggression (of 1959)

7. Assam being India in miniature inhabited by people of diverse races cultures and languages, the proper official language should be Hindi. Meanwhile English should continue as the official language until such time as the people of the State are ready to adopt Hindi as the official language. (Chaube 1999, 132)

In different APHLC meeting the issue of language always was a matter of discussion. Finally when the Assam Government adopted the language Bill, the APHLC meet held at Haflong, resolved that

“Language Bill was a clear proof of unfair attitude and the firm determination of the Assamese community to avail themselves of undue advantages and thereby enhance their domination over the hills people and the rest of the people of the State of Assam.”

Finally with the growing movement from the hill tribes of North-East India, Nagaland was created in 1963, Meghalaya in 1969 and Mizoram in 1971. Once the Hills question was solved by reorganizing the state of Assam, the plains tribals asserted in the similar line as Assamese leadership adopted similar policies to the rest of the tribal groups.

The case of the Bodos can be cited here. With the establishment of the *Bodo Thunlai Afad* (Bodo Literary Society) it became a dominant political and literary organization for the community since 1952. Bodos initially used Assamese script for the language, but in 1974 Bodos adopted the Roman script for writing Bodo language. Before that, the then Assam Government had agreed to use Bodo language as medium of instruction with Assamese script in the Bodo dominated areas. But after the Bodos switched over to the Roman script in 1974, the Assam Government stopped financial grant to Bodo medium schools. In the script movement of the Bodos, several people died and others got arrested and punished. When the Bodos approached the Central

Government to resolve the script issue, the Central Government ironically offered them to accept neither Assamese nor Roman script but the Devnagari script. Thus the Bodos caught between “a lion and a crocodile”. At last, the Devnagari script was officially adopted but it created split in the Bodo society.

The demand of making Assamese as the medium of instruction in the Universities of Assam viz. Gauhati and Dibrugarh and its affiliated colleges led by All Assam Students Union in 1972 marginalized the other languages. In 1986, in the first regime of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), under the leaders of the Assam movement, Assamese was made compulsory as the third language for non-Assamese medium schools through the circular of SEBA (Board of Secondary Education, Assam). The hegemonic imposition of language to other ethnic groups who bear distinct cultural and language obviously brought dissatisfaction amongst them. This government imposition, which received parallel support from the Assamese intelligentsia and the nationalistic organizations like Asom Sahitya Sabha and All Assam Students Union, created frontal war between the Assamese-speaking section and the *non-Assamese* others. Moreover, the different communities who had fought for the establishment of their respective languages in the primary or secondary schools, and subsequently granted the same in due course, were deprived from financial grants. Eligible teachers were not appointed in those schools which became ill-equipped for development of the different tribal languages. Thus the hegemony of the Assamese ruling class began to be recognized by the tribal populace, creating the obvious suspicion of the tribal masses towards the Assamese.

As most of the tribal languages did not have scripts of their own, the Assamese script had been used by them. However, imposition of Assamese language resulted in the counter-hegemonic inclination of the various tribal groups towards the Roman script – divorcing their existing practice of using the Assamese script. The script movement of the Bodos started in 1974 was tried to be suppressed brutally by the then Assam Government. Like the Bodos, the Karbis were also mobilizing similar moves for switching the script.

In 1973, a public meeting was held at Diphu, to discuss about the script for Karbi language. A proposal was adopted in the meeting where it resolved that “the Roman Scripts shall be adopted for writing the Karbi national literature and henceforth all Karbi text books to be used as Karbi vernacular subject at the LP schools level should be written in Roman Script” (Rongpher 2005, 72-78). The meeting constituted the Script implementation Committee to give pressure the Autonomous District Council. In the Script movement received fierce reactions from the Government and many people were wounded. However, in 1978, Autonomous District Council adopted the resolution to use Roman Script for Karbi language.

Though, language is a cultural issue, a tool for asserting identity, but it has direct link with other economic and spheres of social and political life. The language policy adopted by the ruling Assam Government is mostly dominated by Assamese people, supported by Assamese elites, intelligentsias and other nationalist organizations for aggressive cultural homogenization. At the same time the same state and intelligentsias accept the diversity and distinct cultural heritage of the region. The language of ethnicity thus, in this line is a bottom up reaction to overcome the hegemonic nature of the state.

2 4 2 Cultural Hegemony: Illustrations from Literature.

Hegemony as described by Gramsci is the domination of a group over another and the mutual consent given by the masses (Gramsci 2009). I here argue that cultural hegemony is a suitable conceptual tool for understanding and interpreting the current ethnic ferments in Assam. It is primarily a story of hegemonic intrusion and counter-hegemonic resistance.

The 19th century Assamese literatures provide a huge range of culturally hegemonic constructions and imaginations which were racist; and show the attitude of the caste Hindu Assamese society towards the tribal population. After 1850, a kind of socio-cultural renaissance began to evolve in Assamese

society; and a set of newly educated elites emerged to take the cause of the modernizing Assamese society. As a part of it, Assamese language and literature flourished. If we accept the popular idea that literature reflects the society then the literature produced in 19th century by the emerging Assamese middle class shows the racist nature towards the tribals. The 19th century was a complex time not only in the context of Assam but the India as a whole when the country witnessed the success of the British who could rule the world, embraced their world views, experienced modernity through developments in the spheres like education, administration, working culture and so forth. On the other hand, it was also a period when the local countrymen re-discovered themselves through comparison with their colonial masters: e.g. people of Assam began to be painted with the attributes like laziness and backwardness. The following discussions give us the impression what the mainstream society thought about other communities. These racist and shallow imaginations of the self as well as the other, which becomes evident in any retrospective ethnography of the Assamese literate of that time, provide crucial insights in historicizing the cultural hegemony which is still at work.

Gunabhiram Baruah, in *Asom Buranji*, wrote about the Karbis,

“Mikirs jati, the peace loving people inhabited in between the hills of present Nagaon, Nagahills and Khasi district. In plains also several Mikirs are residing. They can intermingle with our people very much. Our people call them ‘*dalor mikir*’ (mikirs living in the branches of tree). They call themselves so for getting favours and love. It can be assumed that Mikir is the derivative of the either hakhamrig or morkot. They are the aboriginals of Assam and ruled by the Kacharis” (Baruah 2006, 13).

For him the term Karbi came from the Sanskrit word ‘*kroibya*’(flesh) or ‘*kroibad*’ (raw flesh eater). The shallow knowledge of the 19th century social reformist on Karbis gives the impression how they were treated by the dominant sections. Gunabhiram, being a social reformist of the period, tried to

link the names of all the tribal communities with Sanskrit origin. He explained them in the following way:

Naga: These people live in between the districts of Kachari, Mikir, Manipur and Sivsagar. There were many naked people among them. It can be assumed that from the Sanskrit word “nagna” (means naked) the term Naga originated.

Misimis: These people live in between Abor and Khamti hills. They are highly ethnocentric.

Abor jati: This nation lives in between the countries of Aka and Misimis. From the Sanskrit word Abor, abor term is originated.

Aka Jati: These people live in between the hills of Dafala, Miri, Abor, and Bhoot. The term *Aka* comes from the Sanskrit word *Anka*. Earlier they tattooed their body but nowadays it is no more.

Dafala Jati: These people live in between the hills of Bhoot and Aka. They are very cruel and sadist.

Bhoot Jati: Among all the hilly peoples of this region, they are the most civilized. As per the present norms, they can be called as half civilized (*ibid*, 13-15)

In the first Assamese dictionary *Hemkosh*, published in 1900, different communities were defined in overtly racist tones. It described the groups like Matak and Maran of upper Assam as ‘said to be very cruel’. The first Assamese newspaper published the news item on Phulaguri Dhewa²⁰, an uprising led by lower caste and tribal people of the Nagaon region. That reporting was full of negative comments and judgments about the tribal and low-caste peoples, without going to the area. This piece of write-up, authored by the first Christianized Assamese, described the uprising in a derogatory tone as “when a jackal shouts, others also shout.” The emerging middle class thus took a racist and anti-people stance in every now and then, especially when dealing with the tribal peoples. When the colonial Government imposed

²⁰ First peasants’ uprising in colonial Assam held in 1861 at Phulaguri, Nagaon district of present Assam.

taxation and increased land revenue, spontaneous protests occurred in different places of Kamrup, Rangia, Patharughat, Phulaguri. The educated elites left no stone unturned to please the colonial masters by describing the protesting tribal communities as the culpable ones. Many elites even translated the pamphlets, hand-outs of these movements into English for the help of the British in suppressing the movement.

The 19th Century in Assam thus shows a disgusting practice of demoralizing and humiliating the local tribals due to a sanskritic mind-set adopted by the mainstream nobles and intellectuals of Assam. The colonial ethnography, which was in its peak at this time, was also an important contributor in this asymmetrical inter-culturalism. It is not difficult to understand that the colonial ethnography influenced the local writers in framing and distancing the indigenous tribals through the Euro-centric ideas of civilization. A representative example of fictionalizing the tribals by non-tribal Assamese writers can be taken from the novel *Miri Jiyori* (1894) written by Rajani Kanta Bordoloi. The present-day Mishing community was portrayed in the novel through a tragic story of illegitimate love between a young couple who ended up losing their lives in the hands of cruel hill-dwellers. This novel, which carries all the flavours of the 19th century traits of romanticizing with the remote rural tribals, was later criticized by Mishing critics, pointing out that the rigid social restriction towards love-relationships between young boys and girls which is described in the novel is actually non-existent in the Mishing society. Moreover, the epistemology created in the 19th and 20th century towards the tribal population was well reflected in the colonial records of the ethnographers and administrative officers. The creation of inner line was one of the reasons of creating polarized identity.

The 19th century social reformists of Assam, adopted the so-called mainstream Indian version of colonial modernity. A frame of identification, which was racial in nature both covertly and overtly, was thus created, in which the 19th century Assamese middle class could associate themselves with the emerging pan-Indian mainstream through the sanskritic route and other vocabularies of

the Hindu tradition. Bringing Parth Chatterjee in the forefront, here we can argue that in 19th the consumers of colonial modernity-the social reformist in one sense celebrated and praised the British as ‘the most advance nation in the world’ and compared the others with them in one hand; and on the other hand in the inner domain, they revived and celebrated the traditional Sanskrit practices.

These kinds of attitudes got reflected, in the later periods, in the academic institutions of higher learning where tribal students were not allowed to sit or to take food in the hostels with caste Hindu students. There are different jokes, tales anecdote, where such communities were insulted. A popular proverb found in Assamese which was used even by a doyen of Assamese literature, Laksmi Nath Bezbaruah, where not only the women folk as a whole but a community is insulted too.

Tiri, miri, bhatou kuwa

Ei tinir axoi nupuwa

[The women, the Miris (The Mishings) and the ones who speak like parrots are difficult to be trusted]

2.4.3 The Question of Development

The scenario of employment and development in Assam in post-independence times has been constantly marked by the slow progress of industrialization and diminished the job opportunities for the newly educated youths of the region. The limited job available in the Government sector results a tough competition between the tribal educated and the caste Hindu educated youths. The language policy also affects in getting jobs in those sectors, as the knowledge of reading and writing Assamese became criteria to get a job in most of the government departments for employment. The allegation found a considerable basis when a news item came up in a popular English daily *The Assam*

Tribune on 27th March, 1988 where it said that nearly 10000 backlog posts for SC and STs were lying vacant (Daimary 2012). Thus, the employment policies failed to bring hopes and satisfaction for the ethnic groups as belonging to a free and developing democracy. Such hopelessness stimulated several educated but unemployed individuals belonging to the deprived communities to search for possible solution against the injustice of the dominant section.

In a multicultural society, the relative deprivation theory is one of the major focuses of attention to see the ethnic question. Paul Brass, on relative deprivation theory in relation to ethnicity formation, holds that “a feeling of frustration or relative deprivation defined as the balance between goods and conditions of life which people believe they are rightfully entitled and the goods and conditions they think are capable of attaining or maintaining, given the social means available to them” (Brass 1991, 42).

Such conditions of relative deprivation are found abundantly in North-East India. The different claims and allegations made by different ethnic groups, civil society organizations, regional political parties; about the differential treatment received by them in every sphere from the Government as well as the mainland India exemplifies the rhetoric of deprivation in the identity question. In all India level the people of North-East in Delhi or in other metros of the country face terrible racism, from the people of mainland India, where tribal people of the Assam or from other states of North-East faces similar attitudes from the dominant section. Moreover, when development of a region or people is commonly understood in terms of economic growth, industrial infrastructures and modern technological amenities, relative deprivation is felt when such parameters are compared between Guwahati and Delhi in the national level or between Kokrajhar and Guwahati at the lower scale.

Ted Gurr, in his *Why Men Rebel*, describes the relative deprivation as the “perceived discrepancy between value expectation and value expectancies in a society” (Gurr 1993, 13). As per Gurr due to the relative deprivation ethno political movement occurs in four stages:

- i) Ethnic groups have to recognize that deprivation in society exists.
- ii) Their wretched condition is not experienced by other groups and some groups are enjoying what they are not.
- iii) The deprivation is not only inequitable but also unfair.
- iv) Political action will change the existing condition. (*ibid*)

The Gurr model of ethnicity formation through relative deprivation can be applied to the existing scenario of the North-East Indian part.

The Developmental approach developed in the late 80's holds that "ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness forms 'the essential independent variable that leads to [ethnic] political assertiveness and militant separatism, regardless of the existence of inequality or dominance'. developmental approach argues that distinct communities prefer to be governed poorly by their ethnic brethren instead of wisely by aliens since rule by aliens is degrading for the community" (Phadnis & Ganguly 2001, 40).

The development model in this juncture led by the state is somehow seen to ignore the local issues and cultural behaviours. Examples can be drawn on the use of natural resources, like the forests resources and rivers, where local communities are not part of the development processes. Traditional ways of agriculture, livelihood are being replaced by the modern means without having adequate infrastructure and market. Such kind of models of development also leads to alienation of land, displacement, and poverty of the indigenous population. The displacement of the indigenous population due to massive urbanization, development projects (big dams, industry, establishment of educational institutes, broadening of highways) are some of the issues which are relevant and crucial in the context of Assam. Along with the same, non-compensated loss of land due to erosion, natural calamity, conflict etc. are some other forces of displacement here. All these causes have become the constraint to inclusive development of the indigenous population in North-East India in general and Assam in particular. The different measures of development led by the state reversely helped to emerge a set of new elites

from different communities. Participatory development of the community and thereby sharing of different development measures are found to be minimal mostly in the tribal dominated areas. Gohain holds,

“...The persistence, indeed aggravation of the colonial pattern of underdevelopment in the state with the Indian state filling in the void left by the departure of British imperialism, has provoked this type of response. To be sure, the Indian Constitution also allows a certain measure of self-government to the states. But in the absence of a proper strategy of development for neglected regions in the centre where power is concentrated a set of power-brokers have arisen in the North-East without any concern for genuine regional development” (Gohain 1996, 2067).

Thus, the different ethnic communities feel relatively deprived in case of employment, development, education which brings dissatisfaction and exclusion. The caste Hindu Assamese elites always have been occupying the administration and other offices; without giving proper interest in the problems of the tribal which is quite a common allegation. It is a tragic irony for the local inhabitants of Assam and the North-East that the bureaucrats of the Indian administrative and allied services are sent to serve in these regions as ‘punishment transfers’ – which is rather an openly accepted etiquette of the Government functionaries.

2.4.4 The Assam Movement (1979-85):

The Assam movement was started in 1979 under the aegis of All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad. In 1979, Hiralal Patowary, the Member of Parliament of the Mongaldoi constituency, died and the by-election was announced to get a new representative elected. In the electoral process, it was discovered that the number of voters in Mongalodoi constituency increased abruptly. It was a popular belief that the increasing number of voters was not natural but due to the massive influx from Bangladesh. AASU demanded for deletion of the illegal voters from the voters

list. AASU, along with Asom Sahitya Sabha (a literary society with nationalist sentiments and enjoying mass popularity) and the Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (which was formed solely to lead the struggle against the illegal migrants) started a movement against the illegal influx into Assam. The movement got massive support from the Assamese peasantry, both tribal and non-tribal, who had the fear of losing land. The movement ended with the signing of the Assam Accord, after an agreement between the student leadership and the Indian Government in 1985.

Though almost all the tribal groups of Assam supported and participated in the movement in the initial phase, the Assamese leadership failed to keep on earning the trust from the tribal leaderships after the movement. During the high time of the movement, it was a popular demand to evict the encroachers from the reserved forests and from the government lands. Incidentally, some of the indigenous tribal communities, especially the Bodos, were occupying substantial portions of the reserved forests for cultivation and settlement. As mentioned earlier that they were one of the earliest settlers in the region, the leadership of the Bodos were reasonably dissatisfied the call of the Assam movement to evacuate the reserved forests. As such, communal clashes broke out in many places like Gahpur and Phulung Chapori. There were several other incidents in which suspected illegal migrants and many indigenous people were killed due to the chauvinistic actions of the Assamese language speaking caste Hindus (Gohain 1995). A major catastrophe during the Assam movement was the Nellie massacre in 1983 in which large numbers of (officially less than two thousand) Muslim minority peoples were killed in a single day, in a place called Nellie in central Assam. Kimura, in her extensive research on this incident, has discussed through retrospective recollection of that black day by its various stakeholders. It was revealed by the respondents that the local tribal leaders of the Tiwa group were initially encouraged by the central leadership of the Assam movement to make an assault on the minorities (Kimura 2013). But after the magnanimity of the massacre was flashed out, the central leadership maintained distances from the Tiwas in

Nellie. Several other incidents of varied intensities began to paint the Assam movement as a hegemonic venture of the dominant Assamese speaking section. This eventually led to a fissure in the collective Assamese identity itself, where political divisions grew bigger between the Assamese speaking caste Hindus in one hand and the so-called tribal populations on the other.

The official agenda of the Assam movement, however, got betrayed as no substantial expulsion of illegal migrants could take place, even after the leaders of the movement were voted to power. The most significant fallout of the Assam movement was rather a much unforeseen consequence: the fracture of the Assamese identity into tribals, non-tribals and minorities.

2.5 Theorizing Ethnonationalism in Assam:

With the forces of the development rhetoric in one hand, and preservation of the culture and identity for increased access to power on the other, the ethnonational politics is increasing amongst the communities in Assam. The hegemonic tendency of the dominant mainstream society has dissatisfied the ethnic groups; and the emergence of educated and politically conscious elites among the ethnic groups who are mobilizing their respective groups for the sake of political visibility and economic development. Paul Brass gives a theoretical model in formation of ethnicity and nationalism in his *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Theory and Comparison*. Brass describes the role of the elites of a particular ethnic community in transforming its basic cultural distinctiveness into some bases of political differentiation.

“The cultural forms, values and the practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantages. They become symbols and referents for the identification of members of the group, which are called up in order to create a political identity more easily. The symbols used to create a political identity also can be shifted to adjust to political circumstances and the limitations imposed by the state authorities” (Brass 1991, 15).

In the transformation of an ethnic group to a nationality (political identity), Brass discusses about the processes of reviving cultural symbols like language, religion for a homogeneous identity, which plays significant role in such transitions. The second stage of transformation of the group involves the articulation and acquisition of social, economic and political rights for the members of the group as a whole. As such, an ethnic group aspires to achieve and maintain their rights through political mobilization; and transforms it to a nationality. Moreover, in the ethnicity construction, the elite competition is also an important factor, as elites transform an ethnic group to a political identity. This process involves competitions and conflicts between and within the elites of different ethnic groups for political power, economic benefit, and social status. The elite competition to capture some of the state resources like government job, power sharing are other significant dimensions for the construction of ethnicity and nationalism. Genesis of Assamese nationalism as well the various ethnonationalisms in Assam at present lie in the same ambit. How the Assamese elites found the Bengalis as their enemy or contestant in the late 19th century has been discussed earlier. In contemporary times, the educated tribal elites also have found the Assamese as their contestants.

Ethnic consciousness has several connotative manifestations. Primarily it is meant or proposed for political, economic and other all-round development of the community as a whole by practicing political autonomy inside the existing state or by demand of separate territory. Apart from the political rhetoric of ethno-national manifestation, it also exhibits revival of the expressive cultural behaviors and forms like language, popular performances, folklore, dress pattern, food habit etc. This process of invention of tradition has been noted by Hobsbawm as fulfilling a number of objectives: a) to establish or symbolize social cohesion or group membership b) to establish or to legitimize institutions, status and authority relations or c) to socialize or inculcate beliefs, values or behaviour (Hobsbawm 1983, 9). In the juncture of creating own cultural symbols, it has the tendency of opposing or negating the dominant cultural symbols of its counterparts. These are postulated as shared discourses,

as a matter of ethnic differentiation by the elite or group used as tools of symbolic constructions for identity movements. Renaming of place, the concept of extended and imagined territory, imposing or practicing of traditional dresses in private and public sphere are part of the ethnic mobilization and movement to serve the group's interest. Hence the political movement is a depended variable upon the cultural redefinition, recreation and revivalism, construction and reconstruction. Nagel argues

“Culture is constructed in much the same way as ethnic boundaries are built, by the actions of individuals and groups and their interactions with the larger society. Ethnic boundaries function to determine identity options, membership composition and size, and form of ethnic organization. Boundaries answer the question: Who are we? Culture provides the content and meaning of ethnicity; it animates and authenticates ethnic boundaries by providing a history, ideology, symbolic universe, and system of meaning. Culture answers the question: What are we?”(Nagel 1994, 162).

Further, Homi Bhaba, in *Location of Culture*, further observes,

“It is in the emergence of the interstices-the overlap and displacement of domains of difference-that the intersubjective and collective experience of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural values are negotiated. How are subjects formed ‘in-between’ or in excess of, the sum of the ‘parts’ are difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable.” (Bhaba 1993, 2)

The observations of Nagel and Bhaba fit well in interpreting the contemporary scenario of ethnic politics in Assam. Ethnic enclosures have been recreated and cultural contents have been devised to substantiate the ethnic boundaries

in the context of the communities in Assam who are charged with their identity-consciousness. This renewed imagination of self and the other, and mapping the boundaries in between, have been discursively motivated by the politics of distinction – a strategy of making one’s group distinct and different from the others, undermining the “shared histories of deprivation and discrimination”. According to Bhaba, the recognition of tradition bestows a partial form of identification. In restaging the past, it introduces the incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition.

