

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. AN APPRAISAL OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Ethnicity is perceived as a feeling of identity by a group of people who identify themselves with each other based on some presumed similarities such as common ancestry, language, culture, society or in other words similarities based on socio-cultural, national experiences and above all common ancestry. Ethnic identity remains ridden with a split at its heart. The resultant dilemma is whether to maintain roots in the consonance with the tradition or whether to maintain an identity (Biswas, 2007: 37). All human beings search for identity in two ways: 'self-identity' and 'community identity'. Self-identity evokes an understanding that a person has of himself/herself. The concept of ethnicity is very much linked with the issue of identity and also linked with aspect of culture. Ethnicity is an accepted state of mankind (Sengupta, 2014: 10). Formation of one's identity takes place through self-assessment, personality attributes, knowledge of one's skills and abilities, one's occupation and hobbies. One's personal identity is closely related to his self-image. It is very important because it will affect the way you feel about yourself and how you behave in a challenging situation. For developing an identity or sense of self and those traits a person desires to have a challenging time. Asserting one's own identity at challenging situation requires real courage and commitment and conviction. Not having a strong sense of self or struggling with identity issues may lead to depression, anxiety, and other psychological health problems in addition to even physical health problems. Identity formation, also known as individuation, is the development of the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity in a particular stage

of life in which individual characteristics are possessed and by which a person is recognized or known. Such loss of identity can result in increased levels of generalized anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, a loss of self-confidence, social anxiety, isolation, chronic loneliness, all of which threaten our ability to connect with other people (Bhattacharjee, 2016: 44-46). One's community identity begins with his/her search in finding the belongingness to a particular group to which he/she became a member by birth. This like the self-identity may be challenging to assert and struggle to withstand.

The building of Indian identity began sometime in the beginning of the 19th century during the British rule over the Indian sub-continent. Before her independence in 1947, India was never one nation but always a collection of different entities and cultures with no sense of real national identity. In different parts of India different cultures, manners and languages existed. Different rulers ruled different parts of India as part of feudal principalities. Some of them were of foreign origin. The only features common to the large portion of India's residents were some of the Hindu religious customs and taboos like caste system, child marriages and other religious oriented customs and practices. Tribals residing in India have to assert themselves through various social upheavals and their identity formation carries the stories of pain and agony.

Tribal identity is inherited through myths and legends, developing early in the social environment and outside the conscious awareness of the individual. It is essential for the well-being of the tribe infusing members with positive self-image. Tribal heritage includes myths, rituals, beliefs, customs, symbols, artistic creations and wisdom. Although there are no written texts, knowledge is preserved and perpetuated through oral tradition, music and visual art forms. Tribal culture implies closeness to nature with manifestation of continuity of traditional knowledge. A tribal regards the elements of nature as alive and conscious, revering them as deities to turn to in crisis and to communicate with through rituals and incantations, through song and dance, and through narratives and myths.

Indigenous peoples are ethnic minorities, having their own traditions, cultures and languages, who have been marginalized and pushed to peripheries of the so called

‘civilized’ societies. In international or national legislation, they are generally defined as having a set of specific rights based on their historical ties to a particular territory, and to their cultural or historical distinctiveness from politically dominant populations. The concept of indigenous people may define them as particularly vulnerable to exploitation, marginalization and oppression by nations or states that may still be in the process of colonialism, or by politically dominant ethnic groups. In many cases their existence has been ignored by the dominant culture. No country in the world exists without an indigenous community within their territory. The indigenous people have their own ethnicity, cultural identity, distinctiveness and uniqueness that help them to maintain the cohesiveness and corporateness of their society, yet their history is coloured with their own blood, exploitation, discrimination, displacement and alienation (Mappilaparambil, 2015: 16).

The term ‘indigenous’ is an ambiguous term. It relies more on common sense than on any definition that would be accepted unanimously or that could be applied universally. In English, the term ‘indigenous’ means belonging to a particular place by birth (*Oxford Dictionary*). The term ‘aboriginal’ means the earliest known inhabitants of a region. It is derived from a Latin root *aborigin* meaning from the beginning. Recently some scholars have suggested using the term ‘first people’ (Burger, 1990) to stress the importance of the relationship these people have with the land. There are approximately 370 million indigenous people living in the world, belonging to 5,000 different ethnic groups, in 90 countries worldwide (www.indigenouspeople.com retrieved on 5/10/2013). Indigenous people live in every region of the world, but about 70 per cent of them live in Asia. Considering the diversity of indigenous peoples, an official definition of ‘indigenous’ has not been adopted by any UN-system body. Instead the system has developed a modern understanding of this term based on the following parameters:

- Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member.
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies.
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources.

