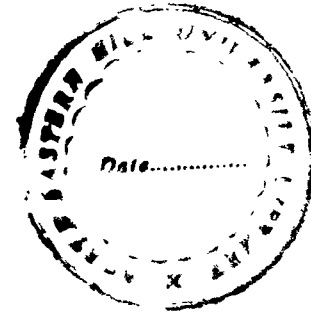


Ethnic and Cultural Identity in
the Context of Borok People of Tripura –
A Philosophical Enquiry

By



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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy of North
Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

Thesis

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Chapter - I

Introduction

The loud continuous outcry for distinctiveness, separate identity, local autonomy, self-determination, self-government, independence, nationality and even secession in the name of ethnic and cultural identity is tremendously increasing in almost all the countries of the world, particularly in India. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the movements of identity-assertion are growing. This situation is particularly true of North-East India. Ethnicity and culture aim at identifying a particular social group of humanity. However, these two concepts are not only ambiguous but are also susceptible to several interpretations. In order to remove the ambiguity from these concepts, and also to highlight certain conceptual issues relating to the Boroks of Twipra (Tripura)¹, it is imperative on my part to first spell out the two

¹ The meaning of the word 'Twipra' in Kokborok (mother tongue of the Boroks) as mentioned in J. E. Webster, *North-Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers*, (1910), is 'the country towards sea'. The hill people of Twipra (Tippra) themselves pronounced it Twipra (Tippra). Tavernier, a French Scholar, who visited Dakka in 1640 A.D. also mentioned the name Twipra (Tippra) in his book *Tavernier's Travels in India*. The term 'Twipra' is originally derived from the two Kokborok words, 'Twi' meaning water and 'Pra' meaning adjoining land, junction or area. Thus, the word 'Twipra' literally means the tributaries of rivers or the land adjoining to water areas. But the word 'Tripura' is a sanskritised form of the original name Twipra. It is to be noted here that the word 'Tripura' unlike 'Twipra' has comparatively less affinity with Boroks. On the other hand, the term 'Twipra' has not only linguistic ties with its aboriginal people, Boroks (Tipras), but also has its own original and historical significance and meaning.

concepts, namely ethnicity and culture, which I do in Chapter II of my thesis. Let me say a few words about the Boroks at the very outset.

The Boroks of Twipra belong to the Tibeto-Burman groups of Mongoloid origin and have their distinct and unique ethnic and cultural heritage. According to some Borok intellectuals Borok 'nationality' may be linguistically categorized into two major groups – one Kokborok speaking group such as Bru, Debbarma, Jamatia, Koloy, Murasing, Rupini, Tripura, and Uchoi and the other Kuki-Chin language-speaking group such as Bongcher, Chorai, Darlong, Halam, Hrangkhawl, Kaipeng, Mog, Molsom, and Ranglong. Here the term 'Borok' is being used in its wider sense, but in its narrow sense, only those people whose mother tongues are Kokborok and speak Kokborok are called Borok. In the present study, I am, of course, basically concerned with Kokborok speaking Boroks of Twipra.

The term 'Borok' literally means 'Human being'. It carries ten different meanings and is being used mainly in ten different senses in Borok society. According to Naphurai Jamatia, these ten different meanings² of the term 'Borok' may be considered as indicators of Borok

² Jamatia, Naphurai, "The Ten Years – A Retrospection" in *Mukumu: A Souvenir on the ten years in service of the Borok People by the Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission*, (Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission, Puspa Printing Works, Agartala, 2003), pp-17-18.

identity. They are: (1) a name or identifier for entire socio-cultural scenario of an ethnic community called Borok community, (2) a name for human beings in general, (3) a name for citizen, (4) a name for member, (5) a name for a cultured, educated or civilized person, (6) a name for a crowd or population, (7) a name for life partner, (8) a name for people, (9) a name for a nation, and (10) a name for a people group.

The Boroks are a tribe inhabiting the Chittagong Hill Tract and Syhlet District of Bangladesh, Cachar District of Assam, Garo Hills of Meghalaya and in the state of present Twipra. Whatever their origin before the advent of the Bengalees and other non-Borok people, they were original/first settlers of Twipra, engaged in *Huk* (*jhum* or shifting) cultivation.

Ethnicity and culture are two terms for which there are no available simple and lucid clear-cut expositions. Even a very short acquaintance with any study of the definitions of these two terms shows how complicated is the task of understanding these terms. Ethnicity is generally regarded to mean racial and linguistic identity of a human group or an individual person. It is also sometimes taken to mean a socio-political phenomenon in most civic human societies. An ethnic group of people is often viewed as a substitute for a minority group of

people. Generally speaking, ethnic identity of a human group is almost like a 'permanent inborn property' of its own. Ethnic identity of a human group or an individual person can neither be changed nor modified at one's own sweet will.

During the last five decades, 'ethnic issues' overflowed the frontier of established nation-states and sprang as one of the facie of international politics. Meanwhile, it became evident that there was a high degree of mystification or obscurity surrounding the concept of ethnicity, and it was never fully explained or was taken as a self-explanatory variable in most socio-anthropological approaches to the phenomenon.

Today, ethnicity is used to describe a variety of collectivities. It has a similarity with a cultural stream, which passes from generation to generation. It generally refers to common ties of race or nationality or culturally living together in a territory. To keep its ethnic and cultural identity distinct from others is very essential for an ethnic group. There is a view, which tells us about the fact that the indigenous or tribal groups are ethnic entities, and one of the most predominant characteristics of the indigenous or tribal group is its ethnicity. It is said that most of the indigenous or tribal groups share certain common

characteristics such as nature of rurality, speciality of illiteracy, relative isolation, economic backwardness, and social deprivation.³

Ethnic discourses are many and varied in nature. Leaving aside the expressions of ethnic assertion in the shape of ultra-nationalism and community exclusivism, we can say that in the hands of the state and the dominant classes, ethnicity serves as an element to reproduce systems of social relationships, to validate structures of inequality and to support policies of social control.⁴ When group conflicts are diverted to confrontations at other levels (for instance, 'locals' vs. 'outsiders'), or where the development of group-based movements encounters great obstacles, ethnicity may act as a factor of unity at a certain moment of political action. The issue remains as to when and under what circumstances class or group-consciousness takes precedence over ethnic consciousness and becomes the leading force in popular movements.⁵

Today, the role played by ethnic factors in politics, however, appears overpowering and has become the basis for resorting to reinforce ideological discourses and practical actions by communities.

³ Doshi, S.L., *Tribal Ethnicity, Class and Integration*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 1990, p. 1.

⁴ Devalle, S.B.C., *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand*, Sage Publications, New Delhi/Newbury Park/London, 1992, p. 239.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

However, no ethnic group is a homogenous unit. The actions of the different sectors of the group are guided by different interests, based on the existence of structural class links that are present in the society as a whole. It is only at certain points in the history of a society that ethnicity is asserted explicitly.

Ethnic consciousness may provide the foundations for the emergence of an oppositional consciousness, expressed in counter-hegemonic practices. This consciousness entails an acknowledgement of the nature of inter-ethnic relationships, often accompanied by an acute perception of class differences and antagonisms. At the practical level, ethnicity may provide the subaltern sectors with a strategy to combat inequality and to cancel forms of domination.⁶

The concepts of ethnicity and culture, significant in the present study are discussed extensively in Chapter II (i.e. The Concepts of Ethnicity and Culture) of this thesis. Ethnicity and culture are closely related to one another. In this regard, Susana B.C. Devalle says, "Culture is ethnicity's privileged field in two senses. First, culture expresses the collective identity and consciousness of a people, synthesized in a particular 'style' rooted in specific social and historical

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

grounds. Second, through culture, a first level of social awareness develops, the one that sustains the political expressions of ethnicity: social contradictions and conflicts are ‘handled in cultural terms’. Among subordinate ethnic groups, it is the cultural domain that provides the elements for a strategy of survival, for social reproduction and for strength to check and question the advance of an attempted hegemonic order. The cultural ‘language’ in which a particular ethnic identity is lived and expressed has codes and meanings that are significant only to those who create and share them. Therein lies the force of culture in situations of dominance-subordination: the preservation of coded spaces that can become *zones of resistance*.⁷

In the same chapter, I attempt an analysis of some of the popular definitions of ethnicity and culture, a classification of the traditional and modern use of the concepts of ethnicity and culture and a relation between ethnicity and culture. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic’ as follows: “Ethnicity – heathendom, heathen superstition, ethnic – nation especially non-Israelitish, Gentile nation”.⁸ These Oxford lexicon meanings ascribe to the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic’ a heavy negative value-loading. In the past, ‘ethnics’ were

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁸ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume I, Oxford Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 901.

taken to mean 'others' on the basis of the categories such as minorities, primitive, underdeveloped and so on. However, these categories have no longer any meaningful application because of the fact that today every human being is considered to be an ethnic since he or she is a member of some ethnic group or other. Thus, ethnicity has now become constitutive of human beings. Ethnicity no longer signifies marginal group or minority.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines the term 'culture' as "the act of developing by education, discipline, and social experience: the training or refining of the moral and intellectual faculty."⁹ This dictionary meaning ascribes to the term culture a collective activity of members of society and their moral and intellectual development. The traditional concept of culture stresses on human society and its belief, customs, arts, knowledge and opinion which are all handed down from the older generations to the younger ones. But today, the concept of culture is being used as "the whole way of life", material, intellectual, and spiritual of a given society. The concepts of ethnicity and culture are so interrelated to each other that they have become indispensable elements in the identity-formation of a community. In

⁹ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, Unabridged (Springfield, Mass: G and C Merriam Co., 1878), p. 781.

fact, ethnicity is originally associated with the racial traits of an ethnic group. But, nowadays, it no longer means only the racial traits of a people, for, even cultural traits have been added to the term ethnicity. So, ethnicity has become a combination of racial and cultural determining factors of an ethnic group. Hence in this chapter I conclude that this transition of the concept of ethnicity has created a perplexity in the minds of people while studying and understanding the determining factors for the identity-formation of an ethnic group and is perhaps closely associated with some goals and demands to be fulfilled by the group through various people's movements.

It is generally agreed that ethnicity and culture are two of the many important concepts essentially required in understanding and studying any social group of people. One can hardly talk of a social group in absence of these two concepts. For, social group, ethnicity and culture are interrelated concepts. How do we exactly identify or recognize a particular social group or a community? This is really a difficult question to be answered. However, there are various markers, which necessarily help us to identify a community. It goes to show that it is impossible for us to understand and identify a community without such markers. In other words, to know a community is to know some distinct identities of that community. In fact, identities may be said to

be some kind of a priori elements working in studying and understanding a community.

The third chapter entitled “The Concept of Identity” is an analysis of popular definitions of the concept of identity. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, defines the word ‘identity’ as “the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances, the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality.”¹⁰ This Oxford lexicon meaning of the term ‘identity’ implies the fact that identity of a person or thing remains the same at all times and spaces, it is same with itself and different from others. The concept of identity is a construct of distinctness by which a person distinguishes himself or herself from others and also a community from other communities. I also deal in this chapter with the concepts of personal identity and community identity with special reference to Mrinal Miri’s two articles titled “Identity and the Tribesman” and “Identity, Tribesman and Development”.

Mrinal Miri says that although phrases such as ‘identity crisis’, ‘threat to one’s identity’, ‘search for identity’ are, nowadays, frequently

¹⁰ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 1, Oxford Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 1368.

used in casual talks, it is almost as frequently the case that wielders of such phrases don't quite grasp what they mean by them. In his paper titled "Identity and the Tribesman" Miri attempts to take a fresh look at the concept of identity, particularly personal identity and identity of a tribal community. Here he talks about two aspects of the concept of identity presenting a two-fold problem: one is the problem of identity of a thing, anything, *at any given time*; and the other is the problem of identity of a thing, anything *through time*. He says that one's competence to use the notion of identity in the first aspect is presupposed by one's competence to use any concept at all. It is usually agreed that in most cases a problem arises because our conventions governing the use of concepts are not sharply defined, which, therefore, allow for borderline instances. In this regard, he talks about the concept of a person, which is intransigent. Our conventions, he states, presuppose this concept rather than determine it. One of the things that have been peripheral so far in the debate about persons is a consideration of man as a self-evaluating creature. In the second aspect of the concept of identity the concept of identity is taken to be a fairly determinate concept, to be sharply distinguished from the notion of similarity. The debate about the concept of a person remains inconclusive in both the aspects of the concept of identity, he points out.

The two aspects of the concept of identity are of course acknowledged to be related.

Miri shows how considerations of value enter into the concept of personal identity in either of its two aspects. The most basic and inalienable fact about anybody's being a person is that he or she must be capable of ascribing various kinds of properties to himself or herself. This is what is minimally involved in the idea of self-awareness. A person must thus be a linguistic being.

To Miri, important and inalienable facts about a person are that he is (i) a self-conscious creature, (ii) a self-reflective agent – a being that acts and chooses between courses of action. Indeed, to act, generally, is to do one thing rather than another on the basis of some evaluation.