Some of the telling illustrations can be brought in for discussion here. Originally the Bodos and the Dimasa Kacharis, the two ethnic groups of Assam, belonged to the same greater Bodo stock – as per the reliable accounts of history. In the course of transition, however, the Bodos became the dominant group in the lower Assam and in some districts like upper and central Assam; whereas the Dimasa population came to dominate in the NC Hills (presently Dima Hasao) and in Karbi Anglong. The Dimasas had their own kingdom in Dimapur (presently in Nagaland) and in Khaspur. In the mission of identity construction, the Bodos depended on the oral narrative to form the people’s history. As a part of it, the Bodos claim the Dimasas to be a part of the Bodos which is denied by the Dimasas. In April 20, 2001 the Bodos established a statue of Daimalu – a half mythical character of the Dimasas, in Kokrajhar as a process of reinvention of tradition. But the Dimasas then claimed that the Bodos have hijacked their identity and their iconic hero Daimalu (Sharma 2006, 84). In Bodo identity formation, different folkloric genres are exploited every now and then. “The Bodo oral tradition has been observed to have effectively used to create an alternative genealogy of the Bodo ethnic identity by negating and contradicting the formulations of the dominant Assamese discourse” (*ibid*, 86).

The Bodos have been scattered in terms of the religious subscriptions to the Christianity, the Hinduism and the traditional religion called Bathouism. As such, some traditions, surnames and names were sanskritized in the course of time. But with the emergence of the Bodo ethnicity, people are seen to be

going back to the pre-Hinduized past. For example, the common surname Basumatary becomes Bismutiary. Among the Sonowal Kacharis, major section of the community was converted to the Neo-Vaishnavism, an ideology propagated by Sankardeva in medieval Assam. The Hinduized and Sanskritized community adopted most of the surnames of the mainstream Assamese society like Saikia, Bora, Hazarika, Das and so on. But the elite section of the community now are asking its population to give up such surnames and to adopt the traditional surnames like Sonowal and some time the name of the clan also.

Such examples can be multiplied. In fact, in addition to names and surnames, a whole range of cultural resources (both material as well as non-material) have been identified as the new heritage for the respective communities. These resources include almost all forms of material and non-material cultural expressions, such as, music, dance, ritual, food, dress, festivals, arts and crafts, etc. These resources, loaded with strong senses of distinctive identities connecting to the people to their desired histories, are the semiotic vocabularies for exercising ethnonationalism within the present-day political and cultural landscape of Assam

2.6 Ethnonationalism vis-à-vis Globalization:

The period from 19th century to till the last decade of 20th century was the age of nation and nationalism. Nationalism as an ideology creates boundaries – both physical and mental. Towards the later part of 20th century, however, these national boundaries were seen to be facing political challenges from within in one hand, and losing their earlier significances with the rise of the powerful global market on the other. The coming of globalization, the fall of Berlin wall and USSR as well subsequent development in world economic scenario in the late 1990's brought significant changes in nationalistic ideology. In one hand, neo-liberal market economy and globalization have localized the global and on the other globalized the local. The constant flow of

capital reduced and changed the idea of national boundary and imagination. In the crossroad of the changing nature of sovereign state, the nationalist ideology is reshaped where in one sense national identities become declined or on the other spread of capital as well creation of new middle class resulted intensification of the nationalist self-assertions. The different market forces, globalization and neo-liberal market economy, minimized the national identity where minorities, smaller ethnic communities were the worst sufferer of such phenomenon. The proto-national bonds, popular culture existed among the different ethnic groups became the social capital to assert in the new world order. In such juncture, the 'invented' or the 'imagined' nation of the 19th and 20th century is taking a new shape with creation of new boundaries. The changes came in the traditional institutions brought by neo-liberal intrigues, cash economy, capital and so forth- the new middle class searched for appropriate rooms in the political arena of the public life. At the same time, though globalization has been understood and experienced as a two-way process between the global and the local, the flow of capital and cultural resources has never been symmetrical and equal to all the stakeholders. This has led to a situation where already many of the weak players were pushed to the corner; and to ensure the minimal cultural identity of an ethnic group, ethnic assertion became one of the weapons. It thus brought significant ruptures in the nationalist ideology of the multi-ethnic states where the progress and development are being experienced in unequal terms by the constituting *ethnos*. The nationalist sense of belonging to a bigger nation began to be replaced by a new sense of belonging in the ethnic line at the lower scales. Ethnonationalism is thus having both material and cultural bases. The materiality attached to the ethnonational upsurge provides an easier way to mobilizing people.

The adoption of neo-liberal and open market economy in late 1990's in India shows subsequent development of ethno national politics especially in North-East India. The popular cultures of the communities become the source to imagine the community in modern forms. It thus creates and invents the

genealogy, history of the community widely circulated among the masses to create an alternative identity and through which the political demand for self-rule is negotiated. It starts with cultural nationalism, invention and reinvention of history and tradition and finally emerges as a pressure group.

Chapter 3

Ethnicization of Space, People, History and Culture

In the previous chapter I have discussed the trajectory of different social and historical moments to understand the emergence of ethnonational politics in Assam. In this chapter, I am examining how different ethnicities are being articulated in current times through different cultural materials; and how the questions of territoriality and indigeneity are framed and manifested, in the context of the leading ethnonational movements of Assam.

3.1 Legacies of State Protectionism:

In the late 19th century, after annexation of the hill areas of the North-East frontier of India, the British colonial Government introduced the idea of Inner Line (ILP) to the hills. As the hilly tribal peoples were not easy to govern by the modern laws of the British, and their relative inhabitations in *primitive* and *backward* areas compelled the British Government to formulate alternative arrangements for them. The alternative came in the form of a specific administrative called the Inner Lines. These Lines demarcated the hills from the plains in one hand and on the other, it prohibited the British subjects in general and the tea planters in particular in acquiring land beyond the line without prior permission. Mackenzie, a Colonial British official deputed in Assam during that time, wrote regarding the introduction of ILP to the hills,

“more stringent control over the commercial relations of our own subjects with the frontier tribes living on the borders of our jurisdiction’, stopping ‘the operation of speculators in cautchouc, and restricting the ‘spread of ” tea gardens outside our fiscal limits.” (Mackenzie, 1884 quoted in Kar 2009, 52).

It was formally legislated through the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873. As per such provisions of the Inner Lines, lines were made in 1882 in Sibsagar, in 1904 and 1906 in the Naga Hills; and in 1884, 1886, 1897 and 1904 in Lakhimpur. In 1919, under the Government of India Act, the hilly areas were converted to backward tracts. This act empowered the Governor General-in-Council to declare any territory of British India as backward tract.

Later, under the Government of India Act, 1935 these tribal areas were classified into Excluded, Partially Excluded and Frontier Areas. The Garo Hills, Mikir Hills and the British portion of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills other than the Shillong Municipality and cantonment area were considered as Partially Excluded area. The principle adopted in the selection of these areas was that where there was an enclave or a definite tract of country inhabited by a compact tribal population, it was classified as 'excluded area'. Where, however, the tribal population was mixed with the rest of the communities and the tribals were substantial enough in numbers, the area was classified as 'partially excluded' (Gassah, 41-42)

On the eve of Indian independence, a sub-committee was formed under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi to formulate further policies for administration of the tribal areas of the North-Eastern part. Bordoloi sub-committee recommended that the tribal institutions should be retained as safeguards on land, forests, law, education and administration through establishment of District Councils in the respective areas. This scheme, which later became Autonomous District Council, was proposed as a separate state scheme of administration because of three factors: (a) the distinct social customs and tribal organization of the different people as well as religious beliefs, (b) the fear of exploitation by the people of the plains on account of the latter's superior organization and experience of business and (c) the fear that unless suitable financial provisions were made, the provincial government might not set apart adequate funds for the development of the tribal areas (*ibid*, 43).

This led to the creation of the Article 244(2) of the Constitution of India, called the Sixth Schedule, which is applicable to the administration of the tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. This special constitutional provision was designed to confer considerable amount of autonomy on the tribal people by giving them protection to retain their identity.

These protective regime of the state for preserving *tribal way of life* has been the most crucial factor in the shaping the identity politics in later times. First of all, this differential treatment failed to bring out a kind of development which was satisfactory to the concerned communities. Dissatisfied with the functioning of the autonomous district councils, several communities of the hills areas began to demand for autonomous states in post-independence times. Secondly, these protective structures provided a kind of legitimacy for the ethnic politics under the aegis of the state itself.

As a consequence of this, demands for autonomy, and even separate states, began to be raised by the different plains tribal groups of Assam under the banner of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), started during the late 1970s. The rise of Bodo movement in the late 1990's for separate Bodoland compelled the Indian State for necessary modifications of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India whereby limited autonomy was initially offered to the Bodos in 1994 and it was further extended to the other plains tribal groups of Assam viz. the Mishings, the Rabhas, the Deuris, the Tiwas, the Sonowal Kacharis and to the ThenagI Kacharis.

3.2 Indigeneity and Territoriality:

The politics of territoriality and indigeneity are the central questions in discussion of the contemporary ethnic politics of North-East India. In a common parlance indigeneity can be defined as a group of people who settled in a particular place earlier than other groups. It is related, thus, to a particular

territory and time. Also, the idea of indigeneity is having meaning in relation to other groups who settled later. A group which claims itself as indigenous to a particular place considers the particular territory as its own, ignoring historical facts of other groups.

Sanjib Baruah argues that the present perceptions of indigeneity and territoriality have been shaped by spatial orders followed during the colonial regime. The boundaries drawn on the basis of colonial ethnography and administrative interests are now seen to become the walls and fences in the contemporary ethnic demarcations of the state. Baruah offers the example of the operation of census, which is again a colonial legacy, to clarify the issue. Census still counts tribes in their supposed natural habitat. In this line, in metropolitan Guwahati the number of hill population is zero. Similarly the Bodos, who are plains tribe in Assam, have actually considerable presence in the hill district of Karbi Anglong where they are enumerated as plains tribe. Baruah holds, “The colonial spatial order involved the radical subversion of existing social, political and economic networks and property regimes” (Baruah 2008, 16).

The modern cartography practices which are in practice since the colonial rule had brought different communities into a similar administrative platform. However, communities of Assam and the North-East used to live with their own kingdom before the British took over. Sanjib Baruah rightly argues how the “colonial propensity of fixing tribes to their supposedly natural habitats” creates the space-centric identity politics (*ibid*). He also claims that colonial notions of fixing and identifying some people on the basis of race and their natural habitat and thereby creation of spaces like ‘excluded’, ‘partially excluded’ areas, ‘abode proper’, ‘backward and degraded type’ etc. are responsible for the rising of space-centric homeland politics in the post-colonial situation. He argues, “This notion of ethnicity and the fixing of ethnic groups to particular physical spaces made it necessary to distinguish between so-called pure and impure types to account for those that strayed away from

the assigned physical spaces, i.e., living in the hills instead of the plains or vice versa, or living in the “wrong” hills; or those that did not conform to the ethnic stereotypes that colonial officials had about them” (*ibid*, 15). The colonial administrative propensity of recognizing and categorizing the different communities in North-East India, as per their habitat as well as cultural and other associated habits, kept them outside to the mainstream colonial modernity. As colonial rule received different kind of experiences in the form of protest and resistance from different communities in the multicultural North-East, that led to separate policies towards those population and spaces. Those areas which were difficult to control were denoted as “disturbed areas” and people as ‘criminal tribes’. It was legalized with the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Inner Line System was created to regard some places as backward which was a line of time in civilizational scale, where it segregated the hills from the plains by creation of binary idea - civilized and wild. Following the ‘uncivilized’ nature of the hilly people they were allowed to be governed by their own customs whereas plains people were governed by the civil laws. Finally in 1935 the hills were given a new recognition as – excluded and partially excluded areas.

The space centric identity, fixing people in their habitat through the creation of Inner Lines in colonial period stopped the traditional interactions between hills and plains. There were numbers of institutions e.g. *pocha*, *duars*, *fair (Jonbil mela)*¹ which show the affinity of plains and hills, but subsequently delimited.

¹ *Pocha*: annual tributary of the Nagas to Ahom kings.

Duar: Foothills areas of lower Assam, through which annual tributaries were exchanged between Bhutia kings of Bhutan and *Zaminders* (big land holders)

Jonbil mela: A fair held every year in Marigaon where the hill communities like the Karbis, the Khasi come down and exchange goods with the plains Tiwas.

In present context even many nationalist organizations demanding extension of Inner Line permit to plains also².

Such kind of colonial intervention in defining and classifying the spaces and communities was, however, not a unique case in the context of the North-East India. Rather it has been documented in increasing number of literatures that this was a common phenomenon experienced in other various locations in Asia, Africa or Latin America where the European colonial masters ruthlessly imposed their schemes of dissecting and classifying the spaces and the communities. In the context of the colonial intervention in South Africa, Mahmood Mamdani (2001) has demonstrated that race and ethnicity are the political identities created by the colonial institutions. Mamdani historicized the root of ethnicity in the South African context where he dealt with the institution of law. The colonial rulers divided the population in the line of ethnicity and race where races were governed through civil law implies they were members of 'actually' and 'potentially' of civil society. Ethnicities were governed through customary laws. Civil laws speak the language of rights, but customary laws speak the language of tradition of authenticity. To confine the language of rights and thereby to set the limits of power the colonial government made a horizontal division between the natives and non-natives, where the customary laws varies from ethnicity to ethnicity. "For civic power was to be exercised within the rule of law, and had to observe the sanctity of the domain of rights. The language of custom, in contrast, did not circumscribe power, for custom was *enforced*. The language of custom *enabled* power instead of checking it by drawing boundaries around it. In such an arrangement no rule of law was possible" (*ibid*, 654).

² Inner Line permit is required to Indian citizens to visit the state of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram of North-East India. All Assam Students' Union (AASU), one of the influential civil society organizations of Assam, is demanding ILP to visit Assam by outsiders to check the immigration issue. Moreover, many civil society organizations of Meghalaya are also agitating for implementation of ILP in Meghalaya. It calls frequent strikes for the same.

Coming back to the situation in Assam and the North-East, such kind of colonial schemes of dividing the space and its people has now become the foundation for articulating ethnicities. Even after independence till today, the Indian state has been continuing the colonial arrangement of diverse spatial recognition and ethnographic nomenclature. Plains and hills are still the spatial categories whereas tribal and non-tribal are the racial labels. Similar to African situation, the plains people are governed by modern civil laws and the hills people are subjected to their respective customary laws.

Thus, the very idea of indigeneity and territoriality, in their present-day usages, are having lineages to their geneses. The massive migration that took place in Assam during the colonial period, as a result of the various colonial policies for exploiting natural resources like tea, petroleum, mines and forest produces or due to the policies like 'grow more crops' formulated due to the sectarian interests of local state government during colonial times – led severe demographic changes where many of the earlier settlers were minoritized in Assam. This resulted in a kind of xenophobia on the part of the Assamese caste Hindus which later got extended to the other ethnic communities also. It thus brought in the binary of the *indigenous* and the *outsider*. The increase of Muslim population, as some scholars claim, is a horizontal growth rather than vertical.³ However, from all practical senses, the issue of illegal migration seems to be an unsettled ideological paradox between the nationalists and the others.

The claims of indigeneity are seen to be articulated in actions of various intensities. It is triggered by the passionate demonstration of possessing a territory for the exclusive existence of a community where the *others* are sought to be minimized in terms of quantitative as well as qualitative presence.

³ Some scholars argue that as the Muslims in Assam are an agrarian community, wherever they find waste land they occupy it for cultivation. The close affinity to the family or home-sick attitude is not much visible among them for which the population is distributed everywhere. This is why spreading of the community is more a horizontal growth, not necessarily a growth in size of the total population.

Such politics of an exclusive homeland leads to ethnicization of spaces which often leads to conflicts amongst the stakeholder groups. The Hutu and Tutsi conflict in Africa, Nellie massacre in Assam, 1983; Bodoland conflict, 1996, 2008 and 2012; frequent conflicts in Karbi Anglong etc. are some of the handy examples related to the question of indigeneity and territoriality.

The on-going politics of ethnicity in North-East India in general and Assam in particular involve the ethnicization of history and imagination of exclusive homeland – which is indeed a more forceful mobilization grounded on the colonial schemes of space-centric categorization of peoples. The movement and mobilization of people in ethnic line in the region shows a process of ethnicization of history by construction and reconstruction of history. It is interesting to note that while the ethnic claims pertaining to the issues of territoriality are largely shaped by the colonial spatial hierarchies, the appropriation of the cultural contents to become indigenous often involves imagining cultural inheritance since pre-colonial times.

Most of the ethnic groups of Assam do not have their own script and did not have the tradition of documenting the past. In the height of ethnonationalism, the communities are constructing history of its own by bringing in new oral evidences and their fresh interpretations. Many oral accounts are negated which are not useful in valorizing the past. Creating an appropriate past and its glorification is invariably an effective mechanism for mobilizing a community. The medieval Ahom dynasty on the other hand, had the rich tradition of the same those scriptures popularly known as *Buranjis* where glimpses of accounts found about different communities of the region. However, the new ethnic consciousness of the Tai-Ahoms is seen to be subjected to fresh narration of their past and their distinctive cultural connection with the South-East Asia. As such, contemporary ethno-nationalism in Assam has become a vibrant site of ethnicized narratives which involve re-creation and re-interpretation of oral as well as written texts.

An extended part of this process is the attempts for consolidation of exclusive ethnic spaces. Bringing the temporal accounts of the 'glorious past' as a historical fact and a contextual necessity, it has become customary to claim such spaces as their own territory by multiple claimants. Such dissonant claims by different ethnic communities about their ownership of the same space are articulated through their respective ethno-historical narratives. Some of such examples are illustrated in the following paragraphs.

Dimapur, one of the important cities of the state of Nagaland was merged into Nagaland after its creation as a separate state of India in 1963. Dimapur once happened to be the capital of Dimasa kingdom in medieval period. The names of different places justify such claims. Diphu, the adjoining area of the earlier Dimasa kingdom Dimapur and district headquarter of Karbi Anglong nowadays mostly dominated by Karbis, is a Dimasa name. The other towns of the tract Lanka, Hojai etc. too are Dimasa names. The invaders pushed the Dimasas from their old kingdom Dimapur to the present habitat of North Cachar and Karbi Anglong. The Dimasa nationalist organizations as well as the militant groups are now demanding the Dimapur area under its map of Dimaraji. Many Dimasa populations living in this areas claim continuous threat from the Naga population especially from the Naga insurgent groups. Similarly the state of Nagaland as well as Naga militant groups are also demanding a larger Nagalim claiming their ownership over different border areas of present day Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal; which is creating tensions in the borders of the concerned states. The Indian state has already set up numbers of commissions to resolve the border disputes but the recommendations of such commissions are yet to be accepted by the concerned states. The creation of the excluded and partially excluded areas by the colonial Government was the policy of exclusion and inclusion- creation of binary between hills and plains. Traditionally the foothills were the meeting points for the 'brothers'⁴

⁴ James Scott looks the continuum of interactions between plains and hills. He regards the plainsmen as brothers of the hill people in his book *Art of not being Governed*.

But the rising demand for a separate and ethnic territory gave momentum to other groups residing in those areas. In case of the North Cachar, presently Dima Hasao, different tribal communities are standing against the demand of the Dimasas for an exclusive Dimaraji. The non-Dimasas formed the *Indigenous Peoples Forum*, claiming to be the more indigenous people of the area than the Dimasas. The debate here is who is more indigenous in Dima Hasao District: the Dimasas or the other communities. The IPF is also demanding for creation of Haflong (the Headquarter of the district) as a separate district which would be out of Dimaraji or the Autonomous District Council of the Dimasas. Similar demand is also coming up in the Karbi Anglong, where a committee named as Bokajan District Demand Committee is formed for demanding exclusive district for the non-Karbis. Thus, in the multi-ethnic context of Assam, ethnonationalism is seen to be spreading like a chain reaction where the demand of one community induces other communities for similar demands. The reason behind such counter politics is the question of basic political rights and land questions; where the other groups in a particular set up feel that once autonomy or separate state is given to the dominant group the minorities will lose their land right and other political benefits provided by the state.

The Bodoland Movement started in 1986 came up with the demand of “divide Assam 50-50”. Although, in the proposed map of Bodoland a substantial number of non-Bodo people are living in those areas from a considerable time. The colonial history, labour history, show the coming and settlement of these populations in there, who nowadays subsequently opposing the Bodoland- the exclusive Bodo territory. More emphatically another ethnic community of the region Koch Rajbanshis who is also demanding Kamatapur, a Koch Rajbanshi land for its people whose map overlaps to the greater Bodoland demanded by the Bodos. Above all, it has demanded six other districts in the proposed Kamatapur from the state of West Bengal. The demand for an exclusive territory for the Bodos creates concern to the non-Bodo people living in Bodoland, who are scared of the basic political rights, land rights and so forth.

The Bodoland has witnessed numbers of ethnic violence in last couple of years. The Bodo-Adivasi conflict in 1996, Muslim-Bodo conflict in 2008 and 2012 claimed death of more than 100 people in each violence. Many people argue that this violence is a part of Bodo Chauvinism and a systematic process of ethnic cleansing for an exclusive Bodoland. Although, Bodos are said to be the autochthons of Assam, claimed by the Bodos⁵ as well others, but many scholars argue that most of Bodos migrated from Bhutan, Nepal and present day Bangladesh. Moymansing, name of a place of Bangladesh is a Bodo word which means a place where paddy grows well. Such examples can be multiplied.⁶ In recent years, many non-Bodo organizations have come up to counter the Bodo nationalistic trend. In Bodoland, nowadays the *O-Bodo Suraksha Mancha* (Non Bodo Protection Forum) is a strong organization who is demanding to review the BTAD accord as well as against the demand of divide Assam 50-50. It is also demanding to cut the non-Bodo villages from present BTAD. In such situation, it is experienced in Assam that due to its

⁵ In ABSU's clarification on *Bodoland Statehood Demand* (divide Assam fifty-fifty) published in 1987, prepared in Question-Answer format, some points were mentioned as follows:

Question no 23: The Chief Minister of Assam Prafulla Kr. Mahanata has said that he would "never allow" further division of Assam. So, how can we hope that Assam can be divided further?

Answer: In fact, the Assamese people have no moral right to rule over the tribals-the sons of the soil. Tribals are the original masters of Assam. On the other hand, the chief Minister of Assam has no proper authority whether or not to divide Assam, because it is not a state subject, but a central subject instead. Moreover, Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta has no moral right claim not to divide Assam further as he is not the original master of Assam but originally an outsider from Kanouj.