- Distinct language, culture, beliefs and separate social, economic or political systems.
- Form non-dominant groups of society.
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities (www.un.org retrieved on 5/10/2013).

Indigenous peoples are often thought of as the primary stewards of the planet's biological resources. Their ways of life have cosmo-visions and have contributed to the protection of the natural environment on which they depend on. It is no coincidence that when the World Wildlife Fund listed the top 200 areas with the highest and most threatened bio-diversity; they found that 95 per cent are on indigenous territories. Indigenous communities and the environments they maintain are increasingly under assault from mining, oil, dam building, agro-industrial projects and logging.

1.2. AREA OF STUDY

India's Northeast traces its formation as a region to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and the gradual reorganization of international borders around it both before and after independence. As a result, it remains tenuously connected with the rest of India through a narrow corridor, the 'chicken's neck' or 'Siliguri Corridor' - as it is popularly known, in northern West Bengal, with an approximate width of 33 kilometers on the eastern side and 21 kilometers on the western side. This constitutes barely one per cent of the boundaries of the region, while the remaining over 99 per cent of its borders are international - with China and Tibet to the North, Bangladesh to the South West, Bhutan to the North West, and Myanmar to the East (www.northeastindia.com retrieved on 15/10/2013). It is located at '22⁰' to '29.5⁰' North latitude and '89⁰70'' to '97⁰30'' East longitude (ibid). Presently the region comprises of eight Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura - also known as 'Seven Sisters' and Sikkim, a small brother. With the exception of Nagaland that became a state in 1963, most of the states in the region were reorganized between 1971 and 1987 (ibid). According to the 2011 Census of India these states cover a total area of

2,62,184 square kilometers. Arunachal Pradesh has the largest area comprising 83,578 square kilometers followed by Assam (78,543 square kilometers). Meghalaya, Manipur and Mizoram are almost of similar area, i.e., 22,487 square kilometers, 22,356 square kilometers, and 21,067 square kilometers respectively. Nagaland comes next with 16,527 square kilometers followed by Tripura (10,477 square kilometers). However, Bera (2017: xxiv) attests that ‘the area of Tripura is 10,486 square kilometers as per the records of the Registrar General of India and the Surveyor General of India’. According to the 2011 census the total population of the eight Northeastern states is 45,587,982 persons (3.76 percent) (Mappilaparambil, 2014:22). The region accounts for one of the largest concentrations of tribal people in the country - constituting about 30 per cent of the total population - though with a skewed distribution of over 60 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland taken together. Within this small stretch of land, the Northeast accommodates 213 tribal communities, over 400 sub-tribal groups, 175 languages and many non-tribal communities. The region presents a unique cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious profile not to be found in any other region in India (Marbaniang and Warjri, 2010:5).

The 45 million people of Northeast India constitute only about 3.8 per cent of the total population of the country (www.censusindia.gov.in retrieved on 10/05/2014). Over 68 per cent of this population (31.16 million) lives in the state of Assam alone. The density of population varies from 13 per square kilometer in Arunachal Pradesh to 340 per square kilometer in Assam. The predominantly hilly terrain in all the states except Assam is host to an overwhelming proportion of tribal population ranging from 19.3 per cent in Assam to 94.5 per cent in Mizoram. It is predominantly rural with over 84 per cent of the population living in the countryside. Thus, one could easily say that:

“The Northeast India is another India, the most diverse part of a most diverse country, very different, relatively little known and certainly not too well understood, once coy but now turbulent and in transition within the Indian transition. Its complexities defy simple truisms and generalizations. The rest of India and the Northeast have much to learn about each other, and the Northeast is still to know itself” (Verghese, 2004: 7).

The abode of clouds ‘Meghalaya’ has a very picturesque landscape and an excellent natural beauty. It lies in the northeastern part of the country located between ‘25⁰1’ to ‘26⁰5’ North latitude and ‘85⁰49’ to ‘92⁰52’ East longitude with the total area of

22,429 square kilometers and the state has a population of 29,66,889 and is the 23rd most populous state in the country (www.censusindia.gov.in retrieved on 15/10/2013). It is carved out of Assam and converted into a full-fledged state on 21st January, 1972. Meghalaya shares boundary with Assam in the north and east, Bangladesh in the south and west. There are three matrilineal communities residing in Meghalaya with their own rich cultural heritage. They have their own history, tradition, customs, beliefs, etc. The division of the districts of Meghalaya is based on the tribal inhabitation. The districts are split into three divisions, the Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills based on three main tribal communities occupying these places (Gurdon, 1907/2010: 1). Our focus area is in the districts of Jaintia Hills, which lies in the eastern part of Meghalaya.