Miri says that the question "Who am I?" is asked against the background of certain kinds of knowledge about myself that I already possess. Apart from all my knowledge about myself, the question seeks further illumination. In this connection, Miri refers to Charles Taylor's distinction between two orders of evaluation – (i) Weak evaluation and (ii) Strong evaluation. A weak evaluation does not make any qualitative

distinction between one desire and another. Here, a weak evaluator has nothing to fall back upon, by way of reflection, but perhaps just a shrug of the shoulders. By contrast, a strong evaluation is guided primarily by considerations of the quality of one desire as opposed to that of another. Because of this language of qualitative contrast available to the strong evaluator, his evaluation is also 'deeper'. According to Miri our identity is bound up with the strong evaluations we make. The answer to the question "What is my identity?" cannot consist in a simple enumeration of properties that I happen to possess. "In fact, my most fundamental evaluations – those that constitute my identity – touch me in the centre of my being – are also evaluations which are the least articulate; I am the least clear about them."¹¹

Accordingly, it may be stated in the light of what Miri has pointed out, that personal identity is closely connected with community identity. For, human beings are considered to be "language-wielding, concept-building and self-evaluative creatures". The inalienable fact about a person is that he / she is a "self-conscious and self-reflective agent". It is only with other language-wielding and self-reflective beings or agents he / she can employ language to identify himself / herself and

¹¹ Miri, Mrinal, "Identity, Tribesman and Development" in *Interface of Cultural Identity and Development*, (ed.) Baidyanath Saraswati, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 1996, p. 72.

also to differentiate himself / herself from others. So far as his / her identity with that of other members of a community is concerned he / she needs to be a member of a collectivity of “language-wielding and self-evaluative beings”. Then only, he / she is able to relate himself / herself to other members of the community he / she belongs to and also to distinguish himself / herself from members of other communities on the basis of self-reflection regarding identity of his / her language, ecology and history. A community identity includes a feeling of continuity with the past, a feeling that is retained as an essential element of one’s self-definition. Community identity is also intimately linked with the personal need for collective continuity, a sense of personal survival in the historical and traditional continuity of the community. The community’s culture, language, religion, ecological setting and its history and tradition forming its cultural moorings, help it to conceptualize its identity.

More importantly Miri talks about tribal identity in the light of its being determined by strong evaluation – evaluation in terms of a value such as “allegiance to the tribe” – in a way such that this value overrides other values in a fundamental way. However, this point I take up for a deeper analysis in the last chapter of my thesis.



In the fourth chapter titled "Identity Assertion", I deal with identity assertion of a community. The dictionary meaning of the term 'Assertion' as "the action of setting free", of "maintaining a cause" or "defending it from a hostile attack" and of "declaring or positively stating" has been considered in the light of the Borok situation in this chapter.

The members of a community are subjectively self-conscious of their community identity. They use their cultural symbols to identify and distinguish themselves from members of other alien communities. They generally conceptualize and dramatize their identity through the symbols, which embody the cognitive and emotive cultural markers of their own community to keep their identity distinct from that of others. However, influence of the culture of a community on that of another community is quite obvious and natural in the matter of food habits, clothing, beliefs, knowledge, language, housing pattern and aesthetic appreciation etc. But when influence of one culture on the other is very dynamic for a long time, it may create a hazardous situation, which may again result in the emergence of a 'threat to the core elements' of the other culture. For, members of any community have various aims, objectives, desires, aspirations and expectations in life. When all these demands are not fulfilled in life, a kind of 'fear' is bound to occur in the

minds of the members of the community. In other words, when the identity of a community is threatened at the hands of other dominant alien people the members of the community assert themselves to insist upon the recognition of their rights, demands and status through various movements. This 'threat to existence' gradually may lead the community to identity assertion movements.

In this chapter, the theme of my dissertation being related to the Boroks of Twipra, I also take the concrete example of the Boroks so as to conceptualize the origin of their community identity. For this purpose, I take help from a descriptive account of Twipra kingdom and Boroks. Here I deal with Borok religion, which, like other tribal religions centres on the worship of nature. The Kokborok term for God is *Kaitor* or *Subraj*. 'Kaitor' is eternal and formless, He is the Supreme God. Their religion is not restricted merely to one aspect of life, but it enters into all spheres of life. The chapter discusses their traditional religious beliefs, myths and legends connected with their origin and political system and other important rituals.

As long as the Boroks stayed in the remote villages observing the age-old customs and way of life, there was no conflict or confusion about their identity. But in due course of time, certain forces, for instance, the

large scale influx of migrants, Bengalisation and Westernization in the post-merger period, were set to work which were to jolt the Boroks from their accepted life-style and pose serious threats to the very base of what they were.

This has led to the gradual polarization of Borok ethnic and cultural consciousness on the part of the Borok community causing identity assertion, resulting in the formation of the Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS) in June 1967. There are many important movements organized by the Boroks in Twipra, some of them in subsequent years gave rise to the call for secession from the Indian state while some others were organized without the call for secession.

With the help of such organizations the Boroks are trying to textualize their culture, language, tradition and history. The Boroks have made much effort to revive or rediscover their old script called 'koloma'. The assertive trends are seen in case of Kokborok language in Twipra. Indeed, language movement has brought all the Kokborok speaking groups closer to form a consolidated Borok identity in the state.

In spite of their felt need for preservation of their cultural identity there is also today a rising individualism and a blind copying of the west by the young. They tend to reject everything traditional, their culture, their religion, their God, their morality, their education, politics etc., sometimes they start regarding their culture as inferior to the alternative models. That is why I cannot help concluding the chapter with the observation that the Boroks as an ethnic group have no threat to their survival as an ethnic group. What is threatened is their tradition and culture for which the effort that is being made to preserve it, may not be enough.

I have stated that the problem of identity crisis and unrest in the Borok community is due to the large scale influx of migrants, Bengalisation and Westernization, which has distorted the Borok traditional way of life and its common identity. Moreover, the blind copying of dominant alien culture and use of slogans such as “threat to Borok identity” has not only resulted in the emergence of all the modern vices of individualism, opportunism and materialism but also unpredictable confusions with more or less disastrous practical consequences between the two communities i.e. the Borok community and the Bengali community (for instance, the 1980 communal riot). In line with the rest of Twipra, the Borok people are seriously confronted

with a high rate of social change, especially in the field of cultural, educational, economic and political development. As a result of their basing their new life style after Bengali, Indian and western culture, the Borok people have identified 'progress' with the idea of better living conditions. Here, of course, they are not very different from the non-Borok population of the state. The difference lies in their rejection of everything, their own, their religion, their God, their morality, their education, politics etc., and even sometimes their culture as inferior to the alternative models. As a result of this, in the relatively stable Borok society that could handle its routine predictable affairs, more and more problems have arisen and the traditional form of tribal organizations has proven inadequate to meet the new challenges.

The relatively stable Borok society that could handle its routine predictable affairs finds itself at a loss to cope with the new set of problems. This again, is not a very exceptional phenomenon, for any kind of social change involves a period of transition. The Boroks have to change in the changing times but my thesis is that as their kind of change is based on a borrowed culture, it cannot be characterized as genuine cultural change, as it does not rest upon the self-drawing and self-evaluating out of their own mental faculties. It is this that would have given continuity between their tradition (i.e. their past) and their

modernization (i.e. their present). Because of the absence of this, the Boroks have only ended up with a distorted traditional life style along with borrowed dress, religion, and a few of the modern vices of the west.

Modernity must be dependent on tradition, which implies that there must be continuity between the old and the new so as to preserve one's identity. This condition can only be fulfilled if the cultural change is from within the individual's inner world or the self-drawing and self-evaluating out of the individual Borok's mental, physical, material, moral and spiritual faculty for the development and progress of the entire life-style of the individual Borok or the entire Borok community on the basis of a genuinely integrating, what Miri calls 'deep' value.¹² This value rests upon his language, culture and pride in ancestral history as Borok community gets its particular specificity from its history, its ecology and its peculiar way of dealing with questions about itself. In Borok community there is no such satisfactory continuity; the Borok indigenous people (tribal) like other indigenous people (tribal) of the State seem to be adrift in the sea of utter helplessness. Whatever

¹² Miri, Mrinal, "Identity, Tribesman and Development" in *Interface of Cultural Identity and Development*, (ed.) Baidyanath Saraswati, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 1996, p. 74.

identity that is professed by them today seems to be only for the sake of saying and is really not self-consciously realized.

Chapter - II

The Concepts of Ethnicity and Culture

In this chapter, I will attempt (a) an analysis of some of the popular definitions of ethnicity and culture as offered in the various Dictionaries and Encyclopaedia,¹ (b) a classification of the traditional as well as the modern use of the concepts of ethnicity and culture, and (c) a relation between ethnicity and culture.

The term 'ethnic', is derived from the Greek word 'ethnikos', and it refers to: (a) 'nations not converted in Christianity: heathen, pagans'; (b) races or large groups of people having common traits and customs; or (c) groups 'in an exotic primitive culture'.² It is quite clear that these Greek meanings of the term 'ethnic' give us a heavy negative value. In the first place the term means a person who has no religion or a person who belongs to some lower form of religion other than Christianity. It also means a person who is neither a Jew (Israelite) nor a Muslim. It

¹ *Webster's Third International Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary Vol. II, New 20th Century Dictionary (Unabridged), ELBS Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy and The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences.*

² *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged (Springfield, Mass.: G and C Merriam Co., 1878), p.781; Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: G and C Merriam Co., 1967), p.285; The Oxford English Dictionary, Vol.3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), pp. 313-314.*

follows from this that the term 'ethnic' refers to the non-Christian nations outside the Christian world, large groups of people belonging to various races having common characteristics and usual practices or groups of people having foreign or outlandish ancient culture. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* the term 'ethnic' literally means 'nation especially non-Israelites, Gentile nation', and the term 'ethnicity' means 'heathendom, heathen superstition'.³ It further defines the word 'ethnic' as (a) pertaining to nations not Christian or Jewish; Gentile, heathen, pagan, (b) pertaining to race; peculiar to a race or nation; ethnological.⁴ It is very clear that these Greek meanings of the term 'ethnic' are narrow and it is not surprising that the Greek meanings of the term 'ethnic' are seldom, fully applicable to refer to the minority groups.

Shibutani and Kwan proposed an authoritative definition, which subsequently established the lines of enquiry into ethnicity. They suggested that 'an ethnic group consists of a people ...who conceive of themselves as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or factitious, and who are so regarded by others.'⁵ This definition focuses

³ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 1, Oxford Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1971. 901.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.901.

⁵ Shibutani, T., and Kwan, K. M., *Ethnic Stratification* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

on the ascriptive elements of ethnicity rather than upon cultural content. It also recognizes the fact that a sense of collective identity may, in extreme cases, have an almost wholly internal or external origin: minority groups in subordinate positions may develop a self-consciousness of a kind only because the dominant group perceives them as 'somehow different' and therefore erects barriers against complete assimilation.

Fredrik Barth⁶ pointed out that although the ethnic markers such as dress, language, house form, life-style, and even basic value orientations, used by members of ethnic groups to signal belonging may change with time, the process of self-ascription and identification need not necessarily undergo a similar change. Therefore, ethnic groups become behaviourally assimilated while yet maintaining a strong sense of ethnic identity. In this light, ethnicity is not so much a product of common living, as a product of self-awareness of one's belonging in a particular group and one's distinctiveness with regard to other groups.

For instance, Raoul Narroll regards an ethnic unit as a comparatively small community with a predominantly archaic

⁶ Barth, Fredrik (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Boston: Little Brown and Co. (1969).

character.⁷ Narroll's definition of ethnicity provides us with a narrow meaning. Because this definition of the term may at best be useful only for a traditional anthropological approach to study 'indigenous' or 'tribal' societies. In contrast to this approach, there is another popular approach, which includes not only small communities but also those with large memberships, embracing the primitive, tribal, backward people and also those in highly 'developed' and 'developing' countries.

What would actually count as ethnic? There is a view, which tells us that the term 'ethnicity' is a polymorphous concept. This means that the term has various stages of use. In other words, ethnicity is not used in a single sense, but used in several senses on various occasions at different points of time. Consequently, there are many expressions such as 'ethnic Asians', 'ethnic African' 'ethnic Japanese' 'ethnic Indians', 'ethnic Nagas', 'ethnic Mizos', 'ethnic Bengalis', 'ethnic Assamese', 'ethnic Chakmas', 'ethnic Boros', 'ethnic Boroks', 'ethnic Christians', 'ethnic Hindus', 'ethnic Muslims', 'ethnic Buddhists', and so on and so forth. The ambiguity related to ethnicity may be due to the fact that most of the fundamental concepts used in talking about human society are not clearly defined and determined. Such unclearness is not permissible in respect of concepts used in natural sciences. In fact, most

⁷ Narroll, Raoul, "Ethnic Unit Classification" in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, (ed.), Fredrik Barth, Boston: Little Brown and Co. (1969).

of the basic concepts used in the natural sciences are so clearly defined and determined that one cannot afford to use them in different senses within the scientific system without the risk of contradicting oneself. The basic concepts used in natural sciences particularly, those of physics sometimes undergo change and modification but such modification and overhauling do not take place frequently at one's sweet will.⁸ Only when there are experimental evidences pointing to the contrary and conceptual contradictions within the system, the existing scientific theory undergoes a radical change and the fundamental concepts are thoroughly revised, otherwise the concepts used in natural sciences do not undergo change. Such kind of revolution has taken place in physics and other branches of natural sciences. On the other hand, the basic categories of social sciences like 'ethnicity', 'ethnic identity', 'ethnic group', 'culture', 'nationality', 'tribal', 'non-tribal', 'indigenous' and so on, do not spring from any kind of intensive and empirical investigation into the nature of people and their ethnicity, culture, nationality and nationalism.