Question no. 44: Who are the original masters of Assam-the Assamese or the Tribals?

Answer: The Assamese are not the original masters of Assam. They introduced into Assam only in the 13th and 14th century. The tribals, the Kacharis, and the Mongolians are the original masters of Assam.

⁶ In a discussion with this researcher, Dr. Chandan Kr. Sharma, a scholar on the Bodo Movement, argues that hardly any oral account is found in Bodo oral tradition regarding the conflict, war and fight of the Bodos with the Mughals. The Mughals attacked Assam several times from West where Bodos reside. This shows that they themselves migrated in the recent past.

multiculturalism, whenever any ethnicity is strengthened to check such nationalism the counter politics also emerged strongly. Similarly in Rabha Hasong (territory of Rabha Autonomous Council) also the non-Rabha organizations are also demanding for carving out of non-Rabha areas from the said territory. Here also series of ethnic violence are seen in recent past. The Rabha-non Rabha conflict is quite common in Rabha Hasong area. In 2011 in Garo-Rabha conflict a considerable section of people of the both communities lost their lives and property.

With the demand of Bodoland by carving out of the 50% of the Assam's existing territory, similar demands started coming from other groups like Karbi, Dimasas, Tiwa, Rabha, Mishing and so forth. Such demands were tried to be neutralized by offering limited autonomy and inclusion of them in the 6th Schedule of Indian Constitution; first to the Bodos in 1993 which in 2003 it was converted to BTAD. Similarly Mishing, Rabha, Deuri, Tiwa and finally Sonowal and Thengal Kachari autonomous councils were offered to the respective groups. Thus Bodos got the territorial council where other groups got satellite autonomy in due time.

3.3 Cultural Expressions:

The contemporary academic scholarship is divided in theorizing the phenomenon of ethnicity (such as, primordial and situative-primordialist theories discussed earlier). But scholars belonging to these diverse schools of ethnicity do agree in one point that ethnicity, in one sense, is articulation of 'culture'. Ethnicity is articulated with the help of culture which a person acquires as a member of a community. Hobsbawm believes that the root of nationalism needs to be traced in the proto-national bonds. He defines proto-national bonds as where certain variants of feeling of collective belonging in macro political scale were suited for the modern ideas of nation and state. These proto-national bonds may be religion, tradition, culture, shared memory

and so forth (Hobsbawm 1990, 46). The phenomenon of ethnicity, and its cultural expression, can be seen as vigorous continuation of similar political exploitation of cultural forms but in the local scale.

The invention and exploitation of tradition and culture involve the authentication of the desired identity of a group by associating it with the past. Tradition thus has the potentiality to connect the present with the past; and imagine the future of an individual or of a group. T. S. Eliot (2005) in his popular essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent' holds that traditions having a 'historical sense' the "perception not of the pastness of the past but its presence"⁷. Eliot claims here that tradition does not have only link with the past rather having link with present also. Eliot's claim has become much clearer by now almost after a century: only that past is invoked in the name of tradition which is suitable for the present in order to move towards a desired future.

In the context of the political usage of the oral traditions and folkloric resources, Roger D. Abrahams argues that in "giving voice to values and entering into the celebrations of ethnicity, oral traditions are a major component in establishing the boundaries and contours of an ethnic group." As ethnicity or nationalism creates boundaries between 'us' and 'them'- the different folkloric genres are exploited in the process. For construction of ethnicity and thereby to negotiate political claims- culture, tradition, and heritages are the tools for mobilizing people. New cultural symbols are created, olds are revived- folkloric forms and cultures are standardized. Temporal and spatial historical forms become the points of reference in re-narrating the ethnicity.

Partha Chatterjee looks the influence of the inner domain in the formation of Indian nationalism specially the role of family. Although, people of India

⁷ Despite the distinction, perceived in academic fields, between *tradition* and *culture*, the two terms are used synonymously in their popular usages .

adopted colonial modernity, but the community did not want or allow the 'outsiders' to intervene the cultural domain of it (Chatterjee 1993). Thus, it helped to preserve their cultural practices and past. Out of it a new kind of patriarchy arose, but the role of family and women of the community to preserve the national culture is found in a great extent during the colonial period. In ethnic or nationalistic politics woman is a symbol of pride and honour of the community. Culture defines the masculinity and femininity and their role in the social relations. As per the behaviour it ensures who belongs to the collectivity and who are not. An individual does not have a single identity rather always having multiple identities. But in identity politics the individual identity is equated with the group identity. Culture, the key element for identity construction is considered as pristine and sacrosanct. But the 'sacrosanct' or 'pristine' cultures are framed in a definite form or power relations. As Hall argues "culture is the critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled". The unsettled power relations are the social capital for ethnic and cultural politics with the help of which hegemony is circulated to the masses. The hegemony thus resolved the dichotomy between 'I' and 'we', and reduces 'I' to 'we' and 'they' in such political rhetoric.

Anderson holds, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 1991, 6). Though, identity is not a single layer phenomenon, identity politics transforms the individual identity and interests into a collective one, reducing the individual self. The members of a community is not homogeneous- it can be divided in terms of class, category or in party line. The identity politics acts like an authorized discourse over the internal differences in terms of class, ensuring a hegemonic consent of the masses in favour of a common and collective identity. Interests and problems of individual or vulnerable groups are thought to be resolved (or many times it is not even addressed or ignored) through a holistic model – may be ethnicity or nationalism which speaks community development. Identity politics thus becomes a cover story,

overlooking the internal differences, to make the individuals think that all are in the same place. Individual identity is henceforth equated with the identity of the group by hegemonic power relations. The politics of presentation and representation – where one represents the rest – ignores such questions.

In the context of this ethnicity edifice in Assam, we will try to locate the rise of certain groups, their political articulation as well as the expression of cultural forms in multidimensional sphere. The ethnicization of spaces claiming themselves as indigenous posits a serious academic question- What are the criteria to be an indigenous or who is (not) an indigenous?

A Karbi myth relates to a common progenitor of different communities of the hills and plains by narrating these communities to be born out of an egg laid by a mythical bird (Datta 1994, 27). Similar narratives are found among the Tarao, Mishimis, Singphos, Wancho, different groups of Nagas, Dimasa, Deuri, communities of Arunachal Manipur and so forth. Another oral narrative illustrates not only such common origin but also tries to give an explanation for the illiteracy of the tribesmen. All knowledge was, as this story goes, first written on animal skins which were distributed among all the communities. While the non-tribals were clever enough to preserve their knowledge, the hungry tribal people ate up their skins and thus they became illiterate. Therefore, the *other groups* became capable of reading and writing scripts (*ibid*, 17). Such kinds of narratives, which manifest the converging forces of integration, can be seen as the products of the romantic utopia of Indian nationalism which probably culminated in the conceptualization of categories like *Bar Axom* and 'seven sisters'.

In the absence of the written accounts, folklore is a handy tool for constructing history. In recent times, to construct the history of marginalized groups (e.g. gender history), oral resources are widely used and appropriated in contextual historiographical practices. The recent experimentations on history look the written documents in certain power relations. Fredric Jameson argues, "history is not text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it

is inaccessible to us except in the textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through prior textualization , its narrativization in the political unconscious” (Jameson 1981, 35) Constructing of history from the oral as well other alternative sources is a distinct marker of the pursuit of current historical scholarship. As mentioned, most of the ethnic groups of the region were illiterate till the early 20th century, hardly any written account is found among them. The Ahom Chronicles, as well some occasional travel writings as few exceptions, offer some information. The different groups in recent times are constructing its own history from folklore, myth and other oral narratives towards a history of glory and distinctiveness. This in turn helps to produce the desired ethnic identity in the present. The dominant historical accounts, through which community can't be glorified, are negated. Thereby, alternative histories are created. Thus, in the height of identity questions, communities are engaged in a more ethnicized history rather than of an ethno history – in the academic sense of the phrase. Even many historical facts, where the pride of the community can be at stake, are ignored in such memorizations. Assamese nationalist discourse, for example, overtly ignores the Nellie massacre by maintaining an uneasy silence on it⁸. Similarly Bodo nationalist discourse never talks about the killings of more than 200 Bodo people by the Bodos who were supporters of PTCA movement⁹.

⁸ The massacre was held in the height of Assam Movement. More than 1600 Muslim people were killed in a single day at Nellie, a small town nearby Guwahati, considering the Muslims as Bangladeshis. Not much debate or discussion can be seen on it in the Assamese public sphere. Makiko Kimura, a Japanese researcher, did an extensive study on Nelli massacre. However, when she came for a presentation in a seminar at Guwahati on the Nellie massacre, she was not allowed to do so by the Assam Government.

⁹ The PTCA demanded for a separate tribal state in late 1970 and got enormous popularity. All Bodo Students Union joined hands with PTCA leaders. Once PTCA reduced the demand of separate state to Autonomous council conflict started. More than 200 Bodos were killed in the conflict. In 1991, Samar Brahma Choudhury, a PTCA leader and ex-Member of Parliament along with his son was killed at Kokrajhar.

Such kind of selective memorization can also be noticed in the cases of the ethnicity formations of the other communities in Assam, where different folkloric forms are used to glorify their specifically desired pasts. Such kind of narrativized memories are adequately tailored for claiming an exclusive homeland in the present context. Some of the telling examples are given below:

The Sonowal Kacharis memorize the following folksong to claim their golden past.

<i>Uri gal pokshi,</i>	<i>The bird has flown,</i>
<i>pari gal pakhi</i>	<i>feathers has dropped</i>
<i>Kirati oi kachari oi</i>	<i>O kirati, o Kachari</i>
<i>Halali rajyare basi</i>	<i>You are inhabitant of Halali</i>
	<i>Kingdom</i>

Contrary to the written historical accounts about the Sonowal Kacharis, this kind of folksong has the capacity to posit them as the descendants of their desired past in the present.

Among the Bodos, folksongs are found which speak about their bravery and courage. Some of them are mentioning below.

<i>Zohalo zalia gothophor zon</i>	<i>We are the sons of heroes</i>
<i>Zonlay raokhoubo gia gia</i>	<i>We know no fear</i>
<i>Dahal thungriano zonni</i>	<i>The sword and the shield</i>
<i>gelegra mua mua</i>	<i>Are our playthings, our toys</i>
<i>Zuhalao....gia gia</i>	<i>Should any enemy invade our land</i>
<i>Sorba suthura gaglab phobia raizoao</i>	<i>They will be cut in pieces.</i>
<i>Dangon sugan gaogon</i>	<i>We have no fear and we do not pause</i>
<i>Zonlay raokhaabou gia gia)</i>	<i>We will cut them in pieces</i>

(Brahma: 1960 quoted from Sarmah 2006, 87)

How lovely is the dear motherland
Beautifully created by god
Oh, you awake not
But lie fast asleep
Awake, awake mother dear
And arouse the sleeping country (Boro 2007, 12)

Drive fast your steed
A hero you are,
The Bhutiya soldiers are marching
Tighten the rein and use your spurs
Drive your steed fast, Bashiram
Look, here they come (Datta et al 1994)

The golden past is reflected in other folk song of the Bodos:

<p> <i>Borono jaigaya gougou Dimapur</i> <i>rimouunson</i> <i>O' aiphor Dimapur rimouunson Maibong</i> <i>Kacharo Boroni rajadongmounnou Boroa</i> <i>goudounou garna phaidamounnou</i> <i>Dimaphur rikhon</i> <i>Thangddnnou bungblabou jaigaoumanou</i> <i>Binikhainou, bongphaao dathianou dalai</i> <i>nangou jatikhou daikhangnou lekha</i> <i>nangou Harikhou daikhagnou raja nangou</i> <i>O' aiphor jong thanai jaigaya</i> <i>gongarnisounou Goudoni abou aboianou</i> <i>bungladou Aiphor adaphou siri thadou</i> <i>Khousoi jananoi rayjou jadao O' aiphor</i> <i>Rayjon jadau</i> </p>	<p> <i>Dimapur was the kingdom of Bodos</i> <i>O listeners, was the kingdom of</i> <i>Bodos,</i> <i>That Maibong was the capital of that</i> <i>Kingdom</i> <i>Bodos had to leave all these</i> <i>To climb a tree branches are needed,</i> <i>To lead the nation on the shiny path</i> <i>Education is needed</i> <i>To lead, a king is needed</i> <i>So said our forefather</i> <i>O' listeners, arise!</i> <i>Unite and build the society</i> <i>(Sharma 2006, 89)</i> </p>
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In the Karbi oral narratives, similarly, different genres of folklore materials are widely circulated to glorify an unambiguously Karbi past. The intelligence, bravery and sacrifice of *Rongpharpi Rongbe* are widely cited in the various

oral repositories soaked in the Karbi nationalist consciousness. The case of the Karbis will be discussed in details in the next chapters.

In addition to such oral narratives, the process of ethnicization has also been extended to other genres of material and expressive cultural forms, leading to the emergence of diverse cultural iconographies of the different ethnic communities in Assam. The process of expressing regional identity through material cultural symbolism heightened during the Assam movement when the cultural objects like *gamosa* (literally a traditionally towel, regarded as a sacred piece of cloth), *sorai* (traditional platter), *japi* (a decorated farmer's cap, invariably found in the South East Asian traditional societies) etc. were made the identity markers of the Assamese nationalism. However, as mentioned earlier, this Assamese-language-based identity later began to be challenged by the constituting ethnicities; but the same model of cultural iconography was seen to be followed in their respective ethnic expressions. This has resulted in a multi-ethnic iconographic regime in Assam where each and every ethnic group is seen to come forward with their exclusive and distinctive cultural assets in the forms of food, dress, music, ritual, festival and various other cultural genres. This ethnonational fashioning of culture is not limited to the official or institutional discourses but also has percolated down to the popular level. Another aspect of this cultural politics of distinction is that this celebration of cultural differences has been noticeably appropriated in the cultural market, specifically in the tourism sector and the leisure industries. The roadside restaurants with traditional cottages and menus of ethnic cuisines, ethnic textile products in various types of clothing and decorative goods, local festivals which are being added in the annual calendar, performance packages freshly recreated in the forms of music or dance – all are seen to be multiplied in number in recent times. This ethno-cultural iconography is not merely limited to the real life experiences, but also extended to the virtual world of media and the cyberspace.

This ethnicization of history and culture, as a process, involves a different kind of inter-community political dialogue, a site of ethno-cultural one-upmanship

amongst the various communities in the multi-ethnic context of Assam. Many often, such ethnicized texts overlap with one another and lead to conflicts. According to Anthony Smith, the dominant group in the multi-ethnic hierarchy becomes the *pace-setter* in the process of *setting standards* of this ethno-political articulation:

In a multi-ethnic context, where the pasts of different groups overlap and interact, we typically observe competition and convergence in the articulation of the pasts of the several groups. Superiority in terms of number, control of resources, solidity of social and political institutions, cultural continuity, will often put one group in a position to impose its own version of the past, and other groups will react either by developing oppositional narratives, which will then tend rarely to go beyond the boundaries of the group, or by adapting their views of the past to those of a dominant group. In this case, the memory of the dominant group will function as a sort of pace-setter, also in chronological terms, for instance in setting standards for the depth of an acceptable ethnic past. (Smith 1986a, 178)

The Assamese nationalism, which began to flourish since the 19th century and got its peak during the Assam movement in the 1980s, can be identified as the dominant pace setter in the context of ethnic nationalism in Assam. The cultural and political dominance of Assamese language-based identity became an alibi for the various ethnic groups to articulate their respective identities; and also to distance themselves from the homogenizing notion of Assamese nationalism.

3.4 Empirical illustrations:

Ethnic awakening is a common visible trait in all the communities, both tribal and non-tribal, of Assam. Each of these groups is seen to be engaged in the politics of distinction, by appropriating respective memories, iconographies and narratives, so as to make each one different from the other. In addition to

the visible tribal communities, like the Mishings, the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Deuries, etc; various non-tribal caste-Hindus are also seen to be streamlining their identity discourses by such kind of appropriations. It is also important to note that six communities in Assam have been demanding to be recognized as Scheduled Tribes by the Government of India.

In the following texts, cases of four such communities are taken for discussion to illustrate the processes of ethnicization in present day Assam.

3.4.1 The Thengal Kacharis

The Thengal Kacharis are a relatively newly-invented tribal group of Assam, mostly concentrated in the districts of Golaghat and Jorhat. This group belonged to the larger Bodo stock, but later intermingled with the Assamese caste society, adopted the Neo-vaishnavism and lost their language.

The Thengal Kacharis got autonomy in 2005 after a series of democratic protests and movements. The case of the Thengal Kachari ethnicity is an example of how the opening of constitutional provision for limited autonomy to the plains tribals created renewed ethnic consolidation. M.S. Prabhakar in his essay 'Invention, Reinvention and Contestation' describes the strange story of how the community suddenly came up in 2005 with the formation of Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council Demand Committee. The community itself is relatively recent formation, as in all the post independent censuses till 2001 the Thengal Kachari peoples were never enumerated. The Tribal Research Institute, a Government organization based at Guwahati, which published numbers of monographs, ethnographic work and carried out research on various issues of tribal problems never mentioned or published any monograph about the existence of a tribal group in such name (Prabhakar 2010).

The Thengal Kachari peoples reside mostly in the districts of Jorhat and Golaghat; they got the Autonomous Council in 2005 only after six months of the formation of the demand committee. The total population of the community is still not known. Even in the different official documents, Government records there are no mentions of the population called Thengal Kachari. People claim that in different census operations these people were enumerated with the Sonowal Kachari population only. To occupy the political spaces provided by the State to the Tribal population of North-East popularly known as the 6th Schedule and other positive discrimination practices the community suddenly came-up with a new identity called Thengal-Kachari.

Initially the Sixth Schedule provision of the Constitution of India was offered to cover the hill tribes only. With the creation of BAC (Bodo Autonomous Council) in 1993 after long years of agitations by the Bodos, the provision of Autonomous Council extended to the plains tribal also by amendment of Indian Constitution. In so far, by 1995, 3 other tribal plains tribal communities Mishing, Rabha and Tiwa got the Autonomous Council without proper boundary of it. The success of these tribal communities of self-determination gave the boost to other tribal groups also. Subsequently by 2005, Sonowal Kacharis, Deuri and Thengal Kacharis got the similar councils. The population size of these communities is too small. Most of the groups leaving their tribal way of life adopted Hinduism, as well left different cultural practices and even language too. Sonowal Kacharis, Thengal Kacharis, Deuri, Tiwas can be mentioned in this regard. The articulation of ethnicity in this sense is to enjoy the political privileges offered by the State machinery. The Thengal Kacharis, as mentioned hardly is having any historical records as Thengal Kachari (from Government records to Census report). As an invented phenomena Prabhakar writes, "Who are the Thengal Kacharis and where do they fit into in this universe of the plains tribal of Assam? The simple answer is: nowhere, as they are identified by their habitation, such as it is and their name. The Community has never been separately enumerated in any of the five census operations

(1951, 1961, 1971, 1991 and 2001) conducted in Assam since independence.....The published details about ST population in the first four of these censuses make no reference to the Thengal Kachari” (*ibid*, 286-287).

However, in recent times, a distinctive set of cultural resources of the Thengal Kacharis is being made visible in the public sphere of Assam. The assertion of Thengal Kachari ethnicity is particularly visible in the revival of selected traditional performances and festivals:

The community revived a festival known as *Tora Chinga Bihu* or *Bali Husari* in March 2009 (‘a festival of tearing a wild cardamom leaves for making ropes for the cows’). In past, they observed this festival in natural setting for more than a month. In past they celebrated ‘*Chot Bihu*’ on first day of the month of *Chot* (*Chot* is the last month of Assamese Calendar; mid of March); “*Rati Bihu*” performed under banyan tree at night, and it was going on till ‘*Chot’s Samkranti*’ (junction of two Assamese month *Chot* and *Bohag* (*Bohag* is the first month of Assamese Calendar). Now-a-day this *Bihu* is known as ‘*Maiki Bihu*’ (female *Bihu*) or ‘*Gabharu Bihu*’. Elderly womenfolk and “*Pat-Gabharu*” (a girl about to attain puberty) girl’s also perform *Bihu* separately from house to house. After the harvest is collected the young lad severed ‘*Nara*’ (stable of paddy) to again cultivation by singing *Bihu* Song. This *Bihu* is known as ‘*Nara Siga Bihu*’. Besides the traditional dances of the *Bihu* festival, they also try to show all the ceremonies associated with it. (Borah 2014, 254)

It is worth-mentioning that *Bihu* was an agriculture-based ritual practice, observed and performed by the different communities in Assam involving music, dance, food and other ritualistic traits. This pastoral ritual became the most vibrant site of Assamese nationalism in the 20th century. This nationalization of *bihu* also involved standardization of the *bihu* tradition into stereotypes of clichéd numbers of songs and dances. The Thengal Kacharis have chosen *Bihu* as a site of demonstration of their distinctive identity, by

reviving *their own* versions of the *Bihu*. It is to be noted that this ethnicization of *Bihu* not only means the change in the songs and dances, but also changes in the dresses and other relevant material goods, ritual itineraries and, above all, the process of meaning-making.

3.4.2 *The Sonowal Kacharis.*

Like the Thengal Kacharis, the Sonowal Kacharis are another ethnic community of Assam belonging to the larger Bodo stock; intermingled with the mainstream Assamese society by accepting the language, surname, culture and so on. They are mainly concentrated in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat in upper Assam. As per 2001 census total population of this community is 235,881. The official religion of the Sonowal Kacharis is Hinduism but traditionally they follow Baithowism¹⁰. With the influence of the Neo-vaishnavism of Sankardeva in the medieval Assam a substantial section of the population of the community became the followers of the said sect. Leaving the tribal way of life, significant changes in the material domain and in the expressive cultural practices occurred among the community. Thus, it became a part and parcel of the Assamese society. Although a vernacular colloquial language was developed out of the Assamese language admixture with its own among the common people. But in the present context, keeping in tune with practice of ethnicity formation, the group is reviving and reinventing most of the traditional cultural practices and forms strongly. The political elites are reviving the traditional surnames or asking its population to adopt the same. The community though did not have the practice of documenting history yet various accounts are found in Ahom chronicles and histories about them.