The Jaintia Hills district was created on 22nd February 1972. It has a total geographical area of 3,819 square kilometers and a population of 3,95,124 as per the 2011 census. It stretches from '25⁰³' to '25⁰⁴⁵' North Latitude and '91⁰⁵⁹' to '92⁰⁴⁵' East Longitude. Jaintia Hills has two civil districts, East Jaintia Hills and West Jaintia Hills, with Khliehriat and Jowai as its headquarters. It has one civil Sub-division at Amalaram and five Blocks namely Thadlaskein, Khliehriat, Laskein, Amalaram and Saipung. There are twelve *elakas*, under these two districts. Jowai is 66 kilometers away from the state capital, while Khliehriat is 101 kilometers away (Lhuid, 2006: 1). The Jaintia Hills district is bounded by Karimganj and North Cachar Districts of Assam in the east, the East Khasi Hill district in the west, the Karbi Anglong district of Assam in the north and Bangladesh in the south. Jaintia Hills is predominantly occupied by a large number of tribal populations known as '*Synteng*'. They are of Mongoloid ethnicity, speaking Austric language belonging to the Mon-Khmer group who are migrated from the East Asia (Pyal, 1978:24). The name 'Pnar' is an endonym, while '*Jaintia*' and '*Synteng*' are exonyms (used by the outsiders). The people residing in the central region of Jaintia Hills are called Pnar by those living in the southern and northern regions and who are in turn being called as War and Bhoi respectively by the Pnar. But all the three are collectively known by a generic name *Jaintia* or *Synteng*. The word '*Jaintia*' is derived from the name of a former kingdom, the Jaintia Kingdom (Maliekal, 2005:20) whose rulers were Syntengs. One theory says that the word '*Jaintia*' is ultimately derived from the name of the shrine of *Jayanti Devi* or *Jainteswari*, an incarnation of the Hindu

goddess *Durga*. Jaintias have a separate and distinct identity and are divided into six sub-groups: the Bhoi, Biata, Hadem, Lalung, Pnar and the War (Sen, 2002:88). The Jaintia are one among the many tribal communities of Northeast India who do not have a script of their own. The very little we know about them was handed to us through the ancestors orally being shrouded with myths and mystery. In fact, nothing is known about their ancestral lands, their origin, migration, etc. They have a very strong oral tradition, which is being handed over till today.

1.3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the dominant components of human social formations is the ability to identify oneself with the rest with regard to one's own uniqueness and collective commonalities. The tribal communities of the present day make every effort to maintain their own distinctiveness. The study of the different tribes has not only attracted the attention of anthropologists and sociologists but also other branches of different disciplines. In trying to understand the Pnar tribal society, the present researcher is experienced with a major problem in seeing the change in traditional values, customs and systems that got diverted due to the ongoing process of development and economic prosperity of the community as a result of inroads of multifarious economic opportunities. Special mention may be made of mining and quarrying that have changed the economic contour of the area and have affected the traditional lives of the tribal people who find it as the newest economic intervention. It is important to analyze the way of life of the Pnar, who had been influenced by forces from within and without, which led to transformation in their society.

Of late, with the impact of large-scale immigration of global forces everything is changing in the fast-moving world. Human society has a tremendous ability to adapt to the situation and environment for his security and survival. Every society adapts to their environment by three means: technological, organizational and ideational (Lamare, 2005: 109). Technological advancement and organizational improvement and ideational development bring tremendous change in the socio-cultural, religious and economic life

of the people. Contemporary tribal communities have a great variety and complexity in their cultural practices, both traditional and adopted. However, they share one characteristic feature which binds them 'by common understanding as to the ultimate nature and purpose of life' (Redfield, 1953). The present scenario of the world, calls for greater awareness amongst people about other cultures and ethnicities. There is a growing need, in this world growing smaller every passing minute, to get acquainted with a wider variety of people, their lifestyles, likes and dislikes or the way of thinking. In fact, to sustain better relations and increase our own acceptability, it is important to develop a deeper understanding and respect for other kinds of people. One of such fields whereby a mutual learning and furthering of good will in our country is through the study of Indian culture and history which demands a closer look and introspection through the various human sciences like anthropology, linguistics, sociology, comparative religion and so on.