⁸ Malla, N., "Ethnicity and Nationalism" in *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North-East India*, ed. by M.M. Agrawal, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1996, p. 168.

To put it more succinctly, the term 'ethnicity' may be interpreted in two different senses – the traditional and the modern. Traditionally speaking, the term 'ethnicity' refers to a racial division of groups of humanity, and normally coupled with a linguistic identity. While discussing the basic attributes of ethnic communities, C.F. Ware says that an ethnic community is held together by self-consciousness emerging from race, culture, language and realism. The ethnic community possesses a greater degree of cohesiveness based on common language, traditions and a common pride for the land of origin. Ware observes:

“Supplementary to race and nationality, the strongest - reinforcing factors are language and religion, both of which are apt to be essential parts of the national culture complex The retention of the tongue is often the principal aim of those who seek to prevent an ethnic group from losing its identity, while the loss of their language is taken as a measure of amalgamation.”⁹

Given this view, it can be pointed out that in the past, ethnic identity was formed on the basis of racial and linguistic divisions of groups of people. Notions of ethnicity are cultural constructions, although in popular usage ethnicity is sometimes assumed almost to be a biological given. Ethnicity in modern usage refers to the way

⁹ Ware, C.F., “Ethnic Communities”, *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Saligman, Edwin, R.A. (Editor-in-Chief), vol.5, MacMillan Company, New York, 1957, p. 1194.

individuals and groups characterize themselves on the basis of their language, race, and place of origin, shared culture, values, and history. Central to the notion of ethnicity is a conception of a common descent, often of a mythic character.

Nathan Glazer says that the term ethnicity connotes a social group, which consciously shares some aspects of a common culture and is defined primarily by descent (i.e. inheritance).¹⁰ Milton Gordon (1964)¹¹ referred to ethnicity as a sense of 'peoplehood' created by common race, religion, national origin, history, or some combination of these. Ethnicity is often thought to be a matter of birth, but the exceptions are as frequent as the rule, especially as the social and political significance of ethnic and religious identities alters significantly according to specific historical contexts. Depending upon context it can mean a tribe or a subdivision of one, a people sharing a common origin or region of residence, or more generally a shared identity of religion and language. In the past, the terms 'ethnicity', 'ethnic identity', and 'ethnic group' were defined as the 'others' on the basis of the categories such as minorities, the tribal, the underdeveloped and so on. Today, the meanings of these categories have changed and

¹⁰ Glazer, N., "The Universalisation of Ethnicity", *Encounter* No. 44(2), 1975.

¹¹ Gordon, Milton, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1964.

have no longer any meaningful application in the understanding of man and society. Because, today every human being is regarded as ethnic since he or she is a member of some ethnic group or other. It is in this sense that the meaning of ethnicity in its modern sense is wider than that of ethnicity in its traditional sense. This is why the original connotation of the term cannot provide a valid basis for a value-neutral terminology since it involves an evaluative orientation. Ethnicity has now become constitutive of humanity. Ethnicity no longer signifies marginal group or minority; it signifies pluralism.¹² So it is quite obvious that there are an immense variety of ethnicities exclusively constitutive of human beings. Though there cannot be *the* definition of ethnicity *per se*, that it is a collectivity of human beings, is a generally accepted view, which means that it has a collective character of its own or it is a collective whole distinct from others. An ethnic collectivity consists of human beings who have one or more common characteristics, and occupy a common platform. People who belong to a particular ethnic group are conscious of their ethnic identities, which is constitutive of their membership in the group. Therefore, we can only talk about ethnicity, but we cannot see it as a physical object, say, a football or a

¹² Daniel S.C., "Ethnicity, Language and Nationalism: Some Conceptual Issues" in *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North-East India*, ed., by M.M. Agrawal, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1996, p. 49.

computer, but we can see only the indicators or object-recognitors that are symptomatic or indicative of ethnicity.

It may be mentioned here that during the last fifty-five years along with the growth of literature on ethnicity, other terms closely related to ethnicity have also crept in, ranging from “ethnic communities” (1938), “ethnocentrism” (1941), “primordial and group attachments” (1963), “minority groups” (1964), “ethnic groups” (1968), to “communal groups” (1975). In the recent times, the term ethnicity is also linked with “nation building” (1990), “nationalism” (1991), “culture” (1992), “indigenous people” (1993), and of course “tribal identity” (1994). All these terms closely associated with ethnicity always aim at identifying a particular social group of humanity. This is why in the past, the term “heathen nations” is used by Western writers while referring to a social group beyond Western Civilization, or “alien minority” within Western countries, and “descent group” which is supposed to be universal to mankind.¹³ Thus, there is a divergence of opinion with no universal acceptance of the true significance of the term ‘ethnicity’. In fact, it becomes all the more difficult if we were to apply the term to the communities of North-East India in general and Twipra in particular.

¹³ Pakem, B., “Inaugural Address,” in *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North East India*, edited by M.M. Agrawal, Dept. of Philosophy, NEHU, Shillong, 1996, p.11.

Before proceeding further I wish to emphasise that although ethnicity has become today a socio-political phenomenon in most civic societies, the concept as pointed out by Glazer and Moynihan (1975)¹⁴ makes its appearance in *The Oxford English Dictionary* only in 1972, it is a recent phenomenon. The 1980 version of *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* bypasses the term altogether, merely defining the word 'ethnic' as pertaining to nations not Christian or Jewish, 'ethnicism' as heathenism or paganism, and 'ethnography' as the scientific description of nations or races of men, their customs, habits, and differences.

Now the term 'ethnicity' is frequently extended to engage religious and national identities. For instance, in United States of America all Indians, irrespective of their race, language, religion and nationality are clubbed together and are called as 'ethnic Indians' and in Australia all Asians and all Africans are clubbed together and are called ethnic Asians and ethnic Africans respectively. From these examples we can see that the four factors of race, language, religion and nationality are unable to determine the criterion of ethnic identity of ethnic groups. Accordingly the modern concept of ethnicity has become a polymorphous and a complex one. It is not a simple concept used for a single finite or physical object, event and property. It is sometimes used in terms of territory only, sometimes in

¹⁴ Glazer, Nathan and Moynihan, D.P., (eds.) *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1975.

terms of race and language only, in terms of culture only, in terms of religion only, sometimes in terms of national identity, common claim and desire, etc. In a nutshell, it may be stated that the modern concept of ethnicity has become exclusively constitutive of human beings belonging to various races, languages, religions, communities and nationalities, whereas the traditional concept of ethnicity is exclusively constitutive of a particular group of human beings based on racial and linguistic classification. However, various types of ethnic movements based on race and language are still prevailing dynamic in human society.

Of late, it has been suggested that ethnicity provides the right soil for nationality, that it is the foundation stone for nation building. Today, race and language are unable to clearly determine the ethnicity of a social group. Because, the races cut across various language groups and a given language may belong to various races and people belonging to a given race may speak various languages. Now it will be generally agreed that 'race' signifying a fundamental division of mankind, with moral and cultural significance is a total myth. In the eighteenth Century there were only four or five races recognized in the world. Today, there are more than four hundred races. The value of these classifications of race is primarily for anthropological research. The science of genetics claims to have shown that the whole human race is one subjected to environmental differentiations. It is, therefore, quite

obvious that there seems to be no universally accepted scientific approach to determining a universal criterion of ethnicity.

It is generally said that there are three principal ways of defining ethnic groups - in terms of objective attributes, subjective feelings and behaviour.¹⁵ When we define an ethnic group in terms of objective attributes, we usually claim that there must be some distinguishing cultural features, which clearly separate one ethnic group from other groups. Language, territory, religion, colour, diet, dress, painting, music, custom or any of them may be considered as distinguishing cultural features of a particular ethnic group. It is, in fact, a difficult task to determine the boundaries of ethnic categories in this way.¹⁶ Fredrik Barth argues that even where it is possible to determine the boundaries of an ethnic group, the use of all these cultural features to identify ethnic boundaries may be superficial, confusing form with the content. Hence, an objective definition of an ethnic group is not free from difficulties. An ethnic group may also be defined in terms of subjective attributes. The problem with subjective definition of ethnic groups is that they make it impossible to answer the

¹⁵ Brass, Paul, R., *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Sage Publications, New Delhi/Newbury Park/London, 1991, p. 18.

¹⁶ Barth, Fredrik, "Introduction" and "Pathan Identity and its Maintenance," in Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), pp. 15, 131- 132.

basic question of how an ethnic group arrives at subjective self-consciousness in the first place. So, subjective definition of ethnic group is also not free from difficulties. It is said that behavioural definitions are, in fact, a form of objective definition since they assume that there are specific, concrete ways in which ethnic groups behave or do not behave, particularly in relation to and the interaction with, other ethnic groups. Behavioural definitions of ethnic groups merely suggest that there are cultural differences between ethnic groups; it is only the critical distinctions between groups that reveal themselves in interaction with other ethnic groups, which are significant for understanding each group's distinctiveness. But, it is seen in most of the cases that the presence of clear codes of behaviour amongst members of a group and their interaction with members of other ethnic groups is more evident, more characteristic and more remarkable in simple than in complex societies in which people may establish their separateness with reference to specific cultural attributes without internalizing an entirely distinct code of behaviour. Yet, the more interaction that members of an ethnic group have with members of other ethnic groups the more clarity, understanding and distinctiveness they have regarding their own ethnic group. So, it is perhaps impossible to think of the identity of a particular ethnic group without its interaction with other

ethnic groups irrespective of simplicity and complexity of the societies in which all these ethnic groups exist.

An ethnic group is sometimes viewed as a substitute for a minority. Those social scientists who refute this kind of view argue that ethnicity of a group of people is neither size nor status but the group distinctiveness or the subjective-objective criterion that is the critical factor in ethnic identification. From the facet of objective connotation, ethnicity is regarded as “primordial affinities and attachments” (Isaacs Harold 1975 and A.M. Greeley 1974) and subjectively, as an “activated primordial consciousness” (Clifford Geertz 1975). However, most of the scholars who have tried to define the concept of ethnicity have stressed upon the subjective facet of it. Among them, Max Weber defines it as a “sense of specific honour” (1965), Fredrik Barth as a “subjective process of status identification”, Sandra Wallman as a “perception of group difference” (1979), Nathan Glazer and D.P. Moynihan as “interest groups” (1975), and Daniel Bell as “interest plus affective tie” (1975). Yet, conversely, P. Van den Berghe argues for a synthesis of both the subjective and objective connotations of ethnicity so as to understand this concept lucidly. Max Weber defines ethnic groups as the one typifying the subjective dimension of an ethnic group. Yet, he views descent as one of the major bases for such a self-awareness. For him,

ethnic groups are “those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities in physical types or customs or both; or because of migration or colonization in such a way that belief is important for the continuance of non-kinship communal relationship”.¹⁷ Ethnic groups, like nations, are a collective state of mind, a collective consciousness of fellow feeling. Ethnic consciousness develops through a community of language, of race, of religion, of regional concentration, collective economic abilities, in various combinations.¹⁸

Many definitions of ethnicity emphasize a common cultural pattern, which separates the ethnic group from the immediate groups. Narroll defines the term ethnic group to designate a population which: (i) is largely racially self-perpetuating, (ii) shares basic cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural terms, (iii) makes up a field of communication and interaction, (iv) has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.¹⁹ Membership of a particular ethnic group is recognized through birth, adoption and

¹⁷ Weber, Max, “Ethnic Groups,” in Talcott Parsons et al, *Theories of Society*, Vol. 1 (New York: Free Press, 1961), pp. 305-306.

¹⁸ Laiq Jawaid, “Ethnopolitical Issues in South-East Asia” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 30, 1998, p.909.

¹⁹ Barth, Fredrik, *Introduction: In Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, edited by Fredrik Barth, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1969, pp. 9-38.

marriage. Cultural evolution and culture change in the group play significant role to shape the overt form of the group. The dichotomies and differences between two ethnic groups are not necessarily distinguishable in objective fact by any unique constellations of racial or cultural categorization. For, the racial and cultural factors are not immutable. This is why the term ethnic group may be thus used to include a caste group, a tribal group, or any other differentiated group of humans.²⁰

A concept, which figures significantly in the present study, is very closely and clearly associated with the concept of ethnicity, is culture. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word 'culture' as (1) worship; reverential homage, (2) the action or practice of cultivating the soil; tillage, husbandry, (3) the cultivating or rearing of a plant or crop, (4) the cultivating or development (of the mind, faculties, manners, etc.); improvement or refinement, and refinement of mind, tastes, and manners; the condition of being thus trained and refined; the intellectual side of cultivation, (6) the prosecution with special attention or study of any subject or pursuit.²¹ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines culture as "the

²⁰ Marriot, Mekim, *Caste ranking and community structure in five regions of India and Pakistan*, Poona, Deccan College, 1960, p.2.