As mentioned above Sonowal Kacharis got the Autonomous Council in 2005. Interestingly, the Thengal Kachris were enumerated with the Sonowal

¹⁰ *Baithow* is the invocatory God of the community, hence the religion is known as *Baithowism*

Kacharis people. In the movement for autonomy also, initially the State Government tried to offer one Council named Sonowal-Thengal Kachari Council to the both groups. But the proposal was rejected by both, and finally separate Autonomy was given. However, the Sonowal Kachari ethnicity formation shows reconstructions of history through oral narratives. The constructing and reconstructing history is a practice for the elites of an ethnic group to make an ideological boundary and also a homogenous history which may be the catalytic force for ethnicity formation among the individuals of a group. In this process, the dominant historiographies are negated where the community may be seen as or marginalized and henceforth their own version is constructed with the glorification of the community. It starts right from the nomenclature of the community of Sonowal Kacharis.

A popular account about the history of the Sonowal Kacharis which was endorsed by academic historians was that the name of the community *Sonowal* had been derived from the Assamese word *son*, meaning gold. According to this narrative a branch of the Kacharis were engaged in the trade of gold washing in the river Subansiri during the Ahom Rule. The Kachari people who were engaged in this particular activity were known as Sonowal Kachari (Singh 2001). The Ahom dynasty maintained stratification in terms of occupation. As such, the Sonowal Kachari community is the outcome of this stratification. The different historiographical accounts also maintained the similar aspects regarding the name of the community. Interestingly this particular discourse is also in popular believe and is largely subscribed by the folk society of the community.

In sharp contrast to the above-mentioned discourse, the insider elites however put forward another version for the term 'Sonowal' where they hold that there were twelve groups of Kacharis earlier, known as,

(i) *Jamas Yān*, (ii) *Barah Yān*, (iii) *Juḥlu Yān*, (iv) *Bāduhaj Yān*, (v) *Bādusunla Yān*, (vi) *Rabhkirat Yān*, (vii) *Intogarh Yān*, (viii) *Intominakh Yān*.

(ix) *Intomech Yān*, (x) *Dauha Yān*, (xi) *Intohujay Yān* and (xii) *Kuchawah Yān* (Hazarika 1985, 86).

Out of these twelve groups of Kacharis, *Bādusunla Yān* established *Hallali* kingdom (now Sadiya) at about 13th century A.D. *Bādusunla Yān*, the brave men community (Badu--brave, sun--purush or son, layan--community or caste) later through some changes such as '*Bāsunray*', '*Sunlay*' '*Sunbar*' '*Sunuwal*' and ultimately gave rise to the word 'Sonowal' and the people are known as Sonowal Kachari (Ibid).

Moreover, there is a third narrative believed by a section which holds that according to an anecdote, during the time of Ahom King Godadhar Singha, a *Gosain*, (a religious head) came to Sadiya. Believing that the *Gosain* has some supernatural power, some Kacharis of upper Assam became the disciples of him by offering certain quantity of gold and silver. Those Kachari who offered gold as a token are known as Sonowal Kachari from then.

Apart from this, the Sonowal Kacharis, since the early years of last decade, are trying to revive their traditional rituals, festivals and other cultural activities for strengthening the ethnic belongingness. As mentioned above, the community almost converted to neo-vaishanite faith. *Haidang Geet*, an annual ritual with music, song and dance has been revived and performed in different places of Sonowal Kachari concentrated areas to memorize and promote their old heritage. Along with such ritualistic practices, Sonowal Kachari Bihu, Sonowal Kachari dress pattern are some other sites of cultural revivalism.

3.4.3 *The Adivasis:*

The Adivasis (although they are not the aboriginal population of Assam) were brought by the Colonial Government in the 19th and 20th century to work in the newly established tea-gardens of Assam from different states of north and

eastern India like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand etc. The population is not homogeneous in nature, comprises of different tribe and caste groups viz. Ho, Munda, Santhal, Oran, Tati, Kurmi etc. Many groups were brought under indenture system. Once the agreement was over, most of the people did not return to their home places and settled nearby the tea-gardens and identified as ex-tea garden labours. Thus 'tea' became one of the identity markers of these different communities. These heterogeneous sets of people are known as Tea-Tribes in all official and popular literatures. But nowadays, leaving the official recognition of tea-Tribes these people sought a new identity called Adivasis.

The Schedule Tribe status is another bargaining point of many groups in Assam nowadays. The affirmative action policy provided by the Constitution of India to the ST populations and specially to the people of North-East (the 6th Schedule and other positive discriminations), which in turn many groups in Assam, fighting to gain the ST status. To achieve such political benefits many communities who adopted the culture and language of Hindu society and also merged into it, to some extent reviving their ethnicity. Till date six different communities of Assam viz. Ahom, Moran, Matak, Chutia, Koch-Rajbanshi, and Adivasi are demanding the Schedule Tribe Status and for the same going through different agitations. Although what 'tribal' means in anthropological or sociological or more widely in academic sense are not practiced in India. This is more political construction than academic. The groups who are demanding for the ST status are being considered as Other Backward Classes in Assam. The conglomerate Adivasi community is also the composition of many caste and tribal groups. But whenever these groups go for agitation or protest in Delhi or in Guwahati to show the 'tribalness' many protesters paint their body with different tattoos as well wear leaves, which converts them to a 'real tribal' – a popular image of a tribesman. The Adivasis use bow and arrow as to show their primitive practice in popular agitations.

The ethnicity formation of the Adivasis in Assam is an interesting case. In 1880 a pocket of Santhal people were brought to the Guma Mauza of the then undivided Goalpara district of Assam under the auspices of Indian Home Mission for Santhals. By 1931 the total population became 60000¹¹. Hence, two kinds of identity are given to these two different sets of people a) tea garden labours b) Adivasi. But nowadays many educated elites of the community strongly oppose the naming of the community as tea-garden labour or tea-tribes. For them, this is the part of the colonial conspiracy and thereby the internal colonialism continued by the 'power hungry Assamese middle class' where a community is named after a commodity (Tanti 2010). As there is no community found in the world which is named after a commodity. Hence, clubbing all the communities brought in the colonial period a newer kind of identity is sought by them is called as Adivasi. A colloquial language popularly known as 'Sadri' unites the different caste and tribal groups of the Adivasis, although many of them having their own language and dialect. The important feature of uniqueness is the social condition of the populace. Almost the entire population is backward in the sense of education, health, and economic condition. In the colonial period the workers were put in the labour line under strict rules, less wage and torture. Such kind of exploitation and torture brought the different tribal and caste groups to a similar social condition. No significant changes occurred in the post-colonial situation. The social and economic conditions that brought them closer helped in the later phases to assert as a distinct group. The Adivasis nowadays is agitating strongly for Schedule Tribe status. Most of the groups in their original habitat are considered as tribal. Hence, this populace is also demanding the schedule tribe status in Assam.

¹¹ Census report of Assam 1931.

3 4 4 The Bodos

The Bodos are one of the aboriginal ethnic communities of Assam, residing mostly in the Western part of the state. The Bodos belong to the Indo Mongoloid origin racially; and linguistically belong to Sino Tibetan language family. Their major concentrations found in the districts of Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Baksa, Chirang (These areas are called Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts), Sonitpur, Darrang, Lakhimpur, Goalpara, and Karbi Anglong. Considerable sections are also found in West Bengal. Their traditional religion is Baithou, where a major section has already adopted Hinduism and Christianity. The Constitution of India recognizes them as plains Schedule tribe.

The Bodo movement for a separate Bodoland is one of the early movements in the divided Assam. The root of the same goes back to the PTCA (Plains Tribal Council of Assam) movement which demanded a tribal state including all the tribals of Brahmaputra valley popularly known as Udayachal. The Bodo started asserting politically after the formation of Bodo Thunlai Afad (Bodo Literary Society) in 1952. Along with the formation of Bodo Thunlai Afad, subsequently the formation of All Bodo Students Union in 1967, as well as formation of the PTCA later; the demands became more crystallized for a Separate Bodoland. The Bodo Literary Society, right from its inception, opposed the expansionist attitude of the Assamese nationalist hegemony, reflected in the acts like imposing of Assamese language as the medium in the College, schools and offices in the later year of 1960's decade. The Society also demanded to establish Bodo as a medium of instruction in Bodo dominated areas. The post 1960 decade was the decade of conflict and division of Assam on ethnic lines. The adoption of Language Bill in 1960 was largely responsible for such kind of ethnicity discourse in the state. In 1959, the Asom Sahitya Sabha gave an ultimatum to state Government to recognize Assamese as the state language. Consequently the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee also in 1960 adopted a resolution and demanded to recognize

Assamese as the State language. Subsequently the State Assembly passed the Bill in 1960, which dissatisfied many indigenous communities as well as other hill tribal population and the Bengalis. All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) was formed which opposed the Language Act and later on demanded a separate state for the hills. Similarly the Bengalis of Barak valley also opposed it, where the Bodos joined too. After formation of Nagaland in 1963, broke out of MNF in Mizoram (the then Lushai Hills), as well as the announcement of reformation of states of Assam by the then Prime Minister, the plains tribal also asserted who formed PTCA (Plains Tribal Council of Assam) in 1967, who demanded a separate state for the plains tribals of Assam named as Udayachal (Narzary 2011, Chaube 1999, Sharma 2006, Das 2012).

With the demands of propagation and preservation of Bodo language, the people entered into series of agitation program like Script movement in 1974 where 18 people died. Simultaneously in 1967, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) was formed and emerged as the most influencing and powerful civil society organization among the community. In the same month of its establishment it organized a convention on 27th February where raising the demand of autonomy for the plains tribals of Assam PTCA was formed. As a political organization PTCA in 1973, demanded the tribal state called Udayachal, where side by side ABSU demanded for a Union territory. During 1974 the Script movement of the Bodos started where Roman script was demanded for the Bodo language. In such juncture the PTCA movement for an exclusive tribal state became diluted. Moreover political turmoil started in entire India due to the emergency in 1975. As such, the demands also remained subdued for quite some time. Once normalcy returned, the PTCA suddenly reduced the demand of a separate state to an autonomous council, which brought lots of misunderstanding between PTCA and ABSU. In so far, fratricidal killings were also started. ABSU considered Samar Brahma Choudhry a PTCA leader as “the most treacherous, opportunist and crooked (with devil master mind) fellow” for the act. Many PTCA leaders, supporters specially from Bodo community were killed in the entire Bodo movement.

The vertical split came in the party itself, where the youth section of the PTCA was confined in separate state only. But during the last couple of years of 1980's decade Assam Movement started and the PTCA movement also became neutral. The PTCA leadership however, joined in the electoral politics and Charan Narzary, Samar Brahma Choudhury elected as MP and MLA. But, for reducing the demand of a separate tribal state to an autonomous council dissatisfied the majority section of the Bodos. As a part of it in 1991, Samar Brahma Choudhury was killed along with his son in Kokrajhar, when he came back during the time of 1991 election. Although, the youth section of the then PTCA led by Binay Kr. Basumatari formed UTNLF, but it failed to mobilize the Bodo population. However, with the broke out of Assam Movement and subsequently formation of AGP government turned the demand of Bodo Movement from Union territory to a full-fledged state. The PTCA became weaker and ABSU emerged as the most influencing and powerful civil society body among the Bodos. During the Assam movement, some of the deeds of the movement made skeptical to the tribal leaderships towards the Assam Movement. In Gahpur, Phulung Chapori many Bodos were killed in the name of eviction from Government land. The Nellie massacre also can be referred here. Though, the massacre was led by the leadership but later on the entire blame was shifted to the local tribal people. Moreover, once the Assam accord was signed and AGP came to power, it adopted some steps which considered as anti-tribal stance of the dominant Assamese sections. For example, in 1986 through a circular SEBA (Board of Secondary Education of Assam) ordered imposing of Assamese language in all non-Assamese medium schools as third subject. Moreover, at the same time the then Assam Government made compulsory the knowledge of Assamese language for jobs in Assam. Such expansionist and hegemonic attitude of the Government made angry the different tribal people and its leadership. Though, through the process it was tried for a more inclusive society but the imposition model worked reverse and exclusion started. Thus the demand of a separate state became more strengthen. By 1987, through a widely circulated booklet ABSU, justified the separate Bodoland answering 53 questions and came up with the popular

demand 'divide Assam 50-50'. The booklet prepared in question-answer format, where the issues of chauvinist, anti-tribal, expansionist attitude of Assamese people, and a separate state are the solution for economic, cultural development and progress of the tribal people.

Along with the democratic protest and agitation the Bodo political discourse added the insurgent activities in late 1990's (Ibid).

In Bodo nationality formation, different oral, material cultural genres are exploited. In one of the previous discussions, I mentioned different folk songs which speak the glorious past of the Bodos. The story of establishing the statue of Daimalu is already mentioned in the previous chapter. A news item that published in almost Assamese daily regarding the decision of a college Authority of a college of lower Assam, where it decided that students of the college must wear uniform in the college premises. Particular dress code was also decided for male and female. Against the decision, many Bodo organizations came out in agitation demanding that *dakhana* should be dress for Bodo girl students in the college premises, though they didn't talk about the dress of men. Such activities of the Bodos adhere to the widely held, and often criticized, perception of the ethnicity as a gendered discourse which reduces women's bodies into material sites for celebrating identity from male subjectivities.

Chapter 4

Growth and Development of the Karbi Ethnic Movement

The demand for formation of Mikir Hills district in the mid-decade of the last millennium paved the road for initiation of Karbi ethnic consciousness. The Karbi youths, who were educated through the newly institutionalized education systems of that time, could see the *backwardness* of their community in terms of education, health and development. They also became conscious of the marginalization and hegemonic subordinations that their community had been subjected to, from the so-called mainstream society. Such awakening led them to the seeding of the idea of self-rule of themselves. Moreover, the official policy of the newly independent Indian state at that was confronting between two polarized views, which was reflected in the Elwin–Ghurye debate. G. S. Ghurye, the founder of anthropology in India, was of the view that the tribal communities could be regarded as backward Hindus, which endorses the idea of integrating them with the mainstream Hindu society. In contrast, noted ethnographer and tribal activist Verrier Elwin held a more protectionist view towards maintaining the distinction of the tribal communities (Guha 1996). Elwin’s perspective seemed to be more influential in the governmental policies and activities, especially towards the tribal people of Assam and the North-East India, in the post-independence times. This led to a preservationist policy towards the tribal culture and heritage, which, in turn, facilitated the emergence of the ethnic politics legitimated by the state itself.

In the context of the then undivided Assam (now the North-East India), it started with the Naga insurgency which erupted in the wake of Indian independence. In the coming years, voices from other communities were also raised in the similar tone. The beginning of the Karbi ethnic consciousness can also be traced back to this time of the Indian independence. In this

chapter, a detailed trajectory of the growth and development of Karbi ethnonational politics will be attempted.

4.1 The Karbi People:

The Karbis are a Tibeto-Burman group and speakers of a language belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family, who are now registered as one of the Scheduled Tribes as per the enumeration of the Government of India. Believed to be one of the earliest migrants to the region, their traditional settlement area is found in the Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao (erstwhile North Cachar) districts in the state of Assam. As per the census of 2001, the total population of Karbis in Assam is 3, 53,513 which constitute 10.7% of the total ST population of the State¹. Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao have the highest concentration of Karbi population, though considerable numbers are also residing in the plains of Marigaon and Kamrup, who are known as *amri Karbi* (plain dwellers) or *dumarali* in colloquial references. Besides these locations, small pockets of Karbi settlements are available in several other districts of Assam (Marigaon, Kamrup, Nagaon, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Karimganj) and in certain areas within the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Anthropological writings on the Karbis report that there are four subgroup of the Karbis, namely; Chintong, Ronghang, Amri and Dumrali on the basis of their geographical areas. These subgroups are again divided into clans and sub-clans (Sengupta 2003, 374).

The Karbis were popularly and frequently referred as *Mikir*, in the official colonial documents of the British as well as in the pre-colonial Ahom Chronicles. But they like to call themselves as Karbi or *Arleng*. In the first Assamese dictionary *Hemkosh* published in the year 1900, their entry was given not as Karbi but as the *Mikir* where they were described as “an aboriginal tribe of Assam”. Gunabhiram Barua a 19th century social reformer

¹ Census report 2001: http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_assam.pdf (2011 census report yet to be published).

of Assam, is mentioned in his *Asom Buranji* that the Assamese called them as *Mikir*, whereas they call themselves as *Karbi* (Barua 2006, 14-15).

As per the available oral accounts, during the Burmese invasion in the early decades of the 19th century, the Karbis entered into the deep jungles to save themselves from the brutality of Burmese soldiers. The Karbi girls tattooed a black line (in Karbi it is called *duk*) starting from the forehead to the chin to show themselves ugly. It later became a tradition among the Karbi girls to draw the line. The tradition is still prevalent among many elderly women. In many folk performances, nowadays, the girls along with the traditional costumes also make this artificial line.

Another narrative related to a harvesting festival, called *Hachakekan*, it is recounted that a Karbi youth had learned the wet rice cultivation during his stay in plains, and he carried this new knowledge of cultivation to the hills which provided more productivity in comparison to traditional dry rice cultivation. Such narratives provide may hint about the existence of spontaneous relationship between the plains and the hills among the Karbis in the pre-colonial times. However, under the colonial scheme of classifying peoples and geographies, the Karbi settlements were subjected under the policy of *Inner Line Permit* in 1873 and finally segregated as *Partially Excluded Areas* in 1935.

4.2 Social Structure

As mentioned above, the Karbis have five exogamous clans (*nok:hum*) namely Terang, Teron, Enghi, Ingti and Timung. Each of these clans has several sub-clans as mentioned belows:

1. Terang (15 sub clans): Terang, Terang Ingnar, Terang Ingjai, Terang Dilli, Terang Rongchecho, Be Ke-ik, Be ke-et (Ronghang), Be Chingthog, Be Dum, Be Lindok, Be Miji, Kro, Kro nilip, Kro nihang, Kro Khamu

2. Teron: (9 sub clans): Milik, Kongkat, Langne, Sirang, Dengja, Ai, Torap, Sir:ik, Miji
3. Enghi: (30 sub clans): Enghi, Rongpi, Rongpi Ronghang, Rongpi Amri, Rongpi Chinthong, Rongpi Lindok, Rongpi Meji, Rongpi Ronchehon, Ronghi, Ke-ap, Reng:oi, Renglum, Rente, Lekthe, Bongrung, Kramsa, Hanse Lindok, Hanse Chinthong, Hanse Durong, Hanse nongphili, Hanse nongloda, Hanse Ka:i, Ronghang, Ronghang Lindok, Tisso Rongphu, Tisso Rongchitim, Tisso Rongling, Tisso Motho, Tisso Rongcheicho, Tisso.
4. Ingti (6 sub clans): Ingti Hensek, Ingti Kathar Bura, Kathar Riso, Ingleng, Taro, Ingti Killing
5. Timung (30 sub clans): Timung, Timung Rongpi, Timung Killing, Timung Phura, Phangcho, Phangcho Juiti, Phangcho Langteroi, Phangcho Ingnar, Phangcho Vojaru, Pator, Killing Miji, Killing nokbare, Senar, Senar Muchiki, Senar Meji, Tobi Ronghang, Tokbi Toktiki, Tokbi Chinthong, Tokbi Dera, Rongpher Senot, Rongpher Phura, Nokbare, Nongdu, Nongloda, Dera, Senar Pator, Senot, Chalut Senot, Mu Chopi, Tokbi Killing

These clans are exogamous in nature. Marriage and sexual relationship between the same clan is strictly prohibited as children of same clan are considered as siblings. Violation of the same leads to punishment as per customary law. The society of the Karbis is a patriarchal one. Inheritance and descent passes through father's line only. Children continue their father's clan. A daughter, after her marriage, too continues her father's title only. Cross-cousin marriage is a preferential form of marriage among the Karbis. Monogamy is widely prevalent practice and polygamy and divorce are rare.

4.3 Land and Gender Relations:

Karbi society is a male dominated society which is evident in their property rights, participation of men in rituals and other affairs of their society. The

preferential and proscribed marriage restricts women's mobility and thereby controls the sexuality. The traditional Karbi society runs through village council known as *Me* which is constituted by all males, headed by the village headman of the village. A village is named after the name of the village headman (*Sarthe*) where the post of the headman is hereditary. The other members of the council are priest, representative of youth and other two male members. The village council takes all kinds of decision in a village. Village council is responsible for solving all kinds of problems and issues including disputes, distribution of land, adultery and birth of child out of such relationship etc. As it is constituted of all males, women participation in decisions making is found absent. Nowadays the role of *Me* is decreasing (Bathari, 2009:142-159).

*Jhum*² was the preferred mode of cultivation by the Karbis which is still prevalent in interior villages. In recent times, most of the Karbis have adopted settled and wet-cultivation in the foothills. As *jhum* was common mode of cultivations, the Karbis had to shift from one area to another in the bygone days. Land was considered as the common property and cultivable land was distributed to families as per the requirement of the family by the village council. *Jhum* cultivation is more a self-sufficient mode of agricultural pattern that does not produce surplus to be sold in the market. Both men and women worked in the *jhum* field but gender division of labour did exist. Apart from the division of labour in agriculture, the gendered demarcation and discrimination are also evident in the various prescribed domestic roles for men and women which are illustrated in certain oral narratives.

The decade of the 1980s saw the emergence of environmental concerns among the actors of development. The large-scale industrialization and deforestation processes began to be critically reviewed, with increasing emphases on the newer vocabularies of the development paradigm, like alternative

² *Jhum* is the traditional slash-and-burn cultivation method of many of the hill-dwelling communities of the region.

development, sustainable development, etc. The Southeast Asian hub received significant attention for its traditional agricultural practices like the *jhum* (slash-and-burn) cultivation. A widely held belief was that such kind of cultivation causes of massive deforestation and soil erosion, for which the Government departments encouraged for settled cultivation through various schemes. As such, some model villages were established in Karbi Anglong and some amount of cultivable land was given to each families. Thus, the community land owned by the state started to be distributed with the *pattas*³ to the individuals. The Rubber Board and Coffee board started working in these areas. Apart from the model villages, cash crop cultivations, especially rubber plantation, also started in Karbi Anglong. Individuals started cultivating rubber in the lands which were earlier community lands. Moreover, as rubber cultivation requires some amount of capital in the initial years, hence banks became the sources for getting loan. To get loan from bank, an individual requires his own land with *patta*. As such, many people occupied the lands by different means and started cultivating rubber.