1.4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The aboriginal ethnic groups of India are called 'scheduled tribes' in the Constitution. The designation, invented by the British, covers somewhat arbitrarily 255 such communities. Unevenly distributed throughout the subcontinent, the tribal people are a vast majority in the north eastern states and Union Territories: such as 88 per cent in Nagaland, 80 per cent in Meghalaya, and 70 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh. Half of the country's total tribal population is found in the three states of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Orissa. The state of Madhya Pradesh has over 8 million, i. e., 20 per cent of the population; Bihar has about 5 million or 8.07 per cent of the population; and Orissa has nearly 7 million. The numerically dominant tribes are four million Gond of Central India (Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh), four million Bhil of Western India (Rajasthan and Gujarat) and three million Santal of Eastern India (Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand and West Bengal). The smallest tribal community is the Andamanese, with a population of 49 (www.indigenouspeople.com retrieved on 17/10/2013).

The word 'tribe' itself is derived from the Latin term *tribus*, the administrative divisions and voting units of ancient Rome (Cornell 1995:117). The first Roman tribes

were probably ethnic in origin and consisted of three basic divisions, viz., the Titienses (Tities), Ramnenses (Ramnes) and Luceres. Tribe is an endogamous group originating from a common ancestor. It is composed of numerous families, exogamous clans, bands of villages that lives in a specific territory. It possesses in common cultural, religious and linguistic or dialectical homogeneity and is united under a chief, who guides and leads the community.

The *Oxford Dictionary* gives the meaning of tribe as a ‘racial group united by language and customs, living as a community under one or more chief’ (*Oxford Dictionary*, 1974). W.H. R. Rivers in *Encyclopedia Britannica* defined a tribe as a ‘social group of simple kind, the members of which speak a common dialect, have a single government and act together for such common purposes as welfare. The tribe derives its unity not from a territorial identity but from a sense of extended kingship’ (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2005). In India the tribe denotes primitive people living in the hills and forests. Some of the names used for them are *Vanyajati* (forest caste), *Vanvasi* (forest dwellers), *Pahari* (hill dwellers) *Adimjati* (primitive people), *Janjati* (folk people), and *Adivasi* (first dwellers) (Thanzauva, 2004: 11).

Economically and socially least advanced, the scheduled tribes are the earliest inhabitants of India. The colonial administrators called them ‘aborigines’ and this concept was readily accepted by the average, educated Indian people who trace his own ancestry to the Aryan and Dravidian invaders of the subcontinent. Most Indians consider the tribal communities, which live in isolated and self-contained groups, as wholly distinct from them both culturally and ethnically. In fact, the people of India are highly mixed racially and the aborigines too participated in the process of miscegenation and acculturation. Their commonality is poverty, exploitation and alienation which they have suffered from time immemorial (Thanzauva, 2004: 22). They are culturally alienated, socially stigmatized, economically exploited, and politically powerless (ibid).

The main characteristics, which are common to all the tribes in terms of origin and inhabitation include residence in remote and less accessible areas. Generally, a tribal is honest, simple unambitious and straightforward. They treat the forest as their ancestral home since the forest has been a permanent abode for them. There is an emotional

attachment between a tribal and the forest. The tribal community is egalitarian and they prefer to live in peaceful coexistence. Based on these commonalities Mappilaparambil (2015: 16) suggests the following as salient features among the tribals:

- Balance between nature and culture;
- Self-sufficiency and need based economy;
- Collective economy;
- Community of belongingness;
- Collective labour force;
- Egalitarian social structure;
- Democratic political thinking;
- Animistic religion in the past;
- Central place of land and space;
- Traditional occupation of definite geographical area;
- Distinctive culture;
- Primitive traits in occupation and economy; and
- Lack of educational and techno-economic development.

The people of India are culturally stratified as tribals, who constitute 8.08 per cent of the total population (www.censusindia.gov.in retrieved on 25/05/2014). In 2001 there were about 84 million (84,326,240) of Scheduled Tribes in India (Bera, 2009a: 257) with 98 percent of them living in rural areas. However, as per 2011 census in total there are 698 Scheduled Tribes with a population of 104,281,034 (8.61 per cent) spread all over the country barring the states and Union Territories like Chandigarh, Delhi, Haryana, Pondicherry and Punjab (Bera, 2009b:35). Great diversity and complexity in social life including religious beliefs, practices, rites and rituals manifest contemporary tribal communities. However, they share one characteristic feature which binds them 'by common understanding as to the ultimate nature and purpose of life' (Redfield, 1953). Larger concentrations of indigenous peoples are found in the seven states of northeast

India and the so-called central tribal belt stretching from Rajasthan to West Bengal. India has a long history of indigenous peoples' movements aimed at asserting their rights. India has several laws and constitutional provisions, such as the Fifth and Eighth Schedule for mainland India and the Sixth Schedule for certain areas of northeast India, restricting to Meghalaya, Mizoram and parts of Assam and Tripura, which recognizes indigenous peoples' rights over land and self-governance. The laws aimed at protecting indigenous peoples have, however, numerous shortcomings and their implementation is far from satisfactory.