²¹ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically, Vol. I, A – O, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1971, p-622.

act of developing by education, discipline, social experience: the training or refining of the moral and intellectual faculties".²² In *The Oxford English Dictionary*, culture is defined as "the cultivating or development (of the mind, faculties, manners etc.), improvement or refinement by education and training."²³ *Webster's New 20th Century Dictionary (Unabridged)* gives the following definitions of culture, (1) improvement, refinement or development by study, training etc. (2) the training and refining of the mind, emotions, manners, taste etc. (3) the result of this; refinement of thought, emotions, manners, taste etc. and (4) the concepts, habits, skills, arts, instrument, institutions etc. of a given people in a given period. But one of the most important and lucid definitions found in *ELBS Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, is that culture is development of the body, mind and spirit by training and experience

The word 'culture' derived from the Latin word 'colere' meaning 'to cultivate' means a certain kind of environment as changed and shaped by man, and also the human activity that leads to the cultural patterns.²⁴ These patterns are the society's standards, norms, values, or regularized guidelines for coping with life's demands. Without such

²² Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Vol. I, A – G, William Benton Publisher, Chicago, 1966, p. 552.

²³ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. II, C, Oxford, Clarendon Press, London, 1933, p. 1248.

²⁴ *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, p. 45.

standards, norms, codes and values, life would certainly be impossible in human society.

The word “culture” in its social, intellectual, and artistic senses is a metaphorical term derived from the act of cultivating the soil (Latin, *cultura*). The cultivation of the mind was seen as a process comparable to the cultivation of the soil; hence, the early meanings of “culture,” in this metaphorical sense, centered on a process, “the culture of the mind,” rather than on an achieved state. In fact, the first important development from this metaphorical use of “culture” was a description of certain men as “cultivated” and then as “those who are cultivated.” In this use the meaning of “culture” is very close to “civilized.”²⁵

In 1951, two renowned cultural anthropologists Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber had undertaken to compile and study the current thinking on the concept of culture. In fact, they brought together no less than 164 different definitions of culture, but as they said, actually “close to three hundred definitions” are used throughout their book. Henceforth, they reviewed 164 different definitions of culture and classified them under a variety of headings as historical, psychological,

²⁵ Williams, Raymond, “Culture and Civilization” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. I, II, Paul Edwards, Editor-in-Chief, Collier Macmillan Publishers, London, 1967, p. 273.

descriptive, normative, structural and genetic, etc. However, they tried to extract a common core in all these definitions in the following lines:

“Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived) and selected ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.”²⁶

This definition shifts the focus of culture from behavioural elements in the first half of the definition, to intellectual elements in the second half “behaviour acquired and transmitted” to “ideas and especially their attached values”.

There is a general acceptance among social scientists that culture is a system of learned behaviour acquired by a person as a member of society. Culture is shared when a group of people accepts it and organizes their lives according to it. Cultural systems usually pass from generation to generation through a process of learning. Therefore, cultures vary from group to group and make members of the same group similar to each other and every person spends a subsequential portion of his life, learning a share of his culture. Forde says, “Culture intervenes

²⁶ Kluckhohn, Clyde and Kroeber, Alfred, *Their Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Harvard University, 1952, p. 357.

as a middle term between the physical environment and human activity.”²⁷

Culture is a distinct terminology, which possesses its root at all levels of human existence. It is the total repertoire of human action and its product socially as opposed to genetically transmitted and, as such, was the exclusive preserve of man. While the culture *per se* signifies the total social heritage of mankind, a culture signifies the social heritage of a particular people. At the same time, culture is a complex whole of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, values, ideational, learned and other capabilities, and habits acquired and used as basic parameters of man’s management of his society.

According to Dewey, “Culture means at least something cultivated”²⁸ something ripened; it is opposed to the raw and the crude. Man wants to move forward for the fulfillment of his potentialities. B. Malinowski has defined culture as the “handiwork of man and as the medium through which he achieves his ends.”²⁹ Whitehead propounded that “culture is the activity of thought and receptiveness to beauty and human feeling”. In 1874, the father of modern anthropology, E.B. Tylor stated that culture is that “complex whole which includes

²⁷ Forde, C.D., *Habitat, Society and Economy: A Geographical Introduction to Anthropology*, London, 1934.

²⁸ Dewey, John, *Freedom and Culture*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1966.

²⁹ Malinowski, B., *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*. New York: A Galaxy Book, 1960.

knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”³⁰ So, an individual born in a particular community learns life-style of his own people. Lowie has defined culture as the “sum total of what an individual acquires from his society – those beliefs, customs, artistic norms, food-habits and crafts which came to him not by his own creative activity but as a legacy from the past conveyed by formal or informal education.”³¹ Linton observes “culture refers to the total way of life of any society, not simply to those parts or ways which the society regards as higher or more desirable”.³² He defines a culture as the configuration of learned behaviour and results of behaviour whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of the particular society. He also says that a culture could be regarded as the social hereditary of a society’s members.

Alfred Kroeber has defined culture as “the mass of learned and transmitted motor reactions, habits, techniques, ideas and values – and the behaviour they induce.” In the words of Clyde Kluckhohn “culture refers to the distinctive way of life of a group of people, their complete design of living”. He regards culture as a way of thinking, feeling and believing. To him, culture is the knowledge of the group stored up in memories, objects and documents of human beings for further use.

³⁰ Tylor, E.B., *Primitive Culture*, New York, 1874, Vol. 1, p.1.

³¹ Lowie, R.H., *Primitive Society*, George Routledge, London, 1921.

³² Linton, Ralph, *The Cultural background of Personality*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1947.

According to Felix Keesing culture is “the behaviour acquired through social learning.”

It is generally said to have two important facets: one immanent, the other its external manifestations. The former aspect of culture is the inner formations of the human mind, formed by the long traditions peculiar to a particular social group, whereas the latter aspect is the external manifestation, that is, the sum-total of the physical and mental reactions and activities that characterize the behaviour of human beings. ‘Culture’, in popular usage, is a collective name for the material, social, religious and artistic achievements of human groups. Other definitions of culture include traditions, customs and behaviour patterns unified by common beliefs and values.³³

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy regards ‘culture’ and ‘civilisation’ as two different concepts. According to it, culture means the cultivation of the mind while civilization is compared with the concept of barbarism, yet another social condition, which in fact, originally describes the life of a foreign group. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* further underlines that culture is an act of cultivating the soil. The cultivation of the mind is seen as a process comparable to the cultivation of the soil. Generally,

³³ Miri, S., “Wither Tribal Culture?” in *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*, ed. Mrinal Miri, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Elegant Printers, New Delhi, 1993, p. 32.

cultivation applies to land, where the farmer pays full attention to the soil in developing the crops planted. In the concept of culture similarly, the main concern is the cultivation of the individual mind for development towards the higher reality.³⁴

It may be noted that in recent times, the Researchers at the Contemporary Cultural Studies Centre of Birmingham University maintain that the term 'culture' refers to 'the way, the forms' in which group "handle" the raw material 'of their social and material existence'. According to them, 'culture' also refers to the codes with which meaning is constructed, conveyed and understood. Cultures are maps of meaning through which the world is made intelligible. Cultures are not simply systems of meaning and value carried around in the head. They are made concrete through patterns of social organization. Culture is sometimes accounted as the way the social relations of a group are structured and shaped, but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted.³⁵ Here they tend to represent cultures as fixed and abstract systems of traditions, meanings and values either simply carried over from generation to generation, or

³⁴ Williams, R. "Culture and Civilisation", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. II, (ed.), Paul Edwards, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1967, pp. 273-276.

³⁵ Cf. Peter Jacson, *Maps of Meaning*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1989, p. 2.

embodied in 'patterns of social organisation'. But cultures are not inert or dormant systems.

Given this view it may be stated that a culture is not a unique permanent entity conferring some *essential* identity upon a community. It is a holistic – a spiritual – movement towards the realization of the classical 'holy trinity' of Truth, Goodness and Beauty in an indefinite variety of ways in numerous forms of life. In the Humanities, traditionally, culture appears as a unitary notion. The unitary notion considers culture as the intellectual and artistic product of a select group of the elite, as in the word of Matthew Arnold: 'the best that has been thought or known.'³⁶

Human beings are divided into various groups and communities. As there are innumerable groups and communities, there are many different cultures. At the same time there are also cultures, which are universal in nature. However, culture can be broadly categorized into two types: 'Material' culture and 'Non-material' culture. Melville J. Herskovites talks about 'material' and 'non-material' culture in his book

³⁶ Matthew Arnold, quoted by M.M. Agrawal, in "Introduction" in *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North-East India*, M.M.Agrawal (ed.), Seminar in North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1996, p. 23.

entitled, *Cultural Anthropology*.³⁷ The word 'material' refers to something of a physical or worldly nature. For example, the book, which you are reading at present. This you can see, touch and feel. Accordingly 'material' culture comprises housing patterns, food, clothes, means to transport, and so on. Since these play a vital role in man's existence, his relationship with other men becomes stronger when he tries to acquire them. Every man wants to fulfill his basic necessities. In this attempt to meet his primary needs he comes in contact with different men, and his relationship with others becomes wider and wider as his needs increase. Therefore, we can say that relationship begins with material culture. Material culture is concrete and accumulative in nature. Material culture may also create tension among members of the society if they are unable to meet their basic needs. It also leads to competition and conflict and thus disturbs the harmonious relationship between men in a society. On the other hand, there is Non-material culture. Man's needs are not only physical and social, but also spiritual. Besides food, clothes and shelter, man has often faith in religion and he needs certain norms and laws to guide and govern him. There are certain codes and ethics that control his moral behaviour and conduct. Factors such as language, literature, science, art, law and religion constitute non-material culture.

³⁷ Melville J. Herskovites, *Cultural Anthropology*, Oxford and IBH Publishing Co. (New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta), 1995.

Non-material culture is as essential as material culture. For example, an owner of a car, while driving, may meet with a serious accident if there are no traffic rules and regulations. Similarly, a rich person may spend his income lavishly on himself if he is not aware of the moral obligation to look after his family members. Therefore, we can say that non-material culture is the guiding principle of every man's life. However, in a real-life situation, these two aspects of culture are inseparable and interdependent. Both are complementary to each other. While material culture provides a new environment to non-material culture, the latter safeguards the values of material culture.

There is no denying the fact that culture can only be realized in the individual through an encounter with other minds, it is essentially a social phenomenon. Cultural phenomena are not isolated phenomena. They are interconnected phenomena. Human beings promote their cultural values and interests through the reciprocal activities. Every culture, irrespective of its differences, influences and is influenced by another culture related to it. From this point of view it can be said that phenomena of culture are social phenomena and the concept of culture is a social concept because its values are pursued and sought in the society through the interpersonal and reciprocal activities of the people of the society. The individual members, the group and the society all

play significant role in the developments of the human culture in different ways. Since the individual, the group and the society are structurally and functionally so related with one another, influence of the one of the other is quite natural.

It must be pointed out here that although the notion of culture is associated with certain beliefs, ideas, knowledge, values, ideals, attitudes, rituals, customs, aesthetic appreciations, music, arts, myths, symbols, architectures, language, food habits, clothing, housing and manner etc., it is not essentially associated with any particular system of these elements of culture. The notion of culture can be viewed from two different angles: generic and specific. From the generic point of view we can say that the notion of culture is always associated with certain beliefs, ideas, knowledge, values, arts, ideals, attitudes, rituals, customs, aesthetic appreciation, music, arts, myths, symbols, architectures, language, food habits, clothing, housing, manners etc. and the generic characteristic features of these elements constitute the general meaning of culture which does not change from one context to another context. It remains constant throughout in all its application. While the specific meaning of culture changes from one context to another context, due to variations and specificities of the elements of culture out of which its specific meaning is constructed. In this respect

the culture of the individual is different from the culture of a group and the culture of the group is different from the culture of one society of which they form as a part.³⁸ Not only this, the culture of one society is also different from the culture of another society.

Mention may be made that some people regard 'culture' as a generic term to include within it more specific terms such as 'religion', 'language' and so on. Some other people consider it as a specific term along with 'religion', 'language' and so on. Still some others use it in both ways, that is, a generic term and a specific term. If the term 'culture' is used in both ways, a logical mistake known as category mistake will be committed. And this logical error consists in assigning elements to one category when they actually belong to another category. For example, 'Either she bought a left-hand and right-hand glove or she bought a pair of gloves (but not both).'³⁹

There is a view, which tells us that the elements of culture vary from one context to another context owing to their specific characteristic features. It goes to show that elements of culture differ from one society to another and from one period to another. When these elements of

³⁸ Melville J. Herskovites, *Cultural Anthropology*, Oxford and IBH Publishing Co.(New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta), 1995.