The diminishing of communal land and thereby rise of private property resulted affecting many spheres of the tribal society. As stated, the *jhum* had been more a self-sufficient kind of cropping system which produced the crop within a short span of time giving the food security to a family. Therefore, such pattern had kept the people away from the market and market economy. But the new pattern of cropping connected the populace to the markets and market-centric ideas and practices. Through some middleman, different cash-crops began to be sold; and the cash usually flow to the hands of the male members of a family. Along with this, the rubber cultivation is also having different implications. As it takes around eight years for a rubber tree to get matured and produce the latex, questions have been raised regarding how a poor family, who were traditionally accustomed to the self-sufficiency of the *jhum*, can survive for such a long duration. To feed the family, many people have become daily wage labour or adopted different livelihood means.

³ *Pattas* are the official land-owning documents.

As the hills are not good for rice cultivation, cash-crops became a preferred cropping pattern once *jhum* cultivation stops. This connects the individuals directly to the market. Many traders invested money (gives money to cultivate to local people) purchased the crops from them in low price. The market price is determined by the middlemen or if it is sold in the market directly also expected value is not received by the farmers. The dependency syndrome, cash transaction, flow of capital altered the gender relations and has created a new kind patriarchy within such developmental frame.

The flourishing market economy thus, affecting the remote corners of the tribal areas, is creating a new development regime. In one hand, it is propagating the cash crops cultivation, and in turn, traditional mode of agricultural pattern is withering away. People became dependent on the market and cultivate as per the need of the market. The serious gender implication here is that such kind of new developmental paradigm has created a new order of patriarchy. Dependency of women on men increases as cash economy is controlled by men. The emerging land laws also create a set of dependent elites who earn money from outsiders by leasing out their lands. The operations of capital in multiple levels, either through direct connections with the market or through the government sponsored schemes, led to the rise of the elite class.

4.4 Formation of Mikir Hills District (Karbi Anglong)

The coming of the Christian Missionaries in the hills of Karbi Anglong during later decades of the 19th century brought the *illiterate* and *tribal* people of the hills under the purview of colonial modernity. The *white men's burden of civilizing the savage* led to the twin processes – religious conversion to Christianity and spread of western education. Within a short span of time, a considerable section of the Karbis adopted Christianity in the early 20th century. Some of these neophyte Christians also passed out of the Missionary

educated who could feel the relative *backwardness* of their own community. However, unlike the state of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya of North-East India, where majority or sometimes the entire population was converted to Christianity, the absolute religious cleansing did not take place among the Karbis or among other tribal communities of the present-day Assam. As such, diverse religious affiliations worked crucially at certain levels in furthering the political discourse of the people.

Semson Singh Ingti (1910 – 1948), the father and architect of Karbi nation and nationalism was a Christian Mission-educated gentleman who first raised the issue of a separate district for the Karbis. As a part of Christian Mission, Semson's father shifted from Tika hills of present day west Karbi Anglong to Golaghat where Semson got his early education in Golaghat Mission School, and did his matriculation from Bezbaruah High School, Golaghat. Later he went to Cotton College and finally completed his Graduation from Murari Chand College of Sylhet in 1933. Once he came back after his higher education, Semson Sing Ingti was appointed as a School Sub-Inspector in Education Department. This service opportunity gave him the scope to know the illiterate, backward Karbi people living in villages and hills. Visiting different primary schools as a part of his Government duty, he could see the appalling conditions of primary education and economic backwardness of his community. He tried to bring all the Karbis scattered in different places to one geographical space and to form a single political administration so that necessary measures could be taken for the upliftment of the Karbis. Along with Semson Sing, a set of other educated elite came out from the community and a political consciousness of the Karbis developed. Some of such individuals of that time were namely Khorsing Terang, Nihang Rongpher, Song Be, etc. This attempt of bringing all the scattered Karbis under a singular political and geographical constellation was the manifestation of imagining themselves as an ethnic community. However a more immediate agenda was to function like a pressure group towards the desired course of development for the people and their places. The newly emerged political consciousness is

reflected in the memorandums submitted to the then Governors of Assam. Semson Sing and his colleagues welcomed Sir Robert Neir, the Governor of Assam, at Mohongdijua Camp, during his visit to upper Assam via Mikir hills in 1940. There, the delegates led by Semson submitted the first memorandum where it was informed that,

“Mikirs who have been kept in perpetual subordination by their progressive neighbours beg to express our deep gratitude to Your Excellency for taking in for the first time a Mikir Representative in Provincial Legislature, an act which has not only received appreciation from the Mikir people but has also worked as an initiative among the Mikir youths for improving the status of their tribe; and we sincerely hope that however busily engaged Your Excellency might be with multifarious activities. Your Excellency would be graciously pleased to bear in mind the deplorable condition of the Mikirs due to complete isolation in the jungle area of the hills and further to redress to their legitimate grievances as embodied in the memorial annexed herewith.” (quoted in Rongpher 2006, 344-345)

Thus the political consciousness of the Karbis started and in the later periods the demands became more crystallized. With the formation of various political organizations, the mobilization process got momentum in later times.

One old Karbi Socio-Political organization namely *Karbi A Dorbar* was formed in the year 1946 at Hawaipur of the then Nagaon district. Semson Sing Ingti was nominated as General Secretary and Sarsing Teorn Habe became the President of the organization. Right from its inception, the *A dorbar* was concerned about the problems of its community. On 1st March, 1947, it submitted a memorandum at Lanka to Sir Andrew Claw, the then Governor of Assam, in his visit to the tribal dominated areas along with his wife. Some of the important issues highlighted in the memorandum were necessity of educational, medical, and agricultural facilities and governmental recognition of the *A Dorbar*. The memorandum says,

“We, the Mikir people who are in every respect backward and neglected, feel most encouraged by Your Excellency and Lady Claw’s presence in our midst today.

.....The country is passing through a most critical time in the political history of India. Every minority community is fully alert of the situation and asserting their best for their own political safeguards. The Mikirs, as well have strongly organized themselves to voice their feelings through their only All Assam association called ‘Karbi A Dorbar’. We humbly pray to Your Excellency to give due recognition to the aforesaid Association, so that in the matter of framing the coming Constitution of the country, the Association is consulted.

Your Excellency is aware that the Mikir people are living in areas where there are scanty educational, medical, and agricultural facilities. Communication as compared to with rest of the province is nil. So we most humbly pray the immediate steps are taken to better the conditions prevailing in these areas. It is general opinion of the country that the backward tribes require protection and protective rules in the Hills. But we have come to know that there is a proposal for the abolition of Chin Hill Regulations. If that is done, we pray that some other rules or regulations should be substituted for safeguard the interest and existence of the illiterate and ignorant Mikir people.”(*ibid*, 346-347)

An important issue reflected in the above memorandum is the vouch for a protective administration of the Karbi population that can safeguard their tradition and culture. There was colonial regulation, under the name of Chin Hill Regulation which was initially passed in 1896 for the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) which authorized the Superintendent or Deputy Commissioner to order an undesirable outsider to leave the area and to tax the residents, permanent or temporary, clans and villages. In 1911, this regulation was also extended to the Mikir Hills which protected the Karbi localities from outsiders. A concern for the removal of this regulation is revealed in the above memorandum.

The Inner Line Permit was introduced in the year 1873 to certain areas of North-East, especially to the hills of the region. The then Mikir hills were part of the two districts of Assam viz. Nowgong and Sibsagar; hence it suffered

most as it was nobody's child (Chaube 1999, 47). The Mikir Hills tract in the colonial period was constituted with the administrative boundary of Nowgong district from the year 1884. There was no administrative boundary of Mikir Hills until 1884. Through the Frontier Regulation Act 1884, it came under Nowgong district. A part of the tract was transferred to Sivsagar district in 1893. In 1928, the Simon Commission came; and under its advice, the categories of *excluded areas* and *partially excluded areas* were created. Creating and separating some areas from the mainland by this process, the colonial Government began treating such areas with different administrative measures. The Mikir Hills fell under the partially excluded areas in 1935.

During the time of Indian independence, with the recommendation of Cabinet Mission, the constituent Assembly hurriedly formed a committee named as Fundamental Rights of the Minority and Tribals and Excluded Area. Ballav Bhai Patel was the chairman of this committee. It set the sub-committee for NORTH-EAST Frontier (Assam) Tribal's and Excluded Area, taking Gopinath Bordoloi as the chairman of the sub-committee. This sub-committee is popularly known as Bordoloi Committee. Rev. JJ Nichols Roy, Rupnath Brahma and A. V. Thakkar were the members of the committee. Semson Sing Ingti, and Khorsing Terang were the co-opted members of Bordoloi Committee. The Bordoloi sub-committee found 'considerable' but unequal progress in the hill areas. The Mikir Hills and the Garo Hills – both the partially excluded areas were found to be the most backward areas of the region.

Thus, creation of a separate district including the partially excluded areas of Nowgong and Sivsagar district was the need of the hour for the newly independent state for a fast development of the backward people. The rising elites of the community also found an immediate solution for the development of the community through the creation of a separate hill district for the Karbis.

Karbi A Dorbar, as it claimed the first socio-political organization became the mouthpiece of the community. On 18th May of 1947, the *Dorbar* submitted a memorandum to the Bordoloi Committee where it demanded a separate district for the Karbis. They desired consolidation of the Mikir areas, protection of customs and extension of franchise (Chaube 1999, 47). On the recommendation of the Bordoloi Committee and further modifications, the Constitution of India adopted the Provision of Sixth Schedule for the hill population of North-East India. After India got independence the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district also came into existence vide Government notification dated 17.11.1951 no. TAD/R/31/50/ as the largest district of Assam curving an area of 4421.12 square kilometres from then Nagaon district, 4382.28 square kilometres from Sivsagar district, and 1540 square kilometre from Khasi and Jaintia Hills district the United Mikir and North Cachar District was created. The Autonomous District Council formed under the provision of Sixth Schedule on 23rd June 1952. In the year 1970, bifurcating United Mikir Hills District, Mikir Hills and North Cachar district was created. Following this on 14th October in 1976, vide Government notification TAD/R/115/74/47 Dtd. 14.10.1976 Mikir Hills District was renamed as Karbi Anglong. Karbi Anglong is now the largest district of Assam comprising 10434 square kilometres of area. Diphu is the Headquarter of the district; and two other sub-divisions are Bokajan and Hamren.

4.5 Consolidation and Institutionalization of Karbi Identity

The formation of Autonomous District Council under the Provision of Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution brought the ‘*anarchist population*’⁴ to the modern set up of the new state. The process had already been started during the colonial rule. In addition to the *Karbi A Dorbar*, formation of other bodies in subsequent times under the names and styles of KSA (Karbi Students Association), Karbi Lamet Amei (Karbi Literary Society), Karbi Cultural

⁴ James Scott in his *The Art of not Being Governed* (2006) regarded the hilly population as anarchist people

Society, Kabi Riso Adabar, etc. gave momentum to the ethnic mobilization among the Karbis. In Assam, the students' organizations and literary bodies of different communities always play vital role in articulating identity. In Assamese nationalist discourse, Bodo nationalist discourse the literary bodies (Asom Shitya Sabha, Bodo Thunlai Afad) and Students Union (All Assam Students Union, All Bodo Students Union) have been seen as the prime movers of nationalist ideology.

4.5.1 Karbi A-Dorbar:

The first socio-political organization of the Karbis was *Karbi-A Dorbar* was formed in 1946 at Hawaipur, near Lanka. Sarsing Teron Habe and SS Ingti was the founder President and Secretary of the *Adorbar*. Right from its inception political consciousness is seen of the organization as it took active part in demanding, submitting memorandum for the formation of a separate district for the Karbis.

4.5.2 Karbi Riso Adorbar

Asom Karbi Riso Adarbar was established in the year 1964 on 25th January taking Bronson Ingti as President and Birensing Ingti as the Secretary. Later, the prefix *Asom* was removed and it was renamed as *Karbi Riso Adarbar*. The APHLC movement tried to include Mikir hills in the proposed hill state, but it was subsequently opposed in Karbi Anglong by *Karbi Riso Adarbar*. They submitted a memorandum to the then Home Minister Y. B. Chawan opposing the federal plan of the Government for re-organizing the state in his visit to Assam. It also took a resolution in the Annual session of the Association held at Parkhuwa which considered that the proposed separate hill state issue vis-à-vis, so call federal plan is a vague idea. A section of leaders of the *Karbi A Dorbar* supported the hills state movement and *Riso-Adarbar* opposed such moves.

4.5.3 Karbi Cultural Society

The Karbi Cultural Society was formed in 1977 on 30th January in Diphu. Since its inception KCS has been trying to preserve and promote Karbi culture and heritage. It is responsible for organizing the Karbi Youth Festival. It claims Karbi Youth Festival as the biggest ethnic festival. It is celebrated every year during February 15-19th which is one of the prominent initiatives to preserve and propagate Karbi oral and material culture. Initially it was celebrated in small scale, but nowadays it is celebrated in a grand way where food festival, exhibition, musical entertainment and other material and non-material cultural forms are celebrated. A permanent site for the festival was developed near Diphu.

4.6 APHLC Movement & Karbi Anglong:

The formation of State Reorganization Commission (SRC) in 1954 received mixed reactions in the hills of Assam. W.A. Sangma, the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of Garo Hills District Council convened a meeting of all the CEMs to discuss some of their mutual interests at Shillong. Except the CEM of Mikir Hills District Council, all the other CEMs were present. The meeting resolved that a separate hills state should be formed and Sixth Schedule needs amendment. The Assam Hills Tribal Leaders' Conference held at Tura in the same year on October adopted the similar resolution comprising all the Autonomous districts, and decided to submit a memorandum to State Reorganization Commission. The SRC rejecting the demand said,

“Generally speaking, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills and the Lushai Hills are not in favour of a separate hill state and the District Council in the Lushai Hills and the Karbi a dorbar (Mikir National Council) are in favour of the *status quo*. The agitation in favour of hill state is, therefore confined virtually to the Garo and Khasi and Jaintia Hills.” (*ibid*, 123)

In 1955, in a conference of the tribal leaders held at Aizawl, it formed a political party, called Eastern India Tribal Union, with similar demands. In the general election in 1957 it won couple of seats in different constituencies of the hills.

Meanwhile, the Assam Assembly in 1960 approved the Language Bill by which Assamese language was adopted as the State language. It received negative reactions especially in the hills areas of then Assam as well as among the other tribals of plains and also in Bengali dominated Barak valley. As a part of the reaction, in 1960, W.A. Sangma called a conference of all the Hills tribal leaders at Tura on July 20. In the meeting, the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) was formed. The meeting opposed the language bill that Assam Government brought to Legislative Assembly. The APHLC raised serious concerns against the Language Bill, as it felt that tribals are unsecured under this Government and considered the move as the cultural aggression of Assamese nationalism over the minorities. As such, the APHLC started raising demand for a separate state comprising the hills areas of the then Assam. The formation of APHLC (All Party Hills Leaders Conference) in 1960 had a mixed reaction in Karbi Anglong and among the Karbis.

Concerned with the language policy of the Assam Government, demand for a separate hills state was stronger. To neutralize the Naga aspirations, in 1963, the state of Nagaland was created. After series of demands and movement, by the 22nd Amendment of Indian Constitution, on 25th December, 1969, passing the Assam reorganization bill, Meghalaya was created as a state within the state comprising Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills. The article is named as Article 244 A.

After formation of United Mikir Hills and north Cachar District, the political consciousness came into existence with the idea of reformation of the state. The formation of Meghalaya and Nagaland was one of the catalytic factors. The APHLC however, demanded for a separate state including all the hill

areas of Assam, excluding Nagaland. A branch was established in Karbi Anglong also under the leadership of Raidang Ingti, John Kathar, Devidalang Enghi, Maniram Langne and so forth. In between 1961-62 a meeting was held at Deothor, where DD Lyngdoh, Darwin Piu, Nichols Roy etc. were present (Rongpher 2006, 67) where a consensus could not be achieved among the Karbis in this issue. Contrary to the support of APHLC, a section of Karbi leadership had opposed the movement by voicing against the inclusion of Karbi Anglong in proposed hill state. This difference of opinion is believed to be due to the religious difference between the Christianized and the other Karbi leaders. Chatrasing Teron, Choi Choi Teron, Dhaniram Rongpi, Joysing Dolo were some of the leaders who opposed the move of the APHLC at Karbi Anglong. The religious affiliation always played a significant role in Karbi politics since its inception. The architect of modern Karbi Anglong Semson Sing Ingti lost the election with Khorsing Terang in the lone assembly seat from Mikir Hills as because of his religious affiliation i.e. Semoson was a Christian (Teron, 2013). The APHLC movement was also nullified in Karbi Anglong as almost all the leaders of the organization were Christian. So there was a counter campaign that the movement for a separate hills state was a movement of the Christian leaders. According to many leaders, *Karbi Riso Adarbar* was established to check the Christian aggression in Karbi Anglong.

In 1968, the Assam Government announced the formation of autonomous state of Meghalaya out of the Khasi-Jayantia Hills and Garo hills. The APHLC appealed the leaders of Karbi Anglong to take a resolution in Autonomous District Council (ADC) for inclusion of Mikir hills in the new state. But the leaders of Karbi Anglong who were engaged to APHLC movement were not the members of ADC. There was only one member namely Raidang Ingti in the ADC who supported the APHLC movement. Hence the resolution of inclusion of Mikir Hills could not be taken in ADC and Karbi Anglong did not become a part of the separate state of Meghalaya. Even during the times of creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963, a considerable amount of land of Karbi Anglong was occupied by the Nagas, for which political tension in the

border erupted (the border dispute is still going on). To solve the land dispute, a one-man commission was formed with K.V.K. Sundaram, the then Advisor of Home Affairs, Government of India. When Sundaram made his visit to Karbi Anglong in 1971, a section of Karbi leaders submitted a memorandum where they demanded full inclusion of Karbi Anglong in the newly formed state of Nagaland. The signatories were Bapuram Singnar, Sarsing Teron, Alex D. Sangma, Resulo Hinbe Rengma, Chondrasing Tokbi, Monsing Rongpher, and Thousal D. Sangma. In the memorandum it said,

1. Sir, the original area of Naga Hills district where it was initially formed included the whole area of the Mikir Hills, North of Barapani, river and East of Kapili river the then Naga Hills District.
2. Whereby the subsequent modification of the Naga Hills boundary, as modified by the Govt. of India in 1875 some portion of the present Mikir inhabited areas were out of the then Naga Hills
3. The Mikir people as a whole, have been as a whole have been struggling heart and soul to be out of Assam and have worked together with the APHLC to achieve this end.
4. Under the circumstances mentioned above, and to fulfil the wishes of the people, we wish to affirm our desire that the whole of the present Mikir Hills district with its contiguous areas, without disintegrating, be merged with Nagaland without delay. (Rongpher 2006, 334)

In another memorandum submitted to the Governor of Assam, on 12th April, 1972 by Mikir Hills Nationalist Organization also raised the similar demand. It also said that it had actively participated in the APHLC movement. During the creation of Meghalaya, though option was given but many people demanded that the decision should be taken after the election of ADC, but election was not held despite the term of the ADC was over by that time. The same organization again submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi raising the similar demand. But the demand was rejected by both states viz. Assam and Nagaland. Hence the demand of incorporating Mikir Hills in Nagaland was not fulfilled.

4.7 Script Movement:

After the APHLC movement, in Karbi Anglong, another significant movement was the script movement. The Karbi language did not have any script and it adopted Assamese script to write the language. The Script movement demanded Roman Script for Karbi language. On 31st May, 1973 a meeting was convened in Diphu Club, under the chairmanship of the then CEM of the ADC where the meeting anonymously resolved that the Roman Script should be used for writing of Karbi literature as well all the Karbi text books used in schools. In the same meeting it also formed a Script Implementation Committee where Bronson Ingti was made the President and Indrasing Ingti, Roy Inghi, Longki Phangso and Jiwan Bey were the Secretaries. After the first sitting of the Script Implementation Committee the members decided to approach the Autonomous District Council to raise the issue on the next session of the Council. It also resolved to request Karbi Lamet Anei (Karbi Literary Society) to use Roman Script.

To popularize the demand of Roman Script and to mobilize the people the Script Implementation Committee conveyed public meetings, rallies in different parts of the district. On 29th December 1973, in such a rally, the state police force treated the protesters in brutal manner, injuring several students (*ibid*).

There were contradictions among the Karbis regarding the use of Roman Script for the language. A section of the Karbis opposed the Roman Script movement; and leaflets were circulated by both the pro- and anti-Roman script sections. On 26th March, 1974 in the Council Session, the proposal of implementing Roman Script was raised. Finally in 1978, the ADC adopted the resolution of using Roman Script for Karbi language and literature. As the Script movement was to some extent opposed by some leaders of the All India Congress party, the Congress lost the Election of the Council to the Janata Dal in 1978. However, with the official adoption of Roman Script by the

Autonomous District Council, the Script Movement came to an end successfully.

.4.8 Idea of Autonomous State: Article 244 A

As mentioned earlier, the history of the demand for a separate state goes back to the APHLC movement. The Provision of Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution offered to the hill areas of North-East India limited autonomy within the state. The rising demand for a separate state including all the hill areas of Assam started with the APHLC movement during 1970's decade. As a result of such popular demands, different states were created. Meghalaya was created under Article 244 A without making necessary corrections in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Article 244 A was added here to mitigate such demands. As per the Article 244 A, it says,

(1) Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution, Parliament may, by law, form within the State of Assam an autonomous State comprising (whether wholly or in part) all or any of the tribal areas specified in 218[Part I] of the table appended to paragraph 20 of the Sixth Schedule and create therefore-

(a) a body, whether elected or partly nominated and partly elected, to function as a Legislature for the autonomous State, or

(b) a Council of Ministers, or both with such constitution, powers and functions, in each case, as may be specified in the law.

(2) Any such law as is referred to in clause (1) may, in particular,-

(a) specify the matters enumerated in the State List or the Concurrent List with respect to which the Legislature of the autonomous State shall have power to make laws for the whole or any part thereof, whether to the exclusion of the Legislature of the State of Assam or otherwise;

(b) define the matters with respect to which the executive power of the autonomous State shall extend;

(c) provide that any tax levied by the State of Assam shall be assigned to the autonomous State in so far as the proceeds thereof are attributable to the autonomous State;

(d) provide that any reference to a State in any article of this Constitution shall be construed as including a reference to the autonomous State; and

(e) make such supplemental, incidental and consequential provisions as may be deemed necessary.