The concept of ethnicity is very much linked with the issue of identity and also with the aspects of culture (Mondal, 2014:4). Thus, identity, ethnicity or culture of a tribal group could be defined as a socially defined category of people who identify with each other based on a perceived shared social experience or ancestry (Barth, 1969). Ethnicity is not a simple and isolable social phenomenon, rather interrelated to many other complex social issues (Mondal, 2014: 4). Ethnicity is an important means by which people may identify with a larger group. Many social scientists and anthropologists, such as Fredric Barth and Eric Wolf do not consider ethnic identity to be universal. They regard ethnicity as a product of specific kinds of inter-group interactions, rather than an essential quality inherent to human groups (Ranger, 1983). Thus, ethnic identity remains ridden with a split at its heart. The resultant dilemma is whether to maintain roots in consonance with the tradition or whether to maintain identity despite the ongoing changes augured by modernity (Biswas, 2008: 37). Usually, ethnicity has been looked upon from a negative angle; therefore, the issue of ethnicity was mostly tagged with social unrest. But this not true. Ethnicity helps in maintaining and conserving the valuable cultural resources of which most important is indigenous wisdom, traditional knowledge (Mondal, 2014: 15). Membership of an ethnic group tends to be associated with various factors such as belief system, ideas and ideologies of shared cultural heritage, food habit, rules and regulations pertaining to the group,ancestry, history, homeland, traditional wisdom, language or dialect or any other means of communication, direct or indirect, verbal or non-verbal, which people use for their interacting with one another and with symbolic systems such as religion, mythology and ritual, cuisine, dressing style, physical appearance, etc. Thus,

identity is not an accomplished end point of a people's history but a constant process of becoming into one (Mondal,2014: 15). Members of an ethnic group, on the whole, claim cultural continuities over time, although historians and cultural anthropologists have documented that many of the values, practices and norms that imply continuity with the past are of relatively recent invention.

The term 'ethnic' is derived from the Greek word *ethnos* which was loaned into Latin as *ethnicus* (Tonkin *et.al.*, 1989). The inherited English term for this concept is 'folk'. In modern English and until the mid 19th century, the term ethnic was used in the meaning of 'heathen' or 'pagan'. The Greek term could refer to any large group, a host of men, a band of comrades as well as a swarm or flock of animals. In Classical Greek, the term took on a meaning comparable to the concept now expressed by 'ethnic group', mostly translated as "nation, people; only in Hellenistic Greek the term tended to become further narrowed to refer to 'foreign' or 'barbarous' nations in particular" (Ronald, 1978). Anthropologists or anyone who study the human history will agree that ethnicity is one of the important factors in culture. Every human community may it be advanced or primitive has its own tale of ethnicity to share with other communities. Human beings can express themselves in a society, which give shape to ethnic identity. Ethnicity finds expression in material culture, in human behaviour, and in value systems, morals and ethics. It interacts with systems of family and clan organizations, marriage, law and politics (Acharya, 1990: 71). Eminent anthropologists, ethnographers, and sociologists like Sir James Frazer(1890), Baines (1891), Enthoven(1901), Ernest Crawley (1902), Gait (1911), Marten (1921) Tallents (1921), Hutton (1931), Elwin (1942), Majumdar (1961), AnanthakrishnaIyer and Bala Ratnam(1961), Ghurye(1963) Nirmal Kumar Bose(1971) and Vidyarthi (1976) stated that there is a very strong relationship between ethnicity and cultural identity. However, Saikia and Majumdar (1990) said that the term 'ethnic' is based on the concept of pure race is a myth. It can be understood as relating to large groups of people classed together according to common traits or customs or a social group which consciously shares some aspects of a common culture and is defined primarily by descent (Datta, 1990). Mondal states that term ethnicity is still more used to denote marginal, disadvantaged, excluded and minority communities who are confronting with the dominant majorities. Ethnicity is basically an issue of 'ours' and

‘others’. It can be construed here that imaging ‘other’ and ‘otherness’ is the root of ethnic differentiation (Mondal, 2014: 16).