³⁹ Ryle, Gilbert, *The Concept of Mind*, Penguin Books Ltd, London, 1949, p. 24.

culture vary from one society to another society they make changes in the specific meaning of that culture. Thus, understanding of the culture of one society does not mean understanding of the culture of another society. Variation in the specific nature of the elements of culture means variation in the new lesson of learning of the meaning of culture. In order to understand a particular culture fully we must have to learn something new in that culture. Nevertheless, the specific meaning of culture should not be muddled with its generic meaning because both generic and specific meanings of culture are always different and distinct. It is because of this genuine fact that one's understanding of the generic meaning of culture does not mean one's understanding of the specific meaning of culture. In fact, the generic meaning of a culture is always independent of its specific meaning. But it does not follow from this that there is no connection between generic meaning of a culture and its specific meaning. But their connectedness is not opposed to their independency since both the elements of meaning of a culture can go hand in hand. Moreover, the generic meaning and the specific meaning of a culture are not identical. Because identifying them means committing a category-mistake. There are at least two different groups of people – one considering the generic meaning as fundamental and the other the specific meaning as fundamental. But whatever might be the case; the universalizability of culture is not impossible on the basis of

the generic elements of culture. So, meaningful talk about the unification of different cultures of a society by subtracting the generic elements from the specific elements is not merely logically but also practically quite possible, provided the individuals of the different cultures are willing to make necessary adjustments with one another.

The discussion so far enables me to throw some light on the distinction between the traditional and the modern use of the concept of culture. The traditional use of the concept of culture as a goal or perfection drawn from within regards culture as a process, which can be contrasted, with the more modern use of culture as condition.

The traditional view of culture emphasizes that in human societies, the so-called beliefs, customs, arts, knowledge and opinion are all handed down from the older generation to the younger generations. They may be said to have been inherited from the past or older generations. The traditional use of culture as development brings in the notion of morality in the sense that if development whether of the individual or the society happens to be attained by way of non-moral actions, then, the attainment of true and genuine meaning of culture may fall. A line of morality should therefore, be followed from generation to generation. Only thus the concept of culture as per the

traditional view is fulfilled. Take, for instance, a particular clan 'C' or a particular clan 'S' and supposing that 'C' or 'S' are found behaving immorally, that is, lacking in moral activities, one main reason of this, I think, can be attributed to their past generation who indulged in debauchery. Moreover, we often say that 'the son inherited his father' or the proverb which goes "like father like son". The point I wish to stress here is that the morals of a present clan or society are greatly determined by the role its ancestors have played in generally inculcating a high sense of adherence to moral rules in its younger generation and no immoral means of attaining perfection or development can be justified by a clan or society in its pursuit of being cultured.

The modern use of the concept of culture from the late 18th century onwards, is worth noting for the understanding of the true meaning of culture. The concept has been used in four different ways, (a) as "a general state or habit of the mind" with close relation to the idea of human perfection, (b) as "a general state of intellectual and moral development in a society as a whole", (c) as "the general body of the arts and intellectual work" and (d) as "the whole way of life", material, intellectual, and spiritual of a given society".⁴⁰ Culture

⁴⁰ Williams, R. "Culture and Civilisation", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. II, (ed.), Paul Edwards, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1967, pp. 273.

involves various kinds of development aiming at human perfection, accomplishment, refinement and self-realization and in a word, changes to a higher quality.

The modern development of the notion of culture as a condition, observes the general state of the mind, intellectual and moral development, arts and intellectual work and the whole way of life in respect of material, intellectual and spiritual needs of a given society. Here the individual and the society as a whole has in mind, a constructive feeling for the development of the individual creativity. When the individuals or the society's constructive feeling reaches its climax, it brings forth the development of life viz., intellectual, moral, material and spiritual condition of the individual and the society. This use of culture I accept as sufficient for a framework.

The concepts of ethnicity and culture have become very crucial in the identity-formation of a human group. It can be said that quest for identity of self and one's own group is a natural human behaviour. Identity of a group may be on the basis of race, religion, occupation, language, territory, etc. I have tried to show in this chapter that the origin of the term 'ethnic' is to be associated with the biological formation of human beings. But, today, cultural parameters or markers

have been added to the term ethnicity making the study of identity movements more complicated. The situation gets further confusing when we note that (a) ethnic groups are not necessarily homogenous, and (b) boundary of an ethnic group is not a stable phenomenon.

If the term ethnicity is considered in its traditional sense, it is basically a racial unity of an ethnic group. But if the term ethnicity is understood in its modern sense, then, culture becomes one of the determining elements of ethnic identity of a particular ethnic group. Ethnicity as it is used popularly by social scientists today, for instance, T.K. Oommen, Urmila Phadnis and K.L. Sharma⁴¹, refers to the way individuals and groups characterize themselves on the basis of their race, language, place of origin, shared culture, values, and history. Take the following: Ethnicity refers “to all varieties of collectivities formed on the basis of ascriptions – race, caste, language, religion and territory.” (T.K. Oommen). “Thus, an ethnic group is broadly defined as a social collectivity which possesses, and is aware of, its distinctiveness by virtue of certain shared historical experiences as well as certain

⁴¹ 1. Oommen, T.K., “Insiders and Outsiders in India: Primordial collection and cultural pluralism in nation building”, *International Sociology*, Vol. I, No. 1, March, 1986, p.72.
 2. Phadnis, U., *Ethnicity and Nation-building in South Asia: A Case Study of Sri Lanka*, Delhi, 1987, p.29.
 3. Sharma, K.L., *Society and Polity in Modern Sri Lanka*, South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1988, p. 27.

objective attributes such as race, tribe, language, dress, diet, etc. – a combination of some of which endows it with a differentiated character vis-à-vis other groups as they perceive it and it perceives them”. (Urmila Phadnis). Ethnicity is “a collectivity of a distinct nature in terms of its race, descent and culture.” (K.L. Sharma). From the above we can easily come to conclude that ethnicity has come to connote a synthesis of racial and cultural traits of an ethnic group. This conceptual transition of the term ethnicity I am trying to point out has confused people in studying and understanding the determining factors for the formation of identity of an ethnic group and is perhaps linked with some material goals and demands to be fulfilled by the ethnic group through various types of mass movements.

Chapter - III

The Concept of Identity

In the previous chapter I have hinted at the concepts of ethnicity and culture, and the formation of a community identity. In this chapter I will undertake to analyse some of the popular definitions and meanings of the concept of identity. I will also attempt to discuss the concepts of personal identity and community identity with special reference to Mrinal Miri's two articles titled "Identity and the Tribesman" and "Identity, Tribesman and Development".

People age, some trees regularly shed their leaves, ice melts with the coming of spring, and wood, when burned, gives way to fire and ash. The world seems to be in perpetual flux, undergoing ceaseless transformation. Yet in spite of the alterations we notice, we want to say that this is the same tree which shed its leaves last month, that this adult is the same person we knew as a child, and that this pool of water is made up of the same "stuff" as the piece of ice which melted there, and this ash is the same "stuff" as the powder of wood which burned in fire. Philosophical reflection about the nature of change, about the problem of identifying or re-identifying something or someone, gives rise

to a set of issues, which cluster under the name of “the problem of identity”. In its simplest form, this problem may be thought of as the problem of trying to give a true explanation of those features of the world which account for its sameness, on the one hand, and for its diversity and change, on the other. Put in modern terminology, the problem of identity is that of trying to give a true account of the use (or uses) of such words as “same,” “identity,” “change,” and “diversity,” and for such related expressions as “similar,” “like,” and “different,” in order to describe picturesquely those features of the world which the use, or uses, of these terms is intended to mark out.

There are several meanings of the term ‘identity’ given in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*: “(a) Sameness of essential or generic character in different instances. (b) Sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing. (c) Unity and persistence of personality and (d) The condition of being the same with something described or asserted.”¹ The first two meanings lead us to the concept of cultural oneness of group of people. When we speak of group of people having an identity we imply that they have some similarity (usually in the cultural aspect) or they think that they have some similarity. So, we can define identity as “commonness of culture”. In *The Compact Edition*

¹ *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, Vol. II, H – R, William Benton, Publisher, Chicago, 1966, p. 1123.

of the Oxford English Dictionary, the same word 'identity' is defined as (a) the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness, (b) the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality, (c) 'the self-same thing', (d) the equality of two expressions for all values of the literal qualities; distinctively denoted by the sign \equiv ; an equation expressing identity, an identical equation, (e) the condition of being identified in feeling, internal, etc. and (f) (In Logic) Law or principle of identity, the principle expressed in the identical proposition.²

Our unreflective apprehension of the world suggested an outlook that at any given moment it exhibits features of both permanence and change, of both sameness and difference. This outlook is sometimes called the common-sense view of the world. This view seems supported by logical considerations, as well as by those based upon observation. For it seems a matter of logic that when someone truly asserts of something that it is changing, he thereby implies that there is a

² *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically, Vol. I, A – O, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 1368.

“something” which remains untouched and unaffected by the transformations that “it” undergoes. The identification of that which remains untouched by change while undergoing change has traditionally been part of the philosopher’s task. If one believes that any correct philosophical analysis of the world must ultimately do justice to our common-sense view of it, the problem becomes singularly acute, for the philosopher is often driven to a picture of the world, which is incompatible with this common-sense view. On the one hand, he seems impelled (as Heraclitus presumably was) to maintain that the world is nothing but process and flux and that nothing remains untouched by or immune to change. On the other hand, he is often driven to the position that there must be something, which remains exempt from change (Zeno and Parmenides). In the history of this problem the common-sense view stands as a watershed dividing thinkers into two great streams, particularly over the question of whether the world is “really” changing or not. Most of the great theories of antiquity – such as those of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Zeno, and Plato – fall on one side or the other of this watershed: they affirm either that nothing in reality remains constant or that whatever is real cannot change, and hence that whatever appears to be changing is unreal and illusory. Many other great classical theories (those of Democritus, Aristotle, and Epicurus)

may be viewed as compromises attempting to reconcile these conflicting claims, and thus as attempting to justify the common-sense outlook.

There are two broad issues about the concept of identity to which both classical and medieval social scientists and philosophers addressed themselves – (i) first issue springs from the conception of identity interpreted as meaning permanence (amid change) and (ii) second issue springs from the conception of identity as unity (amid diversity). The problem of identity as permanence gives rise to the problem of change, which involves determining what, if anything remains constant when we say of a certain thing that it changes, whereas the problem of identity as unity gives rise to the problem of universals, which may arise independently of any observation of change. We may ask, for instance, whether two green spots seen simultaneously in a visual field exhibit the same colour when the colours of the spots are inseparable from one another. In such a case we ask whether what appears to be diverse (different things) is really not diverse (is the same thing), whereas in the problem of change we ask of a certain something whether, after a lapse of time or a transformation in the thing, it is the same thing it was before the lapse of time or the transformation occurred. The problem of change, for instance, gives rise to the problem of substance, problems about the relation between what seems to be so

and what is so (appearance and reality), and the problem of personal identity; and the problem of universals gives rise to the problem of individuation and the problem of abstract ideas.

Writers belonging to the early modern period (seventeenth and nineteenth centuries) concern themselves with five important questions about the concept of identity: (i) how the notion of identity originates; (ii) what the term “identity” (or “sameness”) means; (iii) whether it is possible for two objects to be identical in all respects and yet differ numerically (the identity of indiscernibles); (iv) what constitutes personal identity; and (v) what is meant by “identical proposition.”

Both Locke and Hume treated the problem of the origin of the concept of identity at length and were in considerable agreement in their diagnosis of the origin of the same. In Book II of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke suggested that the idea of identity originates through a comparison of the “very being” of a thing, observed existing at a determinate time and place, with the same thing existing at another time and space. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume proposed a similar but somewhat subtler analysis that had much the same conclusion. Hume argued that the perception of a single object gives rise to the idea of unity, not of identity, while the perception of a

number of objects conveys the idea of multiplicity. Since there can be “no medium betwixt unity and number”, the idea of identity can arise neither from the perception of a single object nor from a multiplicity of objects seen simultaneously or in a single moment of time. The solution to the dilemma is to be found in the notion of time, or duration. The notion of identity arises from a propensity of the mind to articulate *invariableness or uninterruptedness to an object while tracing it*, without a break in the span of attention, through a variation in time. Hume termed such a propensity “a fiction”.

Almost all the writers of the period under discussion, from Descartes to Kant, took the term “identity” to mean that an object “is the same with itself” (Hume). These formulations were expressed by the logical principle, regarded as one of the basic laws of reasoning, $[(x) x = x]$. In this period queries arose as to the ontological status of this principle – whether it refers to a relation or to a property which all objects possess – a query that was taken up in the writings of Hegel and post-Hegelians (F.H. Bradley, J.M.E. McTaggart) and that became the subject of speculation in the works of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell at the beginning of the twentieth century.³

³ Stroll, Avrum, “Identity” in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, edited by Paul Edwards, Vol. 4, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. & The Free Press, New York, 1967, pp. 121-124.

G.W.F. Leibniz talks about the question whether it is possible for two objects to be identical in all respects and yet to differ numerically. In our ordinary speech we make a distinction between “*the* identical automobile” (which may have been taken away for repairs and been returned) and “*an* identical automobile” (an acceptable replacement for one damaged beyond repair). Everyday discourse thus allows for two items to be identical and yet numerically distinct. Still, the ordinary human, if pressed, may be inclined to agree that “an identical automobile” may not be exactly the same as the one it replaces. The Leibnizian response to the query, which emerges from and is demanded by his general metaphysical system, maintains even more strongly that it is impossible for two things to differ only numerically. This response receives expression in his writings in a formal maxim generally referred to as the principle of the identity of indiscernibles. Leibniz formulated this principle in a number of different ways. In the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (IX) he stated it as follows: “it is not true that two substances may be exactly alike and differ only numerically, solo numero,” while in the *Monadology* (9) he wrote, “It is necessary, indeed, that each monad be different from every other. For there are never in nature two beings which are exactly alike and in which it is not possible to find an internal difference or one founded upon an intrinsic quality

(denomination).” And in his Fourth Paper to Clarke (see. 4) he wrote, “There are no two individuals indiscernible from one another.”