(3) An amendment of any such law as aforesaid in so far as such amendment relates to any of the matters specified in sub-clause (a) or sub-clause (b) of clause (2) shall have no effect unless the amendment is passed in each House of Parliament by not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting.

(4) Any such law as is referred to in this article shall not be deemed to be an amendment of this Constitution for the purposes of article 368 notwithstanding that it contains any provision which amends or has the effect of amending this Constitution.⁵

As per the provisions of 244 A Meghalaya was created on 1970 as a state within state. But on January 21, 1971 Meghalaya was declared as a full-fledged separate state after rising demands for several months. After formation of Meghalaya, Article 244 A was not removed from the Constitution. Thus, Karbi Anglong and NC Hills became the left-out areas under the constitutional provisions to implement the Article 244 A.

The demand for a full-fledged separate state and the same for an autonomous state were carried on from time to time during the last couple of years of 1980s. The demand for a separate Karbi-Dimasa state (combining Karbi Anglong and NC Hills) was raised in the meeting of All Party Peoples Conference (APPC) held on 20th August, 1978 under the Presidentship of

⁵ <http://www.constitution.org/cons/india/p10244a.html>

Joysing Dolui. In that meeting, the executive members of both the ADC's of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills were present. It took a resolution that

“now, therefore, it is strongly felt that nothing short of separation from Assam would solve the political aspirations of the two districts of Karbi Anglong and north Cachar Hills and the meeting resolved to launch a movement in legal and constitutional methods with the demand for creation of a separate full-fledged state comprising the two districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills” (Rongpher 2006, 103).

It also formed a central action committee for the same. In 1979 Separate state Demand Committee was formed. In the same year, the Karbi Anglong Peoples Conference (KAPC) also declared the need of a separate state for the hilly population of Assam. The President of KAPC also proposed that the new name of the proposed state should be Ratnagiri. In the same year it submitted a memorandum to the then Governor of Assam demanding a separate state. But KAPC sometimes supported the issue of separate state and sometimes opposed it and finally reduced the demand to implementation of Article 244 A. Thus the demand for a separate state became diluted; and towards the 1990s and onwards, a political consensus began to prevail among most of the Karbis in favour of an Autonomous State.

4.9 Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC):

The Assam Movement (1979-1985), which has been discussed in the previous chapter, was a movement primarily for the deportation of the illegal Bangladeshi migrants from Assam. Though the various ethnic community leaders of Assam participated in, and sacrificed their lives, for the common cause of the elimination of foreigners, the movement is now remembered by many as a site of the chauvinistic nationalism of the Assamese-speaking caste Hindu and non-tribal segments of the Brahmaputra valley. Several participating ethnic communities felt betrayed afterwards; and reacted

politically against the hegemonic attitude of the Assamese nationalists towards the so-called tribal leaders and the people behind them. Most of the leaders of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC, a political party of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar district formed in 1986, after the Assam movement) of the Karbis were initially a part of the student leadership of the Assam movement.

In an interview, Haliram Terang, one of the founders of the ASDC, narrated the cause of forming a different political party in Karbi Anglong district after Assam movement. According to Terang, in the 1985 Assembly Elections, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) came to an alliance with the newly formed Peoples Democratic Forum (PDF) headed by Dr. Jayanta Rongpi. Among the four Legislative Assembly Constituencies of Karbi Anglong, namely Diphu, Howraghat, Bokajan and Baithalangso, it was only the Baithalangso constituency where the candidate from the AGP-PDF alliance won in that Election. This winning candidate was Haliram Terang himself. However, in the general context of Assam, the AGP won that election with unprecedented majority and its leader Prafulla Kumar Mahanta formed his ministry in 1985. But Mahanta did not include Terang in his ministry despite the fact that Terang was the sole winning candidate of the AGP-PDF alliance. Instead, Samsing Hanse, the winner from Diphu constituency under the banner of the Karbi Anglong Peoples Conference (KAPC) was given a ministerial berth in the AGP ministry. According to Terang, Samsing Hanse was offered ministry because of the pressure of Asom Sahitya Sabha, as Hanse was an active member of the Sabha. Now it is widely held in the political circles that if Haliram Terang were included in the cabinet, there would have been no scope for forming a different political party named as ASDC. After formation of the ASDC, the Karbi politics got a boost and the demand for an autonomous state came to be more concretized and strengthened.

To carry on the demand for the implementation of Article 244 A in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, the Karbi political elites finally formed an

organization called Autonomous State Demand Committee on 17th May of 1986. Most of the leaders of ASDC were the students who took part in the Assam Movement. The ASDC brought together peoples from different political and non-political organisations of the Karbis and Dimasa community to make the movement stronger. In the same year of formation of the ASDC, another organization called Karbi Anglong North Cachar Hills Autonomous State Demand Committee (KANCHASDCOM) was also formed. However, the ASDC could form its branches in the entire district of Karbi Anglong and NC Hills. The Karbi Students Association (KSA) joined hand in hand with ASDC in the movement right from the inception of ASDC. The political activism of ASDC was included mobilizing of people through meetings, strikes, protest-rallies and so on. The movement, which was led separately by ASDC-KSA, and KANCHASDCOM got its peak during the years 1986-1989. Strikes, protests, processions became frequent events in Karbi Anglong during this period. In 1989, the ASDC participated in the state electoral politics; won 22 out of 26 seats in the Council. In the Election Manifesto, ASDC leader Dr. Jayanta Rongpi stated the objective of the party and the movement: "objective of the party and the movement for autonomy was to achieve more decentralization of the political, economic, socio-cultural and parliamentary power and restore them to the people of the region by the formation of an Autonomous State." (Barbora 2008, 313-334) It also assured the other non-Karbis of the region that it would remain non-hostile to the non-Karbis. Dr. Jayanta Rongpi was selected as the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Council. However, even after the coming of the ASDC to electoral politics, the intensity of the movement continued remain high in different forms of resistance and protest. The Karbi youths became cynical towards the amount of power offered to them in the name of self-rule via Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution. Dr. Jayanta Rongpi, who later got elected as member to the Indian parliament in New Delhi, described the inefficiency of the Sixth Schedule provision in one of his parliamentary debate

The Sixth Schedule has been in practice since 1952. I have the experience of heading such Autonomous Hill Council for seven long years. I was the Chief of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council for seven years. With that experience I can say that the Sixth Schedule has failed in India since 1952 (Rongpi 2003).

There was considerable amount of leftist influence in the ASDC right from its inception. Dr. Jayanta Rongpi and Holiram Terang were the primary members of Communist Party of India's Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML) fraction. Initially it was not disclosed, but with the passing of time the fact came to be known as many leaders and cadres could not accept that political ideology. ASDC kept on enjoying absolute majority in all the elections of the Council till 2002 and showed good results Assembly elections and Parliamentary elections as well.

The growing influence of ASDC and rising demand for implementation of Article 244 A became stronger with the increasing intensity of the movement. Finally, the ASDC came to discussion with Assam State Government and Central Government of India. As a part of the discussion, the State Government agreed to hand over 30 administrative departments to the Autonomous District Council in 1995. In the periodic elections of ADC, State Assembly and Parliament, the issue of autonomous state remained as a major issue; where different political parties tried to exploit the sentiment of the common Karbis.

4.10 Split in ASDC:

The split of the ASDC into two fractions in 2000 was a major setback in the Karbi ethnic movement. Despite the emergence of Dr. Rongpi as a powerful leader in ASDC, his leftist inclination was not liked by many of his colleagues. Moreover, allegations of corruption and mishandling of state funds began to be raised against Dr. Rongpi by members of his own party.

Consequently, on 21 August of 2000, twenty one CPI(ML) members, including Dr. Rongpi, were expelled from the ASDC. After this split, Holiram Terang and Babu Rongpi were given the charge of Secretary and President of the ASDC respectively. Interestingly, on 22 August, the next day after the expulsion, Jayanta Rongpi's fraction convened a meeting of the Standing Committee where Holiram Terang was expelled from the ASDC. Thus, both the sections claim themselves to be original beholder of the ASDC. This split resulted fratricidal conflicts and killings in Karbi Anglong.

After the split, none of the fractions could win in the succeeding elections of the Council, the Legislative Assembly as well as of the Indian Parliament. The failure of the movement for autonomous state led to the emergence violent groups advocating armed struggle, which is described later in this chapter. The Congress Party, often referred as the Congress-I, came back to power in the Council of Karbi Anglong in 2002.

4.11 Insurgency and Ethnic Conflicts

Along with democratic movements, groups subscribing the ideals of armed struggle also developed in Karbi Anglong. With the demand of a separate homeland outside Assam, insurgent activities were started with the formation of Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) and Karbi People's Force in 1994. In 1999, both the organization came under one banner and named itself as the United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity (UPDS). The UPDS blamed the ASDC for its failure to achieve Autonomous State through constitutional democratic means and started armed struggle for the creation of a separate state. In this armed struggle of the UPDS, a reign of violence, terror and extortion erupted in the region. In 2002 it came to a ceasefire agreement with Indian Government. However, in 2004 the anti-talk fraction of the UPDS formed Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLFF). During the period 2000-2005 several ethnic clashes took place between the Karbi and Kuki groups, between the Karbi and the Dimasa groups in Karbi Anglong.

Interestingly, the other ethnic groups living in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills districts formed its own insurgent groups. As such, violent activities began to be multiplied in number in the region. The KLNLF came to an agreement for peace-talk with the Indian Government in 2008 which is still on. However, a number of other extremist groups are still active in the region in present times.

After the coming of the UPDS into peace-talk with Indian state in 2004, a series of discussions was carried out and a peace-accord was signed in 2011. As per the peace-accord, Karbi Autonomous District Council will be reorganized through proposed creation of four new districts. The Council will be renamed as Karbi Anglong Autonomous Territorial Council. From 2016/17, the strength of the new territorial Council will be increased to 50 seats from the existing 30. A special economic package of Rs 350 crore (Rs 70 crore per annum) has also been promised by the Central Government as a part of the peace-accord. With this negotiation with the government, the UPDS declared to abandon its armed struggle for the autonomous state and promoted a new platform called People's Alliance for Peace Agreement (PAPA). However, in the election of the Council in 2011, PAPA could manage to win only 8 seats out of 26; and the Congress continued to remain in power.

Thus, the failure of the ASDC and its movement for an autonomous state, which received massive support of the Karbis, fractionalized and defocused the Karbi ethnic movement. During its good old days, the ASDC could earn the confidence of the various non-Karbi communities, including the Dimasas. But after the failure of the ASDC leadership in fulfilling the hopes of the common masses for a betterment of life in their territory, several fractional groups emerged. The present political scenario in this hills district of Assam is marked by fragmented activities, both violent and non-violent, by various groups of this kind which are multiplying in number.

It is to be noted that the institutionalized activities and the party-based politics do not always stand for the entire political consciousness of an ethnic group, though such elite institutionalizations do play crucial parts in mobilizing the very ethnic consciousness itself. Therefore, though the above story of the movement for an autonomous Karbi state came to an abrupt halt, the entire Karbi ethnic consciousness cannot be reduced to it. An important development that took place along with these organized movements has been the creation of a very distinct cultural consciousness among the Karbis, which can be read both as a by-product of, as well as an ally to, these organized political activities. This cultural activism, which seeks to locate and narrate the Karbis themselves through various aesthetics of textual, visual and material modes, is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Cultural Expressions of Karbi Ethnicity: Narratives and Iconography of the Homeland

Ethnonationalism can be looked as a kind of cultural revivalism. Every ethnic assertion movement stimulates its culture; re-defines and standardizes cultural expressions and also creates new ones. Memories are explored to commemorate the present. In the context of Karbi identity movement, the traditions of orality, materiality and performances – all are appropriated in the present to define and re-define the desired distinctiveness of the community. In doing this, it creates the binaries of self and other, genuine and spurious, sacred and profane, indigenous and foreign and so on, through cultural codes and narratives. How the different cultural genres are exploited to redefine the community which in turn helps in strengthening the Karbi ethnicity is discussed in this chapter.

In the very first visit to Diphu, the headquarter of the district of Karbi Anglong in Assam, and also the hub of Karbi political activism, this researcher was confronted in the doorway of the Diphu town with an artistic creation – a sculptural image. This sculptural portrayal is the heroic fight of *Rongpherpi Rongbe*- the brave Karbi lady, a semi-mythical figure, frequently referred by Karbis about her courage and bravery – how she protested and fought against the *Kachari* Kingdom against its prejudice and exploitation. This powerfully historicized narrative - the fight of *Rongpherpi Rongbe* though denotes the bravery of Karbi women in surface level, but it connotes that every Karbi folk should ready at any and every time to fight against any injustice to its nation.

Another such sculpture is installed at the other entrance to the town, through which people enter by train, is also marked by another sculpture. This second sculpture is a symbol, or perhaps more than that, – a sacred symbolic artifact, which in traditional Karbi society calls as *Bong*, which literally means the

'bottle gourd'. It is made from gourd shells. *Bong* is having significant importance- a part and parcel in traditional Karbi society. No ritual or worship to the traditional deities can be performed without *bong*. Even in Karbi *adam asar*¹, the *bong* is an indispensable pre-requisite. A mythical narrative is available that explains such deep semiotic significance of the gourd shell in the ethnic life world of the Karbis. According to this myth, the seeds of the gourd (*bong*) were gifted by a traditional Karbi God named as *Songnar Recho*, to the folks of the village *Muring-Morong*. The village Headman cultivated it in his land and within a short span of time the plants produced three types of gourds namely- *Bongkrok*, *Bongchum*, and *Langkok*. After it ripened, the seeds were removed and then smoked. The traditional Karbi society believes that since then, these three types of *Bong* are used in different holy occasions of the Karbis. The first one is used in *Adam-Asar*, the second in worship and the final one to retrieve the traditional rice beer from pot. This is, thus, a metaphor of sacredness in the traditional Karbi society, as no sacred occasion such as marriage or any other ritual can be performed in absence of the *bong*. Of course, use of the *bong* in different rituals and performances carries another set of narratives and myths, but, pasting a sacred cultural item in public places also carries connotative meanings. This probably, to let the visitors know the rich heritage of the community in one sense, or more in a political understanding expression of ethnic identity and ethnicity.

Another material artifact that powerfully resonates with Karbi identity, and which has become a very common iconic metaphor for Karbi ethnicity, is the *jambili athon* – a totem of the Karbis. This is a wooden craft, black in colour having a central axis and four lateral branches. In the top of the central axis a bird whose local name is *vojaru* is fixed. On the other lateral branches also other birds are fixed. In the top of the central axis another two small birds are attached. The *jamibili athon* is displayed publicly in different occasions like *chomankan*² and other socio-religious ceremonies of the Karbis. This

¹ It is traditional marriage system of the Karbis.

² It is a death ritual performed publicly by the Karbis.

particular, socio-religious artefact or more emphatically the totem of the society widely used in different other modern day to day activities. It is widely used in leaf gate, welcome gates of any meeting or event, or sometime as a token of gift to others. Keeping a miniature form of the *jambili athon* in each Karbi household is quite common. In two parks of the Diphu town, namely the Recreation Park which is adjacent to the Diphu town and the Samson Sing Engti Park in the middle of Diphu town one can see the *jambili athon* installed. The installation and display of such symbols in public spaces is a part of the official package of the state sponsored schemes, which signifies ethnicity as articulated from the above in an institutionalized manner.

A more ordinary article which is carried by the Karbis, irrespective of class, age and sex, is the Karbi traditional bag. From school-going kids to the office clerks, from the college / university students to activists – everyone carries bag which has become a popular marker of Karbi-ness for outsiders and the Karbis themselves. Small-scale industries, self-help groups produce and sell such bags. This quintessential textile product contains the *jambili athon* is knitted on it, with the decorated phrase “KARBI ANGLONG” along with it. There are also pieces clothing in the forms of jackets for boys and girls where similar motifs are incorporated. Such material practices are a testimony to the Karbi ethnic consciousness at the popular level – which is not only politically satisfying but commercially profitable too. Such ethnicized aesthetics, displayed both in public as well as private spheres, can be understood as a part of the larger institutionalized text of the renewed Karbi ethnicity in current times.

In the following pages, some of such sites of cultural articulations are described where the various kinds of collective imaginations and negotiations of the Karbis pertaining to their ethnic consciousness are reflected.

5.1 Oral Narratives: Homeland and its heroes

Various items of oral narratives, like myths, legends, tales, etc., play a significant role in bringing people of different strata to a similar platform, which ensures their collective continuity over many generations (Smith, 1986). In Karbi nationality formation, different oral accounts of creation and migration, narratives on mythical and legendary figures play a vital role in consolidating the Karbi ethnic identity. In the interviews taken during the fieldwork of this research, men and women of different age groups invariably referred to the stories of *Rongpherbi Rongbe*, *Rukasen*, *Thong Nokbe*, *Semsonsing Ingti* which they use as indispensable instruments for narrating their Karbi-ness.

The Karbis associate themselves to a singular *hemprek* (homeland) of their past through the institution of kingship. Karbis are believed to be divided into three territorial units in the hills. Those are *Chingthong*, *Nilip Ronghang* and *Amri Morlang*. As validated by various oral accounts and ritualistic practices, these three territorial jurisdictions were connected to the royal Karbi court and the Karbi king who was called *Lindokpo*. In village level, the *Sarthe* (village headman) practices his power e.g. distribution of land, solving of different disputes in the village, through the 'Me' (village council). The *Sarthe* is taken over from *Haway* to see the affairs of numbers of villages. In the hierarchical order *haway* is superseded by *Pinpo* who had the access to the Royal court and the *lindokpo* of the Karbis resided in the capital Ronghang Rongbong³. After the formation of Autonomous Council, the *Sarthe* and *Haway* is incorporated in the administrative set up (Borbara, 2008). A lump-sum amount of money is arranged by the Autonomous Council as pension to the current *Lindokpo*.

The existence of Karbi kingship system and the high regard of the *Lindokpo* in Karbi society give the scope to memorize the glorious past and a *Hemprek*. In

³ Ronghang Rongbong is the capital of traditional Karbi king. It is nowadays modernized keeping the traditional flavour through the MP fund by Dr. Jayanta Rongpi.

the process of ethnic mobilization such executed memoirs effectively validate the idea of Karbi homeland.

During my fieldwork in Karbi Anglong, different varieties of oral narratives were found which relate to the issues like origin and migration of the Karbis, heroic legends, religious beliefs and ritualistic practices. Regarding the origin of the Karbis, most respondents referred to a creation myth which describes the Karbis as people born out of a mythical egg. This etymological narrative is also performed through a song called the *Mosera*⁴ song. The song elaborates how the Karbis were born, after series of difficulties, from the egg laid by a mythical bird named *voplakkpi*. This bird has not been identified with any of the species found in the real world. An interesting aspect of this origin myth is that it describes the Ahoms, the Khasis and the Nagas as the peoples who were also born out of the same egg – articulating a shared point of origin among these different communities.

In my interviews, some respondents talked about their religious practices which are distinct from similar activities practiced by surrounding communities. Some of the respondents identified themselves as Hindus or Christian whereas other sections preferred to call themselves as *Hemphu Mukhrang*. There are differences of opinion about their affiliations with institutionalized religions, particularly with the Hindusim, which often crop up in public debates. A common hegemonic perspective is to treat them as backward Hindus, which is reflected in some of the governmental census operations since colonial times. However, a relatively recent emic perspective taken by some of the Karbis is that they were actually the followers of their own distinct type of animism which had nothing to do with Hinduism or any other such big institutionalized religions. Because of such dichotomies, the Karbis themselves are seen to be involved in their own census and documentations. What is largely agreed upon now is that the Karbis were

⁴ *Mosera* is a lengthy narrative describes the origin and migration ordeal of the Karbis.

initially the followers of their own animistic faith, but in later times some of them took affiliations under Hinduism and Christianity. There are still followers of the traditional faith who worship the Karbi deity *Hemphru-Mukrang* as the supreme power, in addition to other different deities on different ritual occasions. Dharam Singh Teron argues that “Karbi belief system is basically composed of the ancestor worshipping, ‘worship of household deities, ‘territorial deities’ and the death ritual or ‘*karhi*. Particularly it is the *Hemphru-Mukrang* duo that dominates the Karbi pantheon” (Teron 2011, 82-83). Mr. Teron, who is a political leader of the ASDC fraction and a cultural activist, has further argued that it was the census legacy which converted the animist Karbis to Hindu. He also asserts that there is no equivalent term for the religion in Karbi language though a Sanskrit derivative ‘*dhorom*’ is used in the modern vocabulary. At one point, some Karbis were in favour of a clear demarcation between the followers of the traditional Karbi faith and the ones who resorted to Hinduism or Christianity by labelling the followers of the traditional faith as *Honghari*. The assumption is that the term *Honghari* was used by Baptist Missionaries to make a clear cult distinction between Christian Karbis and the traditional Karbis, where Christian Karbis were known as *Sikur*. However, avoiding all such old terminologies, many traditional Karbis nowadays prefer to identify themselves as the follower of *Hemphru-Mukrang*

The legend of Rongpherpi Rongbe is another narrative which was frequently referred by many respondents in my fieldwork. As this legend goes, the original name of Rongpharpi Rongbe was Kareng Rongpharpi, and she was the wife of On Teron and the mother of Thong Teron (popularly known as *Thong Nokbe*). Thong Teron is one of the legendary heroes of the Karbis. They lived in a village called Rong-teplong under the rules of Kachari (Dimasa) Kingdom. During the period, the Dimasa king reared tigers as his domesticated pets. In order to feed the tiger cubs, the king used to send his soldiers to collect Human milk which was fed to the hungry cubs of the king. One day, Kareng Rongpharpi went for collecting firewood’s along with her

friends; and after returning to her house, she kept the firewood and her axe in front of the courtyard. As her child was hungry and was crying, she hurriedly took her baby from a *ja-e* (a swinging seat for baby's sleep) to feed her milk. At that moment the soldiers of Dimasa King arrived at the house of Kareng Rongpharpi to collect the milk. By seeing the soldiers, Kareng Rongpharpi requested them to stay away for some time as she was feeding milk to her child. But the soldiers didn't care to oblige her and hold the hand of Kareng Rongpharpi to draw her milk by forcible means. Angered by the acts of the soldiers, she suddenly took hold of an axe which was near to her and hacked them to death. After hacking them to death, she realized that the Dimasa would surely retaliate for the loss of their soldiers. So she requested and recommended her people to flee instead of fighting, as she knew that they would never be able to withstand the enemy strength. So, to escape from the enemy attack, she and her fellow people flee from their land and went across the Kopili river. Some believe, they crossed the Kopili River with the help of a big python which was sent by god for their help. In another version of belief, Kareng Rongpharpi stroke the river with a *harpi* (weaving implements) and the river stopped flowing for some time, giving a passage to Kareng Rongpharpi and her people. After crossing the Kopili river, she and her people established their village at Koka near Amreng. Current believe of the Karbis is that this was the first settlement of the Karbis under the leadership of Kareng Rongpharpi that led to the establishment of the Karbi Kingdom at Rongkhang Area. Thus, from this flee, she is known as Rongpharpi Rongbe (*Rongbe* means 'Flee' in Karbi) by the Karbi people. The story of protest of the brave Rongpherpi against the Kachari kingdom became a binding narrative in the Karbi nationality discourse.