The importance of anthropological approaches to understand the course of development of anthropology in the country along with different facets of the study of ethnicity is emphasized in many universities over a century. Mention may be made of Sarat Chandra Roy (1921), Dharendra Nath Majumdar (1950,1956), Govind Sadashiv Ghurye (1956), Shyama Charan Dube (1956,1962), Nirmal Kumar Bose (1963), Lalita Prasad Vidyarthi (1966,1975,1978) Gautam Kumar Bera (1995), Vijoy S. Sahay and Pradeep Kumar Singh (1997), who made great contribution in the journey of anthropology into Indian Universities and other academic institutions (Bera, 2013: 46). To a great extent, anthropology is the locus where ethnicity is created and re-created. Ethnicity emerges and is made relevant through ongoing social situations and encounters, and through peoples’ ways of coping with the demands and challenges of life. Any change in ethnic components would constitute an ethnic process (Acharya, 1990: 1069). Vidyarthi has given in length all the details of the contribution of the aforesaid scholars in two of his monumental books, viz. *The Tribal Culture of India* (1976) and *The Rise of Indian Anthropology* (1977). However; study on ethnicity had very significant momentum even in the remote past, though, the initial study on ethnicity, religion and culture were mainly made by the travelers, missionaries, merchants, pilgrims and freelance scholars who either made textual analysis, or discussed the diverse religious beliefs and practices, and peculiar customs on the basis of their empirical data (Dubois, 1928). Gradually elaborate ethnographic study of a particular community or a religion was undertaken on specific communities (Sir James Frazer (1890), Ernest Crawley(1902), Roy(1912, 1928) Elwin(1955) to name a few.

“Self-identity changes from context to context and there are simultaneously overlapping and shifting identities of the same individual or group. Moreover, popular as well as generalized and stereotyped monolithic classification or perception of an individual or group by the other is highly unrealistic and unscientific as it ignores the diversities of identities. Identity is never singular rather highly plural as well as contextual” (Mondal, 2014: 3).

The very idea of ethnicity speaks of certain marginal location of a people. In Northeast India the marginality of ethnic people carries complex meaning in addition to its general nature at both national and local context (Biswas, 2016: 38). Ethnicity is

considered as a process whereby the leaders of an ethnic group try to mobilize and motivate its group members by utilizing the ethnic sentiments for some economic political and cultural goals.

“Ethnicity may be examined from various angles. It may be viewed from structural attributional interactional points of views. From the social-structural angle, ethnicity is about social and cultural differentiation which has reference to identity projection. From attributional point of view ethnicity is a process in which “ethnic awareness” and “ethnic consciousness” plays the most vital role. Whereas from interactional point of view, ethnicity is the outcome of relation and interaction between we and they or self and others in the day today social affairs. Ethnicity is subjective experience and beliefs of a particular group but manifests through several objective criteria” (Mondal, 2014: 3).

1.5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Though the Pnar come under the grater Khasi tribe belonging to Austro-Asiatic family and Mon Khmer sub family, they seem to have made much effort to retain some elements of their traditional culture such as their dialect, traditional tribal attire, festivals, customary laws or traditional village council to guide and direct their society and worship traditional deities and spirits according to their age old customs. However, the Pnar society experienced transition due to its contact with the people of the plains and it still continues. No society can live in isolation. Changes are bound to happen either for better or for worse from one pattern to the other. While studying the Pnar society in transition one has to keep these arch questions in the back of his mind.

- How do the Pnar see changes in the society? Can the Pnar society sustain the cultural identity of the tribe against all such factors causing change?
- How can we see the cultural changes witnessed in the present Pnar society be called the cultural expression of the Pnar?
- What are the traditional systems and values of the Pnar community that are eroded with the passage of time?
- What is the cultural uniqueness they possess even at the face of advancing developmental parameters and economic progression and transformation?

- How does the new generation respond to the traditional values and knowledge with regard to agriculture, religion and social life?

These are certain immediate concerns that need attention to address while conducting the present research. Again, in comparison to the other tribal communities, who have given up their dialect in favor of greater languages like Assamese/Bengali, why did the Pnar both in Meghalaya and Assam adhere to their own dialect even amidst the push and pull of modernization? Have they been living comparatively aloof from the other communities so as to protect their tribal dialect, or did they take any other precaution to preserve their mother tongue? These and other questions raised by the present researcher to unearth the specificities of the Pnar and what they accumulated over years in other words their tradition, transition and social transformation.