The modern view of the concept of identity is found in the work of Gottlob Frege. From Frege’s time to the present, questions about identity or sameness have been interpreted and investigated as questions about the identity of meaning. He maintains that identity is to be interpreted as a relation holding between the names or signs of objects. When we utter an identity sentence such as “Venus is the morning star,” what we wish to express by this utterance is that the terms “Venus” and “the morning star” both name the same thing, a certain celestial object. If the relation of identity is interpreted as holding between names referring to a given object, one is faced with the following paradox. It is obvious that the sentences “ $a = a$ ” and “ $a = b$ ” generally have different cognitive significance. For instance, the sentence “The morning star is identical with the morning star” (which is an instance of “ $a=a$ ”) is analytic and truism, while the sentence “The morning star is identical with the evening star” (which is an instance of “ $a=b$ ”) is synthetic and represents a “valuable extension of our knowledge.” But if a and b are the same object, and identity is taken as a relation holding between this object and itself, then it is impossible to

explain how the two sentences can differ in cognitive content, which they obviously do.

It is generally accepted among the social scientists that the concept of identity, like that of personal identity, is a construct by which individuality presents its distinctness and features that distinguish one individual from another and one ethnic group from another. Identity seems to be a strategy of adjustment in consonance with the individual's capacities, aspirations and the accepted social norms, codes and mores. It is thus sometimes, said to be possible to conceive of a community identity as analogous to individual identity, for, belonging to a particular community ensures the sharing of common social norms and pattern of culture. Therefore, it can be said that both individual and community identity are shaped by the content and process of socialization within a pattern of culture. The concept of identity may be viewed at two different levels – one, the level of individuality where it transcends culture or society that may be referred to as the 'primordial' identity and the other at the level of 'interest group' where individual identity blends with the cultural and social milieu, in fact, in constant interaction with culture and society and in the process, strategies of social adjustment are evolved. Identity may be viewed at the community level too – a 'primordial' community identity where a community is

perceived in isolation without extraneous influences, as well as at the 'interest group' level, where a community or a section of the community do not perceive themselves nor can be perceived in isolation, but are always interwoven warp and weft with other communities or ethnic groups. In some cases, the emerging 'interest group' identity integrates or harmonizes with the 'primordial' identity and in some cases it is in the process of being integrated passing through the normal ups and downs of adjustment.

It may be stated that identity can be defined in personal context as well as in social context. In personal context, it is the summation of those psychic, physical and mental tracts, which define the person's peculiarity and uniqueness. In social context it refers to set of common characteristics, which distinguish one society from another with the help of distinct myths, history, world-view and recognized pattern of social relationship. It then aims at emphasizing commonness and identity with one's own people and also emphasizing commonness and identity with others.⁴

It is true that there are many different racial, linguistic, cultural, religious, and regional groups in our country. But meanwhile, the line of

⁴ Mahapatra, Sitakanta, *Modernisation and Ritual: Identity and Change in Santal Society*, Delhi, OUP, 1986, pp. 1- 3.

clear-cut demarcation between all these groups is not very clearly drawn and not fixed for all time to come. Indeed, the so-called dividing line between all these groups keeps on changing from time to time. In spite of all these things, people cry and search for their ethnic, cultural, and sub-nationality identity. It is often argued that these are what give life and blood to particular groups. In fact, it is pleaded that the loss of such identities leads to the elimination of the individual in a substantive way.

What, then, about the nature of identity? Why should we retain and struggle for identity? Does a person have only one kind of identity or he or she is a combination of many identities? The so-called protagonists of identity theory have rarely answered such questions about identity. The problem of identity is very significant in the present study. An individual or a collectivity may be characterized from the point of race, culture, language, religion, territory and so on so as to constitute a distinct identity. There is not one single vantage point for the purpose (Refer Chapter – II, p. 32). In fact, the vantage point is dictated and decided by the motive force that one has. Moreover, the so-called religion, language, culture, etc. do not constitute an integral part of what is known as the being of the individual. Indeed, the individual acquires them in due course of time. But at certain stage, the acquired

characteristics of individual become dominant. It is a generally accepted view that human beings in general feel at ease with individuals of their own cultural, religious and racial groups but at the same time it is not a necessary fact.⁵ That means persons of a human group may always feel or may not feel comfortable with other individuals of the same human group. Of course, in almost all cases, perhaps, they may feel comfortable with other members of their own group or community.

In his paper "Identity and the Tribesman", Mrinal Miri attempts a fresh look at the concept of identity - personal identity and identity of community. The concept of personal identity, he says, is one of many concepts of identity. The concept of identity, he points out, has been seen as presenting a twofold problem: "one is the problem of identity of a *thing, anything at any given time*; and the other is the problem of identity of a *thing, anything through time*."⁶ These two problems may be said to correspond to two aspects of the concept of identity.

In the perspective of the concept of identity in its one facet i.e. the problem of identity of a *thing, anything, at any given time*, he points

⁵ Malla N., "Ethnicity and Nationalism" in *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North-East India*, edited by M.M. Agrawal, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1996, p. 167.

⁶ Miri, Mrinal, "Identity and the Tribesman" in *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*, ed. Mrinal Miri, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Elegant Printers, New Delhi, 1993, p. 165.

out, we use the concept of identity when we intend to express our feelings and thoughts through judgements, for instance, 'That is a boy, and not a girl', 'This is a toy car, and not a real car', 'This is a television, and not a computer', etc. In fact, it is very obvious that we must be competent to use any concept before we use the notion of identity. For, our competence to use the notion of identity in this aspect is presupposed by our competence to use any concept at all. To use a concept is said to bring some particular or particulars under it, and to bring a particular under a concept is said to identify it as an item of certain kind. The problem of identity, which this aspect of the notion of identity presents is expressed in questions of the identity: what is it for something to be a horse, as opposed, say to a colt? "When is something to be called an illusion and not a mere hallucination?" It is generally agreed that in most cases a problem arises because our conventions governing the use of concepts are not sharply defined, which, therefore, allow for borderline instances.⁷ Miri takes up the concepts of a person and personal identity to illustrate this point.

There are, he says, three principal reasons for the difficulties associated with defining the concept of a person. These are: (i) Although self-consciousness is thought to be essential for anything to be a person,

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

the debate about whether self-consciousness requires as its basis (substratum), a thing different from the human body, is too substantial to be treated merely as an attempt at laying bare the conventions governing the use of the concept of a person, and, thereafter, leaving things as they are, (ii) 'Personhood' is something that I ascribe to myself; and it cannot be just a matter of convention that I call myself a person; it matters immensely to me whether I am a person or not irrespective of how people use or do not use the concept of a person, (iii) The concept of a person is too basic (primitive), for its fate to be decided merely by conventions. Our conventions *presuppose* this concept rather than determine it.⁸ In spite of all this being, perhaps, correct, the debate about the concept of a person (what it is to be a person) is sadly inconclusive. Perhaps, this very fact should not be considered as a surprise in philosophy, because it is completely filled with such inconclusive debates. It is a generally accepted view that the human beings are considered to be language wielding creatures; concept wielding creatures; reason giving creatures; judging or thinking creatures; and so on. They are also believed to be value and religion oriented beings. The denial of this orientation would be self-refuting, or self-stultifying on the part of the mankind. In this regard, Miri says that

⁸ Miri, Mrinal, "Identity and the Tribesman" in *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*, edited by Mrinal Miri, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Elegant Printers, New Delhi, 1993, p. 165.

one of the things that have been peripheral so far in the debate about persons is a consideration of man as a self-evaluating creature. It seems to him that bringing this into focus might just be the thing that will open up fresh channels of thought in the debate about persons.

The concept of identity in its other facet, i.e. *identity of a thing through time*, is considered next by Miri. In this aspect the concept of identity is considered to be a fairly determinate concept. It is taken to be sharply distinguished from the notion of similarity. There are various ways of differentiating these two notions. One way of making the distinction between them in terms of the 'logic of relations' Miri points out, is as follows: The relationship of the notion of identity is both symmetrical and transitive, whereas that of similarity is merely symmetrical but not transitive. This follows from this that if A is identical with B and B with C, then it is necessarily the case that A is identical with C: while if A is *similar* to B and B to C, it is *not* necessarily the case that A is also similar to C. This means that A may or may not be similar to C. Another distinction between the two notions i.e. identity and similarity that is emphasized, is made in the following way: A is *either* identical *or* not identical with B; it cannot be the case that A is *both* identical and not identical, or more or less identical with B at a time. On the other hand, the notion of similarity is not such an

all-or-nothing relationship. There is no difficulty in the thought that A is both similar and dissimilar to B, or A is more or less similar and dissimilar to B.

Miri says that once the concept of identity, in its second aspect, is thus cut to its logical size, the debate about identity, say, personal identity, takes the form of sorting out logical puzzles that arise on a strict adherence to the demands of the concept. But here, as in the debate about the other aspect of the concept of identity, the debate remains inconclusive, in spite of increasingly sophisticated attempts at reaching a conclusion. Logical puzzles can be shown to arise at unsuspected places on any theory, which claims to have specified the criterion of personal identity – any theory, that is, which accepts the ‘logic’ of the concept of identity mentioned above.

It is perhaps generally agreed that the two facets of the concept of identity are closely related. We cannot even begin to ask a question about the identity of a person through time without first obtaining the knowledge about what it is to be a person at any given time at all. In this regards, it may be stated that unless I know who I am at this moment it is impossible for me to think and know what or who I shall be at another moment of near future. In this sense, my knowledge of my

personal identity at any given time may, perhaps, be considered as an apriori condition for my knowledge of my personal identity through time. It is also said that my knowledge of personal identity through time is presupposed by my knowledge of personal identity at any given time. Thus, one may not know what it is to be one's own identity of the future without knowing one's identity of the past and the present. Miri further points out that a discussion of what constitutes the continued identity of a person may, in its turn, throw light on what it is to be a person. In engaging in the former discussion we may, as it were, begin with a preliminary, intuitive understanding of what it is to be person, and as the discussion proceeds, our intuitive understanding may become sharpened and more articulate, which, in its turn, may generate fresh insights in our thinking about personal identity through time. There is no circularity involved in such a procedure. If we insist on a geometrical metaphor to describe it – there is here a *spiral* rather than a circle.

It follows from the above that identity *at a time* and identity *through time* are thus related. But how do considerations of value enter, if at all, into the concept of personal identity in either or its two facets? One thing, which seems to have been generally accepted in the debate of the concept of personal identity is that the most basic and inalienable fact about anybody's being a person is that she or he must be capable of

ascribing various kinds of properties (predicates) to herself or himself: this is what is involved minimally in the notion of self-awareness.⁹ Hence, a person must, at least, be competent to make assertions of the kind: 'I am a human being', 'I am a research scholar', 'I am writing my dissertation', 'I am in severe pain now', and so on. As Miri points out that it is generally agreed that self-awareness, in this minimal sense, requires, on the part of the subject of such awareness, that he or she be a wielder of language, and also be a linguistic being. The vital and fundamental fact about a person is that he or she is a self-conscious (therefore, language-wielding) being. It is an equally significant and inalienable fact about a person that he or she is a self-reflective agent – a being that acts and chooses courses of action. In fact, to act, generally, is to do one thing rather than another. This is certainly done generally and however implicitly on the basis of some evaluation. Hence, it is impossible for a person to ascribe any property (properties) to himself or herself without using language and he or she cannot even think of him or her without using language. Thus, he or she must necessarily be a linguistic, self-questioning and thinking being so as to be called as a person.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 165

In his paper titled "Identity, Tribesman and Development" Mrinal Miri raises the question "Who am I?" or "What am I?" He says that the question has been treated differently in different styles of philosophical thought. The question may seem, for example, to be a question not about the mundane or the earthly, but about the metaphysical or the transcendent. He points out that as a question about the mundane, it can – so it has been thought – never have an adequate answer, for every possible answer leaves a crucial residue, which is beyond the pale of the answer. Thus, "I am this body", "I am this mind", "I am the same as this set of properties, or memories" cannot – none of them – be an adequate answer to the question, because the 'I', as it were, is detachable always from any particular body, or mind or any set of properties. One might, then, say that the answer to the question is not something that can be articulated in the ordinary way; it is something that is ultimately a matter of mystical realization.¹⁰

Miri mentions that the non-mystical mode, definitely, rejects the idea of the detachability or irreducibility of the 'I' as merely apparent and insists that the question in principle can be answered in a mundanely adequate fashion. He points out that there are several such

¹⁰ Miri, Mrinal, "Identity, Tribesman and Development" in *Interface of Cultural Identity and Development*, (ed.) Baidyanath Saraswati, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 1996, p. 69.

mundane approaches to the question. He mentions just two: (i) the approach where the autological version of the question is suspended in favour of what is considered its equivalent non-autological – neutral, so to speak – version, viz., “What is a person?” “What constitutes personal identity?” The answer to the question, then, is sought in terms of the correct analysis of the concept of a person and of specifying the criteria of personal identity. The debate here proceeds from the initial idea that the concept of a person, of personal identity, may be significantly different from any other concept, and that, our search for criteria might have to follow a correspondingly different track. However, every such search seems to have got bogged down in logical puzzles of an intractable nature, thus giving rise to the suspicion that perhaps the question ought to have been framed differently, and that the search for an answer ought to have been along a different route, or that mysticism was perhaps unavoidable. (ii) The second way is to retain the autological version of the question, and to treat it as demanding an answer, which, while being indeed mundane, will require an ever deeper cognitive-moral luminosity about oneself. It is difficult from the first way in that it does not regard the problem of identity as an issue about the correct analysis of a concept and of specifying the criteria of its application, but as an issue about embarking on a moral intellectual journey into oneself.