Rongpherpi's son Thong Nokbe Teron, as mentioned earlier, became another legendary hero of the Karbis. Thong Nokbe belonged to the Teron clan. Nokbe means a warrior or hero in Karbi. The legend says that, he was the bodyguard of Jayanta Narang – the king of the nearby Jaintia kingdom. Thong Nokbe was

popular after he did *Khatvi atovar kepan* (cleaning jungles between two villages) for which the Karbis could flee from the Jaintia Kingdom. Thong Teron killed the King of Ghilani (Borthol) Recho-Ikpo whom the Jaintia King could not defeat. The popular imagination about Thong Nokbe is that he was a man of bigger physique than a normal man. He was killed by the soldiers of the Jaintia king as they could not accept the fact that the Jaintia king honoured him more than the Jaintia soldiers. In the conspiracy of the soldiers, Thong Nokbe was told to pluck mangoes from a mango tree; and during this plucking, the soldiers killed him with arrows and brought the head of Thong before the king saying that the head is of Recho-Ikpo's. But the king could figure it out and punished the soldiers.

The legendary narratives about the heroics of Thnog Nokbe, his tragic death and the honours he received from the King of a nearby kingdom – all these have made him a national hero for the Karbis. It gives them pride in memorizing and recounting the heroism of their leader. A statue of the legendary figure is placed in Donkamukam of Karbi Anglong district.

The story of *Rukasen* is also an important folk narrative in the Karbi folklore discourses. As per the narrative circulated among them, Rukasen was the first person to establish a village among the Karbis. The story holds that the real name of Rukasen was Kasen Teron. In Karbi “*Ru*” means grandfather, so, the Karbi people used to call him as “Rukasen” meaning grandfather Kasen, and later he was popularly known as Rukasen (Bey 2004, 15). He established the first village containing thousands of houses in the Nongkular plateau and the name of the village was Muring Rongsopi. As an organizational unit of the community, the village has a significant importance in Karbi society. The traditional Karbi society runs through *Me*, hence, villages play a vital role in decision making. This practice is prevalent among the Karbis. So, the story of Rukasen is also an important component in Karbi political discourse.

Rukasen organized three *Jirsong* (Youth Dormitory) in his villages, one at the middle of the villages and other two at the two ends of the village. The youth

were imparted the cultural activities and social activities so that they become capable members of the community. Rukasen is known for his efforts to create a mutually acceptable social setup at the village-level of the Karbi community. During his time, which is claimed to be as long as nine hundred years from 1300 B.C to 400 B.C., the people had adopted Kasen's ideology and created for themselves the similar status of Kasen (Terang 2003, 5). Many years later, when Karbis had migrated to Salween river valley in China, there appeared some influential persons who had been adopting the ideology of Kasen for reforming their own societies. They were Ridem Timung, Wejeng Inghi, Thanglong Ingti and others. Among them Ridem Timung was the best ruler. During that time, most of the tribes of Tibetan region did not take rice as food. Perhaps such food had not been introduced or paddy cultivation was yet to be developed in the region. The people had generally used arum, yam, potato, chosot (a kind of arum) and bajara as the major food (*ibid*).

After departing from China, Ridem and Moidong (Grandson of Rukasen), had established villages in the eastern part of the Pengja Hills in Burma territory, each of the Village had comprising more than thousand houses as per the Ideology of Kasen and they lived happily after the treaty of Khmer War. There was a myth that Rongsopo or Teron Rongsopo, the son of Moidong Teron, saw a dream of beautiful and charming goddesses who were playing in a river bank of Marle-Abi of river Kuleng. And the myth is believed to be the origin of the paddy in the Karbi societies.

It is noteworthy in most of the above narratives that they are centered upon heroic individuals who had committed extraordinary actions towards the pride and continuity of the Karbi community. Creation of national heroes/heroines or converting mythical, legendary or historical figures to a national icon is a recurring activity in any nationalist movement or ethnic assertion. The narratives of sacrifice, bravery and intelligence of the distinguished leaders of a community contribute greatly in invoking and consolidating a shared sense of belonging among the members of the community. While examining the folk heroes in the Tamil heroic ballads, Blackburn asserted that "the folk hero is

one who protects what the folk group values and/or challenges what the group devalues” (Blackburn 1978, 131). The hero narratives of the Karbis aptly reflect this fact, as the characters of Kareng Rongpherpi, Thong Nokbe Teron and Rukasen embody the current ethnonational sentiments of the Karbis. It is also interesting to note that in the narratives of Kareng Rongpherpi and Thong Nokbe Teron, their heroics are substantially by virtue of their victimhood due to inter-community confrontations. This theme of *victim as heroes* can be read as a core theme in the larger text of the Karbi ethnicity where the community itself is portrayed as a victim of a dominant hegemonic nationalism.

5.2 Narratives of Contestation:

Ethnic assertion is often seen to involve some kind of contestation, negation or negotiation with an existing dominant-hegemonic discourse. Right from the cases of Indian nationalism to sub-nationalisms or the little nationalisms, a counter-discourse is evident at all the respective levels which contests against the hegemonic impositions.

In almost all the ethnic mobilizations in Assam, the Assamese language-based nationalism has been identified as the immediate dominant hegemonic discourse. The various ethnic groups have actually produced their respective ethnic identities by articulating differences with, and distances from, the so-called non-tribal, elitist and Assamese-language-centric nationalism. Sometimes this is accomplished by taking direct allegiance to the discourse of the so-called sanskritic mainland India or beyond. For example, in the context of language, the Bodos and the Karbis negated the Assamese script and adopted Devnagari and Roman scripts respectively. The Karbi ethnicity formation demonstrates a series of counter-hegemonic discourses, largely to negate the dominance of the Assamese nationalism.

In earlier times, the Karbis were popularly known as Mikirs. However, different literatures show that the term Mikir was an exonym given by the

non-Karbis, whereas the Karbis themselves liked to be called as the Karbis. There are different stories about the origin of the term *Mikir*. These stories were popularly accepted by the community and by others also. In the peak of Karbi nationalism, an alternative discourse was created by the Karbi elites regarding the origin of the term *Mikir*. The popular discourse circulated in the society is that when the Karbis entered Assam they had a domestic cat with them. Unfortunately the cat was lost. When they were searching for the cat they confronted with another group who demanded their identity. The question was unintelligible for the Karbis; and they misunderstood it as a question on what they were searching for. Therefore, they answered with the word *mengkiri* (cat). The other group thought *mengkiri* was the name of their group (i.e. the Karbis). This *mengkiri* later became *Mikir*. In an alternative narrative, it is said that a Karbi King named *Thireng Wareng* set up his capital at Dimapur who had a daughter named *Mekri*. She was married to a Naga prince. The Nagas could not pronounce *Mekri* and pronounced as *Mikir*.

However, Teron and Phangcho, two of the native Karbi intellectuals of current times, provide a different interpretation of the term *Mikir* in which they have traced the root of the term in the organizational setup of Karbi villages. Their version goes as follows:

Our search for the meaning of *Mikir* or the nearest to it has led us to reconsider the Karbi village traditions. A traditional Karbi village- *Rong* is organized around the institution of a village headman who is known as a '*sarthe*' (among the hill Karbis) and *bangthe* or *rongthe* (among the plains dwelling Karbis). Members of every household of the village are called '*mekar*'. The senior most of all the *Mekars* is known as '*mekar asar*' (hill Karbis) who holds a position in the village court presided over by the *Sarthe/bangthe*. It could therefore be possible that a Karbi introduced himself to an outsider only as a '*mekar*' or an ordinary member of a Karbi village. In a sense, every Karbi is a '*mekar*' and in those days of communication barrier erected by unintelligible linguistic differences, the outsider simply took the tribe to be only as '*mekar*', which in course of time got corrupted

to give the word 'mikir' ” (Teron & Phangcho 2008, 68-69).

Thus the genesis of the term *Mikir* is a debated issue. Charles Lyall in the monograph entitled “The Mikir” also mentions that the *Mikirs* calls themselves as Arleng or Men. The name *Mikir* was given by the Assamese. However, the explanation given by Teron and Phangcho removes the Assamese authorship in describing and labelling the Karibis as *Mikirs*.

Bishnu Prasad Rabha, one of the doyens of Assamese culture, considers the Mikirs as the discoverer of Assam – for which he describes them in one of his Assamese articles as the Columbus of Assam. Rabha wrote:

...the Mikirs were the aborigines in Assam. They were the first one to explore the hills, caves, rivers, plains and the forests of Assam. They are the Columbus, the discoverer of Assam.....(Bora & Das 2008, 934. Translated by researcher.)

In his typical reconstruction of the human evolution and migration in Assam, Rabha poured all his praise for the 'brave' Karbis; and categorically ascertained that the “Assamese nation is ever-grateful to the Mikirs” (*ibid*) for starting the human settlement in Assam. However, as mentioned earlier, Rabhas treatment of the Karbis as the Columbus of Assam has been subject to a different kind of political reading by a section of the Karbis in current times.

....the advent of Columbus in the Americas resulted only in the cruel colonisation and devastation of the indigenous population and their histories, the analogy that indigenous people had everywhere the same fate at the hands of the rulers is a point we must all agree upon. For like Columbus, we Karbis did not 'colonize' but instead, they have been colonized, divided, dispossessed” (Teron 2011,3).

In this reading, Columbus is the representative of the European colonizers, who became responsible for severe ethnic cleansing in America. Moreover, Rabhas text is believed to be negated also because of the fact that Rabha

himself is a prominent icon of Assamese nationalism. That this negation of the Columbus legacy is a serious issue in the counter-hegemonic discourse of the Karbis is evident in the official reference to it mentioned in the website of the Karbi Youth Festival – which is described later in this chapter.

The confrontation with the Assamese hegemony is also visible in their abandoning of using the Assamese language and literary/artistic products. The elderly bilingual Karbis, who took their early education in Assamese medium, could read and write the Assamese language. But this is no longer the case now. What was found from the responses received in my interviews in several areas of the Karbi Anglong is that the number of adults who read and write Assamese is very minimal, though speaking Assamese as a lingua franca is still there. Consumption of Assamese books and newspapers, movies and music is practically abandoned now. In such matters, the choice has shifted towards Hindi and English.

5.3 Material Culture

The material culture is a significant part of any culture. In ethnic assertion movements, material culture plays a pivotal role in articulating and appropriating ethnicity and nationalism as it signifies the distinctiveness of the group. In the case of Karbi ethnicity, different material cultural forms are seen to be used extensively in public and private domains. As mentioned earlier, *Bong*, *Jambili Athon* etc. are some of such cultural items which have become powerful symbols of the recent Karbi identity.

A replica of the *Bong* (gourd-shell) is visible at the entrance of the Diphu town, giving a symbolic meaning of entrance into the Karbi world. *Bong* is used in different ways and in different holy occasions. The word *Bong* means ‘younger brother’ in Karbi language and the reason behind calling the gourd shell as *Bong* bears another myth, which is often narrated in folk songs called ‘*Bong Keman*’ or ‘*Bong-keplang alun*’. According to the myth, once there was

a Karbi village named *Muring Rongsopi* located on the bank of the *Kuleng River*. *Rang Mukrang* was the chief of the village and had five children. *Kareng* and *Kading*, the two daughters of *Rang Mukrang* invented *Thap* (medicinal cake used in the preparation of rice beer), by following a dream which they had seen. Some days after the invention of *thap* and *rice beer*, *Rang Mukrang* had gone to the river to take bath. While washing his face, his teeth fell down in the river water and it remained floating. By seeing this, he picked up his teeth from the river water and brought home. Then he placed it in his garden compound. Just after a few days, a green creeper came out from his teeth, and in course of time two flowers bloom from it, and the two flowers produced bottle shaped round fruits. After the maturation of the fruits, he plucked the fruits and the inner portions were taken out. Then he cleaned the fruits and left them to the hanging platform called *Rap* near the fire place to get them dried up. He made two vessels out of them. When asked by his daughters about the name of those vessels, *Rang Mukrang* replied that it should be called as *Bong* or brother since the vessel had originated from his tooth and he considered the vessel as his son. Thus from that day, the vessel or gourd shell is known as *Bong* in Karbi society. Those first two vessels were named as *Bongchim* and *Bongdam* or damdam.

The making of *Bong* is simple, requires only the fruits of the bottle-gourd creeper; but it takes a considerably long span of time, around five to six months, to complete the whole process of *Bong* making. The process of *Bong* making starts with the plucking of matured gourds; and then the gourds are made little hollow at the tips of their necks. After that, salts and water are put for decaying of the inners flesh of the gourds. This is followed by the removal of the decayed flesh and seeds with the help of water and bamboo strips. Now it becomes hollow as the whole inner portion of the gourd is removed and only the hard rind remains. Though, the gourd has been hollowed, it is not ready for used. In order to make it usable, it is kept on the *Rap* (Bamboo-made hanging structure over the fireplace), to make it properly dried-up and hardened so that it becomes durable. Generally the heat of the fire dries them up and makes

them harder whereas the smoke gives them a dusty black colour, but it is the dusty dark colour which gives the *Bong* a glitter look. After completing all those process, the *Bong* is now ready to use.

The Karbis mainly used *Bong* to keep the traditional rice beer, which is also an inseparable part of Karbi traditional culture. The offering of rice beer is compulsory in almost all the rituals of the Karbis, including the various rites of passage like birth, marriage, and death and other important occasions. Apart from such occasions, rice beer is also used in welcoming the guest; and is offered to give an honour to respected elderly persons like, maternal uncle, priest, or other dignitaries. Rice beer has an important role in the celebration of any festival whether it is religious or secular; and all the offerings of rice beer are to be made invariably with the help of a *Bong*. In rural Karbi society, gourd-shell is frequently used, along with other bamboo implements, for storage of liquids like rice beer and water. Though modern utensils are used in the kitchens of urbanized families, the symbolic use of the *Bong* or at least its name is still in practice. In many of such urban households, *bong* is found as a decorative piece or as an object of paintings and pictures hanged in the drawing room. In different leaflets, brochures and calendars the picture of *bong* is quite common.

Jambili Athon is another socially and culturally important symbol of the Karbis. It is widely used as a decorative item at every Karbi household, sometimes knitted as a motif in the traditional bags and jackets, or as miniature forms to be given to guests as a token of love and affection (Teron 2008, 104).

Jambili Athon (*Jambili* means *bag* in Karbi and *athon* means *branch, stand* or a place to keep things) is a traditional woodcraft of the Karbis, and is entirely made from the wood of a particular tree called *Bengvoi* tree. The typical structure of this item is about 4 metre in height; and consists of a central axis which is called *Athonpi* and a whorl of four small branches called *aro-athon*. At the top of the central axis is placed a local bird known as *Vojaru* (racket-

tailed Drongo); and the four branches below are fixed with another local bird known as *Vorale*. A third variety of bird, called *Voleng* (woodpecker), is placed on the main axis below each of the lateral four branches. Seeds of *Chuselok* are fixed to the head of the birds to resemble eyes. The Karbis regard the *Vojaru* as the king of the birds, who is always followed by other ordinary birds (*atoi-ani* – the ordinary birds). In *Jambili Athon*, the *Vojaru* is portrayed as the Karbi King, who always protect his people (symbolized by other smaller birds viz., *Vorale* and *Voleng*) and enjoys peaceful co-existence amongst themselves in their independent places reflected by five branches. The *Voleng* even collects food for the *Vojaru* (King). It is believed that the *Vojaru* knows the language of all birds and can foretell the coming danger. The *Jambili Athon* is painted with a black dye, extracted from plants called *So-ik* or *Kung-Kung*. Fresh twig of the plants are put to fire, which in turn produce boiling sap in the other end. This sap is collected in a container, which turns black on cooling. Mustard oil is added to the sap, properly mixed and painted uniformly on the woodcraft. After drying, it is again rubbed with a soft clean cloth to give a shiny black colour. The *Jambili Athon* is decorated with an array of different objects, such as, cowries, shoots of certain plants, glasses, combs, etc. Carvings and ornaments however are not uniforms in all *Jambili Athon*. It is crafted by a skilled person called *baroi*. The origin and progressive use of *Jambili Athon* is based on legends. Some Karbis believe that it was used first as a stand to hang the bags of betel-nuts on it, in the fields while working in the field. Later, the *Jambili Athon* was exhibited at the *Chomangkan* (death ceremony of the Karbis) in a village under *Chinthong Rongbong*. Due to its beautiful carvings, the implement was highly praised by the social dignitaries of the region who decided to keep the craft with them by seizing it. To legitimate their act, they made a declaration that the common Karbis are not entitled to keep such a precious craft. The practice of exhibiting *Jambili athon* at the *Chomangkan* festival continued since then. On this occasion, the *klengsarpo* (the youth chief of the Karbis) raises the *Jambili Athon* on a sacred ground amidst beating of the traditional drums. The woodcraft remains exhibited from morning to evening. At the base of *Jambili*

Athon, the singers called *Lunsepi* sing the folk songs relating to the origin of the craft. A pair of *Chong-nok* (shield and sword) is also kept at the base of the *Jambili athon*. Moreover, the *Jambili athon* is also exhibited during the crowning ceremony of new traditional chief, in welcoming the dignitaries and respected persons. The *Jambili Athon* symbolizes the highest honour bestowed upon a person among the Karbis. As per customary laws, only selected cadres like *baroi*, *habe* and *pinpo* are entitled to keep the *Jambili Athon* in their houses. On necessary occasions, the incumbent parties can hire the craft for exhibition in *Chomangkan* and other such events. As understood by the Karbis now, this artifact depicts the philosophy of life and death, social institutions and religious practices and is thus claimed to be the symbol of pride and cultural identity of the Karbi people (Teron 2008, 105).

The dress pattern, specially the dresses of the women-folks is another site attached with Karbi ethnic discourse. Women are considered as the carriers of culture and tradition. In one hand, they are the pride and honour of community; and on the other hand, they create the feminine body in the community – how they should look like, what they should do and should not, what they should wear and what they should not. Ethnonational discourse standardizes the body and behaviour of woman. The bio-politics⁵ specially controlling of woman's body, sexuality through different institutions like family⁶, marriage⁷, kinship⁸ (Rubin, 2006) are celebrated in nationality politics. In identity politics, women are imagined and decorated in specific national dresses. In the ethnic politics of Assam, illustrations can be seen in all the ethnic formations, like *chadar mekhela* of Assamese women, *dakhana* of the Bodo women, the *pini-pekok* of the Karbi women, etc. A news was in circulation regarding the decision of a college Authority of a college of lower Assam, where it was decided that students of the college must wear uniform in

⁵ Foucault conceptualized the idea of bio-politics which literally means controlling of one's body.

⁶ Partha Chatterjee looks the role of family in Indian nationalism context.

⁷ Levi-Strauss argues that Marriage is the oldest form of gift exchange.

⁸ Gayle Rubin's in her essay 'Trafficking Women: Political Economy of Sex' criticizes the kinship and gender discrimination.

the college premises. Particular dress code was also decided for male and female. Against the decision, many Bodo organizations came out in agitation demanding that *dakhana* should be dress for Bodo girl students in the college premises, where they didn't talk about the dress of men. Such gender discrimination seems to be not an isolated case here, as the ethnic and national discourses often tend to validate such discrimination by hegemonic imposition of male and patriarchal subjectivities.

In the projects of ethnicity or identity politics, women always play a pivotal role; from taking the burden of preserving the cultural identity of the group to giving momentum to the ethnic upsurge in public spheres. Gender differentiation can be seen as an important part of any ethnic repertoire – which defines boundaries and reinforces ethnic differences. It is the culture that defines the masculinity and femininity, and the possible relations between the two, in any community. The 'proper' behaviour sanctioned by the society determines who belong to the collectivity and who do not. Women are considered as the carriers of culture – the culture of the community. It is ensured by marriage and divorce. It also ensures that the children born to those women are not only biologically but also symbolically within the boundaries of collectivity. Different women participate in ethnic movements in various ways according to their class, age and marital status. The role of women as reproducers, not only of the labour force and/or of the future subjects of the state, but also as the reproducers, biologically and ideologically, of the national collective and its boundaries. Women are thus unpaid keepers of culture and tradition. In a common parlance, it is assumed that in the project of identity politics/ethnicity or nationalism men and women are constructed differently as well both are included differently in the project. At such juncture, question arises whether ethnicity is a gender-neutral phenomenon or it actually validates the existing gender discriminations for the sake of tradition and identity.

In my fieldwork of this research, interviews were taken regarding the dress of the Karbi women. Both men and women were of the opinion that the Karbi

women should wear the traditional dress only to preserve the culture of the community. Especially in some occasions e.g. agitation programmes, community function, festivals, and rituals they must go with the traditional dresses. Many elderly women said that in their past they had used to wear *chadar-mekhela* also. But the girls of the young generation now seldom wear the *chadar-mekhela*; they hardly know how to wear it.

The material world of the urbanized middle class and elites appears to be a fusion of tradition and modernity, or it can perhaps be called as a kind of ethnicized modernity. Modernity in India, in substantial parts, is experienced as the acceptance of western materials and lifestyles at the cost of the traditional ones. However, in many ethnic situations, a hybridized version of tradition and modern, or local and the western, is seen to be in practice in the life-world of the affluent ethnic class. This is also applicable to the urban elites among the Karbis who prefer to make a more instrumental use of their Karbi ethnic identity in selected occasions. The symbolic or tokenistic use of items like Karbi muffler, traditional jackets and bags was mentioned earlier. Similarly, food and eating, internal decoration of domestic spaces, literature, arts and entertainment are also some of the sites where the urban elites demonstrate their traditional *ethnic-ness*.