1.6. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Search for an identity or create own identity is an unquenchable thirst for every human being and community. Various tribal communities down the centuries have made every effort to locate themselves within the society with their own uniqueness and individuality. They were termed as animists or people who follow crude form of religion in various census reports and books and other periodicals. But due to the awakening of certain tribal communities their religion is accepted and values are appreciated and dignity is restored by the so called 'civilized society'. Ethnic identity is very much associated with the culture, which is the expression of being. Ethnicity relates to identity formation among the group. In a multiethnic situation one is more conscious about his ethnicity. Over the years multi ethnicity has led to different facets of social change. Hence, if one does not understand identity formation, he will not be able to understand ethnicity as a concept and social change as a dynamic phenomenon. In this context the present researcher looked into the Pnar community with regard to their uniqueness and the commonalities they share with the greater Khasi tribe, their tradition, which influences their culture as a whole and formalizes the conceptions of relations between man and his surrounding environment. In fact, understanding social identity of the Pnar is much

difficult by the presence of variegated beliefs, ritual practices and related intricate mechanisms within the tribal community. Besides addressing the tradition, the present researcher also tried to consolidate the political, economic and ecological dimensions of the Pnar society. The researcher also looked into the transition of the Pnar community from the traditional way of living to modernity, which eventually leads to social transformation.

In order to address the above issues and taking the review of literature into consideration, the present study addressed the following objectives:

- To acquire an overall knowledge about the Pnar tribe through an ethnographic understanding;
- To analyze the concept of ethnicity, identity and understand the various aspects of the social life of the Pnar of the studied area;
- To examine the changes that took place in the Pnar community over the years;
- To investigate the factors causing changes in the society;
- To understand the uniqueness of the Pnar;
- To study the impinging factors percolated from the outside world in the religious/social arena of the Pnar.
- To understand the importation of developmental perspectives that have brought in social change and transformation in the religious/social/cultural life of the Pnar and its impact on their society.

1.7. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Every tribal society has a bouquet of rituals and ceremonies to make their life more colorful and meaningful. Their life is intrinsically connected to various ceremonies in which deities and spirits are propitiated. In their life cycle ceremonies, they perform rituals which help them to pass through that stage of life with conviction and courage, since they believe the supernatural deities have power to do good and also have the

power to harm. Therefore, rituals are officiated by the practitioners on various occasions and from time to time. It is known that tribal religion is based on oral traditions. The tribes express their beliefs in everyday language. Their rituals are aimed at solving day to day problems of life. But when we analyze the Pnar from close quarters we see the transitional phase when they came into contact with the people of the plains at an earlier historical stage and the British at a later stage. Change in a community is inevitable. Every community evolves and gets changed over the years. Many things are incorporated and much more shed aside due to the forces either from within or without. Though the religious customs and rituals are within the protection of the divine yet these too get transformed over the years. Even if one takes such things as endangered and think of preserving these aspects as traditional parameters, he should also look into the newer elements that are being incorporated with the advent of time, modernity and developmental attributes. Are the Pnar heading towards a finer and modified identity in the face of newer economic opportunities and developmental importations? These needs to be addressed to as research interventions. By the term ritual, which has been interchangeably used with terms rite, ceremony or custom, one implies any non-instinctive behavior which is repetitive, symbolic and meaningful. It stands for any formal actions following a set pattern which expresses through a symbol which have a public or shared meaning. These symbols express sacred values which are demarcated from profane or mundane day to day activities of everyday life. The sacred is that which is superior to the ordinary and utilitarian life activities which fall in the purview of the profane. Tribal world view is grounded in the natural events and life-experiences. Their cosmology is socially effective, i.e., existential, but un-interpretative. The present study is significant as it intends to probe various issues related to their religion in the larger context of tribal societies in continuity, transition and change. The significance of the research, therefore, can be as seen as:

- To acknowledge that the Pnar as a distinct tribal community in India has cherished their religion and their ritual practices even in the wake of Christian triumphalism in the Northeastern region;
- To help the Pnar to appreciate and be rooted in their tribal tradition and culture;

- To have self-assessment on the Pnar identity and to preserve the traditional values and practices; and
- To feel proud about the identity and to promote it in the midst of fleeting changes that have been constantly threatening the Pnar.

1.8. METHODOLOGY

For this study both qualitative and quantitative data were collected using the methods of observation, interview, case study, survey, etc. in the light of ethnographic study. Household data were collected from the village by visiting each of the households. Religious leaders of the village including the village head men were interviewed to gather data on the religious affiliations of the people as a whole. As there are very few published documents on Pnars and their religion the interview guide technique was used to collect information as peoples' sense of history and perception as great value for such a study.