Here Miri is not overtly interested in the mystical – not because he thinks the mystical is erroneous or illusory – but simply because he feels more at home with the non-mystical mode of thinking. However, he clarifies that if the mystical is found to be lurking behind some of the things that he has to say. Of the two mundane approaches that he has mentioned above, he ignores the first and partially explores the second. This is both because he finds the second more interesting in itself, and because it is more relevant to the present context.

Who, then, am I? he asks. This question is asked against the background of certain kinds of knowledge about myself that I already possess, for example, that I am a human being, that I am a self-reflective as well as a self-evaluative creature, that my capacity to wield language is a condition of my being such a creature. Apart from all this knowledge about myself, the question seeks further illumination. In order to illuminate the question further, Miri refers to Charles Taylor's distinction between two orders of evaluation¹¹ - (i) 'weak' evaluation and (ii) 'strong' evaluation. For an elucidation of the notion of identity, this distinction is useful and tenable, as, hinted by Charles Taylor himself. Weak evaluation does not make any qualitative distinction between one

¹¹ Taylor, Charles, "What is Human Agency" in *Human Agency and Language*, Philosophical Papers 1, Cambridge, 1985.

desire and another. It is *not* based on considerations which yield judgements of the kind: desire X is intrinsically superior to desire Y; there is something reprehensible, unworthy about having desires of a certain kind; persons motivated by desire of a certain kind have moral or spiritual depth. A weak evaluator desists from the pursuit of a particular desire not because of the kind of desire it is, but because of consideration of the following sort: its time and place is not quite convenient; the pursuit of another desire will lead to greater overall satisfaction; the object of some other desire is more attractive. To take examples: should I eat now that I am hungry, or wait for another hour when I know that my favourite dish will be there?, Should I watch a recording of the world-cup soccer semifinal between England and West Germany or should I rather watch the recording of the one day cricket match between the West-Indies and Australia – when it is the case that if each was available separately from the other I wouldn't resist either. It is clear that in each of these cases of weak evaluation a person's choice is not between desires, which are, in any strong sense *qualitatively* distinct from one another. Miri mentions that when in making a choice, considerations of convenience, consequences and attractions etc. are exhausted; the weak evaluator has nothing to fall back upon, by way of reflection, than perhaps just a shrug of the shoulders.

By contrast, in making a strong evaluation, the agent is guided primarily by considerations of the *quality* of one desire as opposed to that of another. A desire is considered qualitatively superior to an alternative and this superiority is expressed in the “language of higher and lower, noble and base, courageous and cowardly, integrated and fragmented and so on”.¹² But because of this language of qualitative contrast available to the strong evaluator, his evaluation is also ‘deeper’. “To characterize one desire or inclination as worthier or nobler or more integrated etc. than others is to speak of it in terms of the kind of quality of life it expresses and sustains for the strong evaluator reflection examines the different possible modes of being of the agent. Motivations and desires do not only count in virtue of the attraction of the consummations, but also in virtue of the kind of life and kind of subject that these desires properly belong to”.¹³ This additional dimension adds depth, “because now we are reflecting about our desires in terms of the kind of being we are in having them or carrying them out. Whereas a reflection about what we feel like more, which is all a simple weigher can do in assessing motivations, keeps us as it were, at the periphery; a reflection about the kind of beings we are takes us to the center of our existence as agents”.¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26

Indeed, 'reflection about what we are or are not' is precisely a reflection about our identity, which is said to be bound up with the strong evaluations that we make. The answer to the question, "What is my identity?" cannot consist in a simple enumeration of properties or capacities that I happen to possess. These may indeed figure in the answer, but they figure only in so far as they are important in my assessment of what I fundamentally am or ought to be. Thus, suppose I answer the question, "what is my identity?" with "I am an Indian above all else" – this means that my being an Indian defines me in a way which no other description of me can – descriptions such as, I am a teacher, a research scholar, a football player, an occasional writer of philosophical articles, an admirer of Indian classical music, a God fearing person, a vegetarian, a nature-watcher and so on. To be deprived of this identity is for my being – my *personal* or *human* being – to be eroded in a way profoundly different from the way in which the non-availability of any of the other descriptions might possibly erode my personal or human identity.

"While my identity is thus bound up with my strong evaluations, my self-identifications are frequently clouded with uncertainties, and are, therefore, subject to clearer, finer articulations; *also* to self-deceptions, and therefore, to corrections which will have powerful

evaluative overtones.”¹⁵ Miri further states that although greater articulacy is a necessary correlate of strong evaluations, it is similarly not necessary that at any particular point of time I articulate or am ever capable of articulating a strong evaluation of mine, or self-identification, with any degree of clarity and assurance. Sometimes, there is assurance but not lucidity or clarity. “In fact my most fundamental evaluations – those which constitute my identity and touch me in the center of my being – are also the evaluations which are the least articulated”; I am the least clear about them and therefore am prone to being (self) deceived about them. “It is those evaluations which are closest to what I am as a subject, in the sense that shorn of them, I would break down as a person, which are among the hardest for me to be clear about. Thus the question can always be paused; ought I to reevaluate my most basic evaluations? Have I really understood what is essential to my identity? Have I truly determined what I sense to be the highest mode of life?”¹⁶ Yet, paradoxically perhaps, it is these identity-determining evaluations, which constitute the framework in terms of which I generally make my other evaluations as an agent.

¹⁵ Miri, Mrinal, “Identity and the Tribesman” in *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*, (ed.) Mrinal Miri, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Elegant Printers, New Delhi, 1993, p. 169.

¹⁶ Taylor, Charles, “What is Human Agency” in *Human Agency and Language*, Philosophical Papers 1, Cambridge, 1985, p. 40

In a nutshell, to return to the distinction between identity at a *given time* and identity *through time*, it is clear that on the kind of description of personal identity that we have before us, it is impossible even to attempt to answer the question, “What am I?” without reference to the past. I cannot even know what I am or what I ought to be unless I also know what *I have been*. So, questions about my basic evaluations Miri points out, arise in specific contexts – contexts in which my role as agent plays the pivotal role contexts in which I am forced to ask questions of the kind: “Must I, at this point of my life, continue to do X, or must I do Y instead, which will change the course of my life, but which is truer to the core of my being?” It is clear that questions such as these demand an evaluative attention to my moral (in a large sense) past, to myself as *having been engaged* in the world as a responsible agent. “And here too self-identification is a matter of articulating my strong evaluations, getting increasingly clearer about them, finding the bounds of my moral being. Thus, I cannot attempt to determine my *identity at a time* without, at the same time, being concerned with my *identity through time*.”

It may be a related point that “I emerge as a strong evaluator and, therefore, as a person at all, through a continuous reflective interaction within my immediate human community, I am inheritor of a

moral domain: I am a son, a father, a teacher, a farmer, a friend, a husband and so on. Each of these descriptions of me presupposes a preexisting, more or less continuous field of human practice within which various evaluations are made. Indeed it is possible for me to see my life as a staccato existence divided unconnectedly between these fields. What would my identity be in that case? It is clear that it would not then make sense to talk about the kind of identity we have so far been concerned with, i.e. an identity which is illumined by strong evaluations of a fundamental kind – strong evaluations which also at the same time define for me single non-staccato moral horizon.”¹⁷ Miri refers here to Gadamer who points out that such a horizon need not, of course, be static, its boundaries may expand or contract, and it may at times find common ground with other such horizons and shift its center of gravity. The horizon is rather something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion. It is not historical consciousness that sets the surrounding horizon in motion. But in this motion becomes aware of itself.¹⁸ Correspondingly, my continued

¹⁷ Miri, Mrinal, “Identity and the Tribesman” in *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*, edited by Mrinal Miri, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Elegant Printers, New Delhi, 1993, p.170.

¹⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 271.

identity through time would, then, also be a matter of the aggregate of continuities of the different roles. But, of course, an aggregate of different continuities does not constitute a single continuity. Alternatively, the self can be thought of as something independent, abstracted from all these continuities – as totally featureless spark of freedom (e.g. Sartre and some analytic philosophers). But to be featureless is also to be unchanging, and to be unchanging is, therefore, to be timeless. It would not therefore make sense to talk of such a self as either continuous or discontinuous. For, it is by a continuous effort to articulate the underlying unity of these different fields of human practices that I discover and rediscover – more or less falteringly – my moral domain – the domain within fundamental identity determining evaluations are made. A temporal dimension is, therefore, a necessary aspect of my identity *at a time*. Therefore, “my history is necessarily woven into my identity”, which seems to be related to the identity of my own community.

Miri separates out a few points – in relation to the discussion above – which are as follows: (i) First there are some powerful theories about man, according to which, the distinction between strong evaluation and weak evaluation is spurious one. Such, for example, are the theories of Freud and Mill (utilitarianism). For Freudianism strong

evaluations are spurious because they are never genuinely operative; they are devices used by the self to camouflage the working of desires, among which only weak evaluations can be made – and it is such desires and (weak) evaluations among them which are ever truly operative in human behaviour. Strong evaluations are therefore reducible to weak evaluations. As to utilitarianism it is well known that it does not believe in any distinction of quality between desires: all desires are of one and the same kind, and they differ only in degree: strong evaluations are thus an impossibility, (Mill's famous statement to the effect that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied is therefore a repudiation of his own utilitarianism. The father of utilitarianism was not himself a utilitarian.) Miri does not here wish to discuss any such theory; he merely contents himself with asserting that while it certainly possible to imagine a life totally devoid of strong evaluations, any attempt to eliminate the latter is also an attempt to denude human life of its specific significance. (ii) One's conviction about one's strong evaluations may be mistaken. The commonest form of this mistake consists of taking what is in reality weak evaluation to be strong evaluation. (Freudianism is correct at least to the extent it has shown such mistakes to be a common phenomenon). Take a philanthropist who, towards the end of his life, is disillusioned by the glamour and power of wealth and contemplates giving away all his wealth to help

feed the hungry of the world. He wishes from now on to live simply, to commit himself to an ever-deeper realization of the mindlessness of a life of ceaseless pursuit of wealth. Maybe he would return to his village, which he had abandoned decades ago, in search of the solidity, integrity and wisdom that, as he now realizes, informed the life of many a village elder. But this man also has children all of whom have grown to dislike him immensely which dislike he reciprocates without ever consciously acknowledging it, with equal intensity; and these children have never outgrown their parasitic dependence on him. Now does he wish to give away his wealth out of genuine sympathy for the suffering of the poor and the starved, or does he really do so out of a desire to cripplingly hurt his children? It is more than likely that the philanthropist is self-deceived; also his self-deception may be of a deeper order than the above narration suggests; it may be the stuff of which tragedy is made. (iii)

Relatedly, our most fundamental evaluations – and therefore our identity – are frequently steeped in darkness, which is what makes self-deceptions and distortions about identity such a common phenomenon. To search for one's identity is to attempt to achieve an articulation that is free from self-deception and distortion, and to realize that one may be self-deceived and yet not be able to see through distortions is to be faced with a crisis of identity.

In the light of the discussion above, Miri raises a question, what, then, about tribal identity? It is clear that in the context of present study, Miri's interest is not that of empirical data collector or census official, however detailed, authentic, and 'scientific' his particular enquiry might be. He is presently interested in tribal identity in the sense of its being determined by strong evaluation – in the sense in which 'allegiance to the tribe' more precisely 'allegiance to the tribe' becomes a value for the tribesman, which overrides other values in a fundamental way. That tribal identity, in the sense, can become a powerful reality we all know. It is something for the sake of which one may be prepared to give one's life, and also frequently, as we know too well, to take another's life. That means the tribal identity is determined by their strong evaluation – 'allegiance to tribe' in such a way, for the sake of which the tribesman is perhaps ever ready to do things at the cost of his and other lives. What greater proof, one might ask, can there be of the reality and power of tribal identity?