5.4 Festivals:

Festival is an important component of any ethnic discourse, particularly in the sense that it serves as an effective advertisement of the ethnic identity. Ethnontionalism sometimes even invents festivals if necessary. *Bihu*, the agrarian ritual of Assam was converted into a national festival during 20th century only. Before that, Bihu had been looked down upon by the Assamese gentry till the late 19th and early 20th Century, considering it as vulgar of the illiterate folk (Dhekiyal Phukan in Tamuli 2005, 80). But, in due course Bihu became the national festival of Assam. The Karbi ethnicity also exploits different traditional festivals and rituals to show its distinctiveness. Some of

such traditional events which are now getting cultural prominence are *Hachakekan*, *Sojun Puja Rongker* etc. The Karbi Youth Festival is an example of officially created festival for promotion of ethnic identity.

In traditional Karbi society, *Hachakekan* is an important festival. It is a post-harvest festival incorporating songs and dances. After the harvesting is over, the Karbis perform the *sok-keroi* ritual where the dance of "*Hachakekan*" is performed. The dance is usually led by a singer called "*Lunsepo*", remembering the great Karbi social reformer *Rukasen* by singing the song of "*Lokhi Keplang*" (Origin of paddy). Young people stretch their hands in the form of bird's wing, tilting this way and that way; with synchronized movement of their feet. It typically starts in the evening and may continue for the whole night by changing of the dancing pairs one after another. The festival is best expressed through songs and dance. Nowadays, the "*sok keroi*" ritual is almost abandoned, but the dance of *Hachakekan* has become a standardized and stand-alone dance form. Affluent families invite the dance troupes after completion of the harvest, where village people also participate in the fun and merrymaking. It is believed that the dance of *Hachakekan* was first conducted in the house of Manik Bey-dum, and this tradition of *Hachakekan* is being continued since then, in every household of the Karbis, after the harvest.

5.4.1. *Rongker*

Rongker is an important religious festival of the Karbis which is observed annually in the village to satisfy the territorial deities for good harvesting as well as for over-all well-being in future. Though there is no fixed time and date for its celebration, the *Rongker* is mostly performed in the beginning of the year i.e. in the month of January or February which is practically the beginning of the *Jhum* cultivation.

Observation of the *Rongker* festival is done with the consensus of the people of the village as a whole. All the requirements of the rituals are assembled together by the people of the village. For performing this festival, first, the people of the village meet at the *Sarthe's* (village Headman) house and discuss plans for effective celebration of the festival. The time and date of the festival is fixed after thorough discussion. As the festival involves animal-sacrifices and community-feasts, the amount of contribution to be made by each family is fixed in this discussion. Works such as collection of money and materials like bamboo, woods, etc. are done by the male members; and the women are usually entrusted in making *horlang* (rice beer) and *hor arak* (wine). The fixed place of performing the ritual is near the *Sarthe's* house in the village known as *Rongker Anglong*. The place is believed to be sacred and is never used for other ordinary purposes. The cleaning of the place and the preparation of the altars are done by the male folks.

The festival begins with the rituals performed the previous night of the day of the festival, when the elderly folks of the village assemble to perform the ritual called *Seh Kasadi*. *Seh Kasadi* is the ritual performed to invite the deities to attend the festival on the following day. The ritual is performed by the *Kurusr* (Priest). He invites the deities by pouring *Horlang* in a leaf and offer to the deities with enchanting hymns.

On the next day, the core festival begins with the *Kasadi* again, at the *Sarthe's* house. The male folk usually leave home for the place of performance and the women folk stay behind to cook rice for the feast to be followed after the ritual. On reaching the place of performing the ritual, the worship of the deities is again started by the *Kasadi* by invoking the deities. After that, the each of deities is worshipped one by one in the proper sequence. The deities worshipped during the *Rongker* vary from village to village as well as from region to region. However, the ancestor spirit like *Hemphu*, *Rasinja* and *Mukrang* and deities like *Longle A Hi-e* are worshipped in common.

In the festival, the deities are worshipped for the protection of the village from the natural calamities, diseases, and the wellbeing of the village people. It is done for maintaining peace and harmony with other communities around. Permission is sought from the deities for collecting goods from the forest and the fields, for the livelihood of the people. The goddess *Longle ahi-e* is worshipped for the protection of the crops in the field and to add manure to the soil of the land of cultivation. The people have deep faith that it is very necessary to appease the deities to have a good cultivation and to maintain peace and harmony among the people. As it is mentioned earlier, there was no fix date of celebrating the festival. However, when ASDC came to power in 1989, they fixed it on 5th January of every year. Since then, it was celebrated on that specific date in many villages. But the Congress party, after coming to power after the year 2000, changed the date to 5th February of every year, declaring it as a holiday on the calendar of the Council.

Besides promoting and celebrating such cultural activities, the drive for preservation and recording of such cultural traits is also going on. In the souvenir published by Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) in 2013, it has mentioned that the Department of Cultural Affairs keep on organizing trainings and workshops in different places on traditional folk song, folk dance, traditional drum beatings etc. Moreover, it also produced CDs, films, audio albums to preserve, protect and promote Karbi culture. Such productions and trainings standardize the folkloric forms and validate their authenticity.

5 4.2. Karbi Youth Festival:

An institutionalized enactment of the Karbi ethnicity through various cultural performances, at the macro level, was started in the late eighties of the twentieth century, under the name and style of Karbi Youth Festival (KYF). This has been a formal, and the most visible, cultural event celebrated every year to preserve and propagate the Karbi ethnic identity. Within the visual and

performative aesthetics of the KYF, one can discern the celebration of the Karbi selfhood and contestation/negation/negotiation of/with the dominant hegemonic discourses which the Karbis are always subjected to.

The official website of the KYF reflects this fact when it webcasts the following texts in its homepage:

“Once in the valleys, hill and plain of North-Eastern geography, there was a place called “Rongbin” and with the Rongbin the Karbis came the demographic movement in this last tip of south-east Asian cauldron was intense. Small indigenous groups were jostling each other from Vietnam to Burma, this was the period when Hindustan was being articulated from the earlier Bharatvarsh, small nationalities like the Karbis were becoming part of the fringe in the pantheon of greater Indian historiography. However, in the Indian North-East karbis didn’t have to jostle with. Being the earliest settlers, their existence was in complete consonance with nature, green forests, rivers and Karbis never acted like Coumbus! But with the onslaught of ‘civilization’ every Karbi arlung has become marginalized. Once a Karbi rong (village) Kuwehonchi (Guwahati) is now a concrete jungle. Only the names of some dingy and obscure by-lanes betray the wounded past. Once a Karbi habitat, Kajir-arong has become distant and disdainful. Karbis are everywhere, from Manipur, Nagaland Cacher, Meghalaya to Arunachal, We are not exclusive...rather we’ve been always inclusive, embracing culture and people...but only paid back in discrimination, displacement and dispossession! Today, the land that we call ours is encroached upon and there are more strangers than kinsmen. Where have they all gone?? We are still looking for them, in the hills and plains and valleys!! Welcome to Karbi Anglong...”⁹

This hyper-textual piece can be read as an effective summary of the core Karbi ethnic sentiments in current times. It begins by specifically locating the Karbis within the historical, geographical and ethno-demographic particularities of the North-East India. By calling the Karbis themselves as *small nationality* in the fringe of the greater Indian historiography, a negotiation has been made between the perception of the Karbis as distinct and self-sufficient in one hand,

⁹ <http://karbiyouthfest.wordpress.com/2009/09/23/12/>

and a part of the greater *Bharatvarsh* (India) on the other. This also involves a valorization of the Karbi past where the Karbis are seen as the first settlers in Assam. Unlike the other communities who had to jostle with each other in the great political dramas of Indian history, the emergence and continuity of the Karbis on Indian soil were rather in full harmony with the *forests* and *rivers* of the land. The reference to Columbus has something to do with a highly politicized reading of an article written by Bishnu Prasad Rabha which was discussed earlier in this chapter. What is more eloquent in this text is the betrayal caused by *civilization* that caused the marginalization of the Karbis in later times. There are also claims that some of the important locations of present times, like Guwahati and Kaziranaga, were once part of the Karbi territory.

Karbi Youth Festival is celebrated during 15-19 February every year. A permanent site has been developed near to Diphu town at Taralangso. The Karbi Cultural Society, which was established in 1977 to preserve and propagate Karbi culture among the youths, organized the KYF first in the late 1980's. By now, it has become a grand annual celebration of the Karbis to showcase their cultural resources publicly.

As evident in my interviews, the KYF is an important occasion for the Karbis, especially the younger generation. This provides a platform to explore the primordial ties and also to renew the existing ones between different generations and geographies.

5.5 Analysis of Karbi Culturalism

In a telling account, J. L. Dawar described how the nationalist discourse and cultural hegemony of the Indian state were transplanted through various bureaucratic machineries, institutional education, popular cultural means like radio and films, in the context of Arunachal Pradesh (erstwhile NEFA) after the independence of India. However, these strategic means and forms of the

nation-building process later became the “tool for counter-hegemonic project on the part of the subordinate sections of the society vis-à-vis the dominant group. It is thus an area of negotiation between the two within which dominant, subordinate and oppositional elements are 'mixed' in different combinations” (Dawar 2007, 68). Dawar’s observation in the context of Arunacha Pradesh can further be extended to the various contemporary ethno-cultural activisms in the North-East India, including the various cultural texts and performances of the Karbis mentioned above. These expressive cultural forms reflect the on-going negotiations of the concerned ethnic consciousness with the hegemonic forces – which are either in the form of nationalist impositions or, in recent times, the waves of globalization.

Investing in cultural symbolism for articulating ethnic identities is a common phenomenon in the politics of distinction in current times. Most often cultural products and performances are seen to be presented in spectacular forms to accomplish the desired political agendas, as evident particularly in the contexts like Karbi youth festival discussed above. Observing the fact that such ethnic spectacles are the events through which “a group represents itself to its own members and to non-members”, Bramadat has assigned four possible roles which these spectacles play in accomplishing the specific agenda of the concerned group. These four roles are: alternative economy of status, sites of dialogical self-definition, public education about ethnic identity and ethnic show business (Bramadat 2001, 3).

Bramadat’s scheme of analyzing ethnic spectacles fits well in interpreting the spectacular ethnicization of the Karbi cultural distinctiveness in current times. In relation to the first role what Bramadat calls as alternative economy of status, it can be said that the on-going cultural manifestations of the Karbis can be read as effective strategies to redefine its status as a distinct community within Assam and beyond. The high visibility provided by such cultural semiotics of the Karbis in post-independence times has successfully portrayed the Karbis as distinct and historically rooted community. The second role

played by such cultural exhibition as the sites of dialogical self-definition, in the context of the Karbis, can be attributed to the fact that these organized cultural performances indeed become a site to confront with the internal heterogeneity, hierarchy and differences (in terms of, e.g., language, geography, economy, clan/class, etc.). Internal negotiations regarding purity, authenticity, etc. are facilitated by these cultural celebrations. An important function that these cultural spectacles fulfil is the dissemination of the Karbi ethnic consciousness across different generations and geographies, for both the Karbis and the non-Karbis, which Bramadat calls as the public education about ethnic identity. The fourth function assigned by Bramadat is the ethnic spectacles as the instruments for ethnic show business. This is a crucial aspect of this entire cultural extravaganza which needs to be looked from the perspective of the profits which are more commercial than political. A definite pattern of the culture industry and the heritage market is noticeable in the Indian context, especially after the advent of globalization. This new pattern of commodification and consumption involves re-packaging of the cultural resources either for domestic consumption or to be exported abroad – which is evident in the increasing number of organized festivals, both governmental and private, and the various performance troupes which visit different parts of the world.

The above-mentioned cultural expressions, in the forms of narratives and iconography, seek to uplift the community towards a specifically politicized ethnicity. The primordial ties in terms of sharing knowledge and worldviews of the community which the members acquire before other identities (cultural citizenship), are lifted for national imagination. The colonial hangover and post-colonial disillusionment are the two factors that crucially determine such ethnic mobilizations. Ethnicity or nationalism as an ideology gets elevated with the socialization of ethnic markers. The religion, social memory, oral tradition, social institution, material culture or other expressive behaviours differentiate them from the intended *others*. Revisiting and reviving of those narratives and iconographic markers make stronger the sense of *ethnic-ness*

and gives the scope to the elites and to the ethnic leaders for making a nation within a nation. As ethnic nationalism always involves inclusion and exclusion of people in reference to a sacralized territorial space – the homeland, hence in Karbi ethnonationalism is extensively a case of homeland imagined.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to understand the ethnonational activism of Assam in its socio-historical perspectives, with special reference to the case of Karbi ethnicity. For accomplishing that, this study has been made to begin with a survey of the various theoretical perspectives, debates and ideas pertaining to the issue of ethnicity and nationalism, in the first chapter. In the second chapter, attempt has been made to trace the emergence of ethnic consciousness in Assam by historicizing the social formations in Assam in the medieval period; and then looking into the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial social-political developments. The third chapter has been a discussion on the leading ethnonational movements in Assam in the post-colonial times. Some of the claimed parameters of the on-going ethno-political narrations, such as indigeneity, territoriality etc, have been discussed and argued that the roots of these presently claimed ethnic attributes can be traced back to the colonial Rule by the British. This chapter has also looked into culture as an instrument used in articulating ethnic sentiments through the process of ethnicization of cultural distinctions and political differences. Initiating the gender-question in ethnic assertion, it has looked into the ethnic imagination on gender – how the ethnic movements construct and exploit its ethnicized images of women. The fourth and the fifth chapters together have been devoted to present a case study of the Karbi ethnonationalism. Collecting data from various secondary sources, archival materials and through interviewing of activists and common people, the political trajectory of the emergence and development of the Karbi ethnicity movement has been outlined in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter focusses on the cultural politics of the Karbi movement; how the de-territorialization as well as re-territorialization of the Karbi ethnic world is currently in process through symbolic cultural codes, through processes like museumization of its cultural

distinctions, valorization of its national heroes and articulation of contesting narratives about its origin and migration.

The last five chapters have been an attempt to discuss the ethnonational developments in Assam with references to different historical contexts. What can be summarized as a conclusion to this socio-historical exploration of the ethnic question in Assam is that the various formations of ethnicity in Assam need to be seen as a part of continuous historical processes. “The construction of ethnic identity and culture”, as effectively elucidated by Nagel, “is the result of both structure and agency—a dialectic played out by ethnic groups and the larger society. Ethnicity is the product of actions undertaken by ethnic groups as they shape and reshape their self-definition and culture; however, ethnicity is also constructed by external social, economic, and political processes and actors as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions” (Nagel 1994, 152). As such, the on-going ethno-political mobilizations in Assam need to be understood as the result of the structural bindings provided by the specific historical conditions in one hand; and the agential enactments by the respective communities to these conditions on the other.

Therefore, the ethnonationalism in Assam can be theorized as the dialectical discourse of such external or historical conditions, and the responds articulated by people towards them, in three identifiable historical phases: *firstly*, the colonialism that created the spatial categories necessary for invoking identity consciousness; *secondly*, nationalism and its discontents that triggered the eruption of ethnic mobilizations due to national disparities and relative deprivations; and *thirdly*, the impact of globalization that brought in a new political fashion of protest and resistance through ethnicization of cultural differences.

As it has been argued and demonstrated in the second chapter of this thesis, the British colonial administration was responsible for creating the spatial or territorial categories which are still being capitalized upon by the various groups in demonstrating their ethnic consciousness. Due to the colonial operations of

classifying and labelling the various human geographies of Assam, through colonial actions like Inner Line Permits, Census operations, designation of different tribes with various nomenclatures resulted in a distinct enumeration of communities which later became the building blocks of ethnicity formations. With the introduction of monetized economy, print media, industrial and urban life worlds, the colonial modernity was responsible for creation of the necessary ambience within which the various communities in Assam could become politically conscious of themselves and the others. As discussed in the early part of the second chapter, there were indeed pre-colonial sites of cultural and social formations, particularly within the so-called non-tribal populace of Assam. However, as far as the sense of identity is concerned, these pre-colonial social and cultural categories could become catalysts for identity building only when they were later exploited for constructing a valorized past during the 19th century romantic nationalism – which was again induced by a sense of anti-colonialism. Therefore, in historicizing the ethno-national politics of Assam, the colonial intervention seems to be the unmistakable starting point that set the ball rolling towards a never-ending politics of identity.

If ethnicity is understood as a scaled down version of nationalism, then a great deal of the ethnic formations in Assam was intricately connected to the ways in which the so-called Indian and Assamese nationalism functioned at the lower levels, during both pre- and post-independence times. Cultural dissimilarities amongst the constituent groups, unequal consumption of colonial modernity, relative deprivation, failing to create political space for the minorities and smaller groups in the new set-up, helped in shaping different ethnicities, which different groups carried on as 'proto national bonds'. Moreover, the national struggle for freedom also became a model to be simulated at the lower scale of the various ethnicities in their struggle against the national discourse itself – which was relatively a dominant hegemonic discourse for the ethnic groups at the bottom of the hierarchy. The discontents of the ethnic minorities with the bigger players of the project of nationalism started to manifest even before the gaining of the national freedom, as evident in the formation of the conglomerate Tribal League

1933. In addition to such conglomerate bodies, the roots of individual ethnic formations of the various groups were germinated during the high time of Indian nationalism itself. What happened in post-independence times was only a more forceful articulation of the previous agonies in a renewed rhetoric of neglect, deprivation and betrayal.

Observing the process of tribal integration in democratic societies, Roy Burman had opined that “there is always a striving not only in the nation but also in every human group to construct hierarchy of models in terms of which internal relations are tended to be organised to present a coherent whole, but again there is centrifugal tendency of the constituent elements to form autonomous units. Result of the synthesis is emergence of new models” (Roy Burman 1961: 28).

The elite theories of ethnicity, formulated by Brass, Pareto, Mosca and Michels which were discussed in the first chapter, hold good for interpreting the organizational practices of the various ethnic groups, including the Karbis. The core perspective of these theories tends to interpret the ethnic phenomenon more as the result of the craze on the part of the few elites in a community to gain political as well as economic mileage. In the context of the current fashion of ethnic politics of Assam in general and the Karbis in particular, the failure of the mass-supported movements (often read as betrayal of the leadership) and subsequent splits in the leaderships provide undeniable validity of the elite interests in such movements.

With the advent of globalization that accompanied the unstoppable waves of reterritorialization of the existing social and cultural categories at the end of the twentieth century, the unresolved demands and unfinished agendas of the ethnicities in Assam gained new cultural vocabularies. Amidst a situation where the world at large began to feel “ethnicity everywhere”, the ethnic movements in Assam distinctly resorted to a war to be fought extensively with cultural symbolism. Like the cases elsewhere, the ethnic scenario in post-globalization times in Assam is marked with the over-exploitation and manipulation of cultural symbols through extensive museumization of the respective ethno-cultural

resources and construction of new historical narratives to counter the dominant hegemonic discourses. In one sense, this was phase of overwhelming ethnicization of all sorts of social, cultural, economic and political differences amongst the various communities of the region.

If the colonial and post-colonial (or national) phases of the ethnic question in Assam can be seen as the result of distinct historical and socio-political particularities within a specific geo-political region, the ethnic situation after the globalization appeared to be a part of globally experienced universal phenomenon. Though the same political issues and confrontations of pre-globalization times have been spilled over to the post-globalization times, the massive cultural articulations of the ethnic consciousness that accompanied the globalization process make the current ethnic manifestations quite distinct from the previous ethnic incarnations in pre-globalized times. This aspect connects the ethnic question of Assam in current times with the contemporary ethnic scenario in the global scale where culture is increasingly being created, recreated and consumed as economic as well as political commodity.

The ethnic outbreak as a worldwide phenomenon, and experienced as a part of the globalization processes, has been addressed by several scholars from varied perspectives. Reading ethnonationalism as an outcome of the post-Cold War global politics towards the end of twentieth century, Adrian Guelke has pointed out that despite ethno-nationalism being associated with minorities dissatisfied with their place in an existing polity, the phenomenon is much broader than simply providing recourse for rebellious minorities (Guelke 2010, 2). Emphasizing on the sudden decline of communism and the left-leaning political activism, as the counter-hegemonic forces against the western capitalist order, after the cold-war, Guelke observes:

..The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the demise of the Soviet Union underlined that for the time being at least, the forces of capitalism had triumphed. The class struggle's lack of credibility opened the door to other agendas, centred on the environment and on issues of identity; including gender and

ethnicity. So prevalent were the latter that the post-Cold War era has been dubbed 'the age of identity. (ibid)

Such perspectives may explain the more intense yet fragmented and diversified sites of identity-formations and their more diversified manifestations.

Guelke's argument does provide useful insights in interpreting the increasing ethnicization of various problems, pertaining to issues like gender, environment and development, as a global phenomenon in post-Cold War times. However, the ethnic situation in Assam, as evident in the previous chapters, cannot be reduced to a follow-up of the fall of communism. The influence of an emerging global political fashion of resisting the dominant order of polity, economy and cultural representation, is evident in the current articulation and mobilization of ethnic identities in Assam, particularly after the last decade of the twentieth century. What is apparent is the fact that these universally erupting politics of protest and resistance did not initiate anything radically new in the ethnic situation in Assam, but they indeed influenced the political games by providing a new rhetoric where any social difference or conflict can readily be ethnicized.

In the Indian context, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia incidentally coincided with another significant event. It was the formal acceptance of the economic liberalization policies with the necessary legislative changes by the state. This led to the entry of another, and perhaps more powerful, determinant of identity politics in the form of an entirely different reconfiguration of the nation and the state. It has been pointed out in several literatures on globalization that the increasing shares of the multinational corporate houses resulted in a new structure of power where the states are no longer the masters of their own nations. The classical idea of the nation-state as the ultimate protector of the nation and the interests of its people has been in sharp decline. This weakening of the state in holding the nation has led to a situation where "the 'national' is increasingly losing its significance as the master frame for the construction of collective identities and has become overlaid, undermined, or even replaced by deterritorialized identity formations" (Berking 2003, 248).

Thus, a kind of differentiated identity formation with multiple ethnic collectivities, which is replacing the erstwhile centralized and totalitarian nation, is no longer an exception but has become an increasingly common phenomenon in the globalized world.

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