For the purpose and collection of secondary sources all the available and relevant historical records and published books were consulted in various libraries of Assam and elsewhere in Northeast India. Relevant information was acquired from books, documents, reports, dissertations, research journals, published and unpublished documents, newspapers, etc. The religious places including their common worship place will be visited and participant observation and interview schedule were made use of for taking note of their religious practices, opinions on socio-cultural and religious life of the Pnar. The whole data collected from three villages were analyzed to find the cultural life of the Pnar in the changing scenario.

1.9. OVERVIEW

The first chapter begins with an analysis on ethnicity dealing with its definition and importance in studying the ethnic communities. It includes the research problem, defining of terms, review of literature, objectives of the study, area of study, and importance of the study.

The second chapter deals with the land and the people with a brief history of Meghalaya with its demographic profile. It also implores the status of indigenous people, Jaintias/Pnars in particular in the East and West Jaintia Hills districts of Meghalaya based on the data collected from the field and other sources. The socio-cultural scenario of the state / Jaintia Hills districts and the nuances attached to it were covered under the purview of research. The current status of the Pnar with their physical features, social structure and organization, feasts and festivals were also analyzed in this chapter.

The third chapter discusses the Research Methodology envisaged for this particular study.

The fourth chapter analyzes the ethnicity and cultural identity of the Pnar with special reference to their religion, beliefs related to agriculture, housing building, omens related religious practices, religious calendar and concludes with the Pnar dialect.

The fifth chapter describes the transition and change in the dynamics of the Pnar. Changes have been conceived of in terms of socio-economic parameters and socio-cultural parameters. While the former one looks into the exogenous impacts, the latter deals with the endogenous factor.

- Socio-economic and socio-cultural scenario;
- Cultural and social practices;
- Customs and festivals;
- Changes in political and administrative system;
- Impact of modern economy;
- The influence of the modernity and western culture; and
- Transformation in the Pnar Society.

The sixth chapter presents the outcome of the data collected from the field study and scientific analysis, interpretation and discussion with the materials, information and all other findings.

1.10. UNFOLDING OF THE STUDY

Understanding the contemporary society from a holistic perspective is a requirement in this postmodern era. Every individual community not only tries to assert themselves but making every effort to find the roots of their being. Hence, the present researcher believes that the most compelling reason for studying the ethnicity/tradition that is cultural identity today is to reach a better understanding of contemporary society. Ethnic diversity of the Northeast should make one to feel, enjoy and appreciate the existence of the other with their uniqueness. Without a proper understanding of one's own tribe and community, ignorance can rule every one, which would create more global conflicts and prejudices. There is still a great need for more research into the cultural aspects as there is still a lot of ignorance in the subject in today's society. Understanding the other with his / her cultural background is the key to a cultured social wellbeing. There are still too many racial and cultural prejudices in the world through lack of vital knowledge in this subject. While making a micro study on six villages; from both East and West Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, the present researcher expects to bring to the fore the in-depth understanding of the Pnar society with special reference to their uniqueness and distinctiveness. This study is also envisaged to throw some light on the Pnar society, which meticulously adheres to the traditional kinship structure, role of village council and life cycle ceremonies that are handed over to them with a devotional precision, their ethnicity, and transition.

1.11. CONCLUSION

The numerous tribal communities in India with their mists and magic not only remind us the constitutional character of the country's 'unity in diversity', but also remind that each ethnic group has their role to play in the larger canvas of the country. This is all the truer in the case of Northeast India, which is now recognized an India in miniature. While the whole universe is changing every movements of time, the tribal communities too gets changed in their beliefs, rituals, rubrics and their socio-political and

economic fields get new dimensions over the passage of time. Though everything does not change in the same speed yet one could easily notice that the ripples of change touch every aspects of life. May it be of the learned and sophisticated communities or the remotest tribal community who are far away from the main stream of the larger civilizational pool. Change has to take place if not the society or community may remain fossilized. No one ever could predict the result of change as it can either be better or worse. Many tribal communities over the years are faced with tremendous confusions and conflicts due to the transition from tradition to modernity. It is important to preserve the values of every tribal thought before it gets eroded in the push and pull factors of modernity. As our universe is the Jaintia Hill districts, we want to enquire into the specificities of one of the numerous tribes, that is the Pnar on the one hand and contribute our share of the knowledge to the academic disciplines for its posterity. This study is also a tribute to the Pnar population who has been working hard to carve out an individual space within the context of Northeast in general and the state of Meghalaya in particular.