As such the question is highly rhetorical in nature, which must make us think in depth. There is always something unclear about giving and taking of life, whatever the avowed purpose of this might be. It might be said that giving and taking of life have now become such common place phenomenon that they no longer surprise us, remind us of

the existence of darker or evil forces. But when all is dark or when evil forces control everything the need to remind oneself to darkness or brightness might not normally arise. 'Allegiance to the tribe' which may provoke, or seem to provoke, such giving and taking is likewise difficult of articulation and comprehension. It is perhaps true that the tribal community for that matter any other community – tribal or non-tribal, gets its particular integrity from: (i) its history; (ii) its ecology in which the natural, the cosmic, the moral, the aesthetic and the spiritual space are integrally united in a living relationship of meanings; (iii) its own peculiar way of dealing with arguments about itself. Miri says that an adequate articulation of my 'allegiance to my tribe' would naturally involve my gaining clarity about all these three. He further points out that any living tradition – tribal or non-tribal – must be capable of engaging in arguments about itself, of asking itself or aspects of itself.¹⁹ Thus, the tribal community or any other community for that matter having a living tradition must be able to ask questions of right or wrong, proper or improper, truth and falsehood, logical or illogical, about itself. In other words, when a tradition has lost this capacity or ability – it has lost its vital core. My 'allegiance to my tribe' would minimally mean my allegiance to all these things. But it is quite difficult to make things

¹⁹ Miri, Mrinal, 'Identity and the Tribesman' in *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*, (ed.) Mrinal Miri, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Elegant Printers, New Delhi, 1993, p. 172.

lucid to oneself, as a tribesman, one's relationship to one's history, culture, religion, and also to the domain of other values to which one is born. Miri says that it is also very difficult to be enlightened about how one gives shape to the critical attitude to oneself, to one's tradition that the latter enjoins one to nurture.

Many of these difficulties are, of course, general in nature, that is, they are involved in the attempt at articulating one's allegiance to a community as such, and not just the tribal community. Here Miri does not talk about these general difficulties of the relationship of an individual member with his or her community. For, they must form the subject of a separate paper, Miri wishes, instead, to enquire briefly about the specific difficulties of clarifying his allegiance to his own community in the particular historical-civilisational context in which he is willy-nilly situated. This historical-civilisational context of the tribal community is the context of modernity with its (i) intellectual self awareness dominated by the unitary vision of knowledge and its progress embedded in modern scientific world, (ii) its moral and aesthetic vision circumscribed by utilitarianism and (iii) its consequent reductionist acceptance or dismissal of traditional moral-spiritual visions.

In connection with the above Miri says “at earlier times my history came down to me by word of mouth of my grand fathers and mothers, parents etc., in a living cosmology, in the myths, folktales and legends of my community, in the sagas of great deeds of heroism and bravery or tales of acts of shameful cowardice of my ancestors. But this notion of the history of my community has to fight a lot of losing battles for respectability with another notion of history, which would, at best, reduce tribal history into a soulless narration of abstract events and actions, and tribal cosmology into a set of strange empty assertions which might, at best, have some psychological import. It may be said that the important thing is not that the old notion of history has to face a challenge, but that it is available at all to the tribesman. After all it is history available in this way that forms the backdrop against which the tribesman may seek coherence in his or her moral aesthetic-spiritual world. While this certainly is an important point, there are two things to be said here: (i) it is not clear that the earlier notion of history is available at all any more in any substantial way or as representing a recognizable coherence and (ii) to question the earlier notion of history is also, naturally, to question the moral aesthetic-spiritual world of the tribesman, although, perhaps it still remains true that the invalidity of the former does not necessarily entail the invalidity of the latter.”²⁰

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.173.

According to Miri, the general cause of the darkness into which the moral world of the tribesman has sunk is certainly the 'march of modernity' - with its strident cognitivism (of its own peculiarly narrow variety), its utilitarianism and its distaste for diversity of any deep kind. In fact, the tribal world being a simple one has failed to cope up with the complex structure of the modern scientific world. Thus, the march of modernity has all but crushed the tribal identity, and for the tribesman to gain an authentic, detailed insight into it has become a near impossibility. The search for tribal identity seems thus an endeavour that is doomed to fail. And the desperation accompanying this realization is immense. While 'allegiance to the tribe' is still a powerfully motivating value (perceived 'strongly' in our sense), instead of the earlier density of material in terms of which this allegiance could be articulated or at least felt with phenomenological intensity, there seems now to be a void. There are panicky efforts, on the part of the tribesman, to fill this void e.g. borrowing or adopting some-body else's past (e.g. the Christian past), and by striking a moral-spiritual stance the connection between which and the old vision is painfully unclear. And how is one to shape a constructive critical attitude to one's tradition, ethnicity and culture, when the very possibility of a coherent authentic articulation of the tradition seems so hopelessly doubtful?

Therefore, it is not surprising that while the tribesman's quest for identity acquires a special sentiment or feeling, the moral force of 'allegiance to the tribe' becomes prone to exploitation by forces, which have nothing to do with this allegiance. It becomes the front for motivations, which range from self-aggrandizement of a few to economic gains to political power.

In spite of all these difficulties faced by the tribesman into the 'march of modernity' Miri points out that everything is not quite, perhaps, lost for tribal identity. He says that things that could happen which will help to create a situation that is better than the one prevailing are: (i) an open-eyed awareness, on the part of the tribesman, of his real predicament; (ii) an attempt, bold as it will have to be, to articulate a conception of intelligibility, coherence and knowledge, which is embedded in the idea of a tribal tradition (this will have to be done in opposition to the powerful, coercive, uniformity-imposing conception of intelligibility, coherence and knowledge); and (iii) relatedly, the development of an intellectual, moral-spiritual self-confidence, on the part of the tribesman, which will enable him or her to face the world outside without being overwhelmed by it, and, yet with a natural sympathy free from self-deluding exclusivist fears and arrogances. Miri concludes that to say this is a tall order, but it is certainly not

impossible to achieve at least in moderate degrees on the part of the tribesman and his community.

The group's ecological setting, its history and tradition forming its cultural moorings, help it to conceptualise its identity. In this regard, George De Voss says that an ethnic group is a self-perceived group holding a common set of cultural traditions not shared by others with whom they are in contact. Such cultural traditions include folk, religious beliefs, and practices, symbols, language, ancestry, common history, common music and place of origin. He reiterates Miri's point that community identity includes a feeling of continuity with the past, a feeling that is maintained as an essential part of one's self-definition. It is also intimately related to the individual need for collective continuity a sense of personal survival in the historical and traditional continuity of the group.²¹ But how does these symbols originate? The specific symbols of ethnicity, which a human group uses at different times and places to construct ethnic identity systems, are created historically. For instance, classical and ancestral Borok poets, singers, heroes, rulers etc. created the symbols, which are common to all the Borok people. But beyond the specific historical content of the imageries of ethnicity,

²¹ George, De Voss, "Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation" in De Voss, Lola Romanuicci-Ross (eds.), *Ethnic Identity*, University of Chicago Press, 1982.

ethnicity itself originates in the biological and cultural experiences of all sub-tribes of the Borok community. So, ethnicity is composed of cultural, political and religious symbols, which represent these experiences. Here the political symbols become vehicles for mobilizing people to defend or protect what would be defined as national or state boundaries; and every human group develops religious symbols by which its distinctive way of life is sanctified. In the perspective of present study, it is necessary to stress that cultural boundaries are symbolic boundaries; and the symbols of boundaries exist in tradition and are utilized by every generation in different ways. It is essential to make a distinction between the “independent” existence of these symbols in the tradition, and their “psychological” use in the construction of self and ethnic identity. This is how ethnicity and culture, personal identity and community identity are closely associated with each other in term of the identity formation of an ethnic community.

The ethnic and cultural features coupled with history of its community bind the Boroks together and help them to retain a distinct identity of their own. What I wish to emphasise in this dissertation is the fact that the biological cohesiveness / racial traits are to be seen as the ethnic attributes of a community, whereas the non-biological attributes which include traits such as language, religion, collective self-

consciousness, self-identity, common customs, traditions and institutions, common pride in the land of origin should be taken as the basis of their cultural distinctness. Language, culture, and ancestral history are the most fundamental determining factors responsible for identity formation of the Borok community of Twipra.

Chapter - IV

Identity Assertion

From the discussion so far it logically follows that a kind of subjective self-consciousness or feeling is involved in the understanding of the notion of personal / community identity. In a community, for instance, in order to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from other groups or establish criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from their own group, the members of a group must become subjectively self-conscious of their own cultural symbols that they are using for distinguishing themselves from other ethnic groups.

In his interpretation, J. Pandian¹ points out that the symbols, which embody the cognitive and emotive cultural boundaries of a group, serve as vehicles for the conception and dramatization of the biological or cultural heritage of the group. These symbols exist in a dialectical relationship, and are transformed and synthesized when used to conceptualize and dramatize the identity of the group.

¹ Pandian, J., *Caste, Nationalism and Ethnicity*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1987, p. 4.

Ethnic consciousness is generally taken to mean group or collective consciousness of a people about their distinctive identity vis-à-vis the 'others'. Now question is: what constitutes an ethnos, which broadly connotes a community of people. It is defined thus by Bromley: "a stable group of people that have taken shape historically, who have common relatively stable specific features of culture (including language) and psychology, as well as an awareness of their unity and distinction from all other similar formations (i.e., self-awareness) which is expressed in the self-identification (ethnonym)".² In this narrow sense, as Bromley would admit, an ethnos is a "relative community of culture and psychology". According to Gumilev, an ethnos is a "system of individuals different in tastes and capabilities and of the product of their activity, traditions, the geographical environment, ethnic surroundings and tendencies to increase or diminish."³ It means an ethnic entity represents dynamic existence of a system that includes not only people but also elements of landscape, cultural tradition and relations with neighbours.

Taylor and Simard observe ethnic identity as "that component of a person's self-definition which is derived from an affiliation with a

² Bromley, Yu., *Ethnography and Ethnic Process*, Moscow, USSR Academy of Sciences, 1978.

³ Gumilev, Leo, *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1990, p. 105.

specific group.”⁴ In the past, this process of self-definition was an unproblematic issue for the individual. For, self-definition was derived from what was given at birth: a race; a language, a culture; a tribe, a history of the group’s relationship with other groups in society. But now, they point out, with rapid modernization, technological advance, and increased mobility, it is now possible to choose one’s ethnic identifications in a self-conscious way. This line of thinking about ethnicity and culture I have already opposed in Chapter III of my thesis. The point to note here is that for group identity the two concepts get intermingled which becomes confusing for the researchers.

To continue the discussion further it may be pointed out here that the notion of migration is closely linked with the notion of identity. When a group with an identity migrates to a place already inhabited by another group having a different identity, as regards the identities of the two groups there are three possibilities: (1) Migration may cause no change of identity, either of the migrant group or of the receiving group. It is to be described that under such a circumstance there is very possibility of a rivalry of cultures (or in other words identities). (2) Migration may cause obliteration of the identity of the migrant group,

⁴ Nimmi Hutnik quotes Taylor and Simard in her *Ethnic Minority Identity: A Social Psychological Perspective*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, pp. 19- 20.

which may get completely assimilated with the receiving group. It is to be noted here that if the migrant group retains some elements of its identities even after merging with the receiving group, such elements may be elements of the older language, food habits, or even racial strains; the merged migrant group may revive its older identity at any time and (3) Migration of a group to a new habitat may cause total obliteration of the identity of the receiving group.

Second and third types of situation are irrelevant in the context of Boroks of Twipra. An instance of the first type of situation is partially the case of migration of the Bangladeshi refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh to Twipra where the older private cultures of the Boroks have somehow retained their identities despite large scale influx of migrants from Bangladesh and also of mainland Indians. It is remarkable to note here that in this case there has been clash of cultures.

For a call for identity preservation there must be at least two different ethnic and cultural societies co-existing where influence and pre-eminence of one culture on the other and vice-versa may take place. For, influence of one culture on the other is quite natural. In this situation, some changes may occur in both the cultures under the

influence of each other. The influence of culture of one ethnic community on the culture of another ethnic community is quite obvious in the matter of language, art, dance, music, manner, food habit, housing pattern, clothing style, religion etc. If an ethnic group ardently follows its culture, has respect for it; it cannot lose its cultural identity under any circumstances. However, its culture is liable to change, but that change may not amount to losing the whole culture of the group.

When a group of ethnic identity completely identify themselves with the culture of another group of people, it is called assimilation. This is a case also of losing the identity from the point of the group, which assumes a new identity. This kind of assimilation may be partial or complete; partial when some trace of the older identity is present and complete when no trace of the older identity remains. In another sense the merger of identity may be partial or complete. When only a section of the group gets assimilated leaving the other group unassimilated or partially assimilated we may call it dissimilation also. When a group, which is assimilated reverts to its older identity it is revivalism.

If we look at assimilation from a wider angle we find that it is nothing but a stage of culture change, or technically acculturation. Culture is not a new phenomenon in the world. There is no culture in



the world, which is completely independent of other cultures. Whatever is attractive in an outside culture is borrowed. However, if the influence of one culture on the other is strong and dynamic for long time, then it may create hazard, which may consequently generate a tremendous threat to the very core of existence of the other culture.⁵

Thus it becomes natural for the members of the group to confidently assert themselves, to insist upon the recognition of their rights, claims and status, and take certain appropriate means and measures so as to secure them in the world. They assert and declare positively, formally and distinctly the existence and extent of their ethnic and cultural identity.

The noun 'Assertion' means declaration and affirmation of anything or person. In *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'assertion' is defined as "(i) the action of setting free, liberation, (ii) the action of maintaining a cause or defending it from hostile attack; vindication, (iii) insistence upon right or claim, (iv) the action of declaring or positively stating; declaration, affirmation,

⁵ The names of Borok, Aguli (i.e. the original name of Agartala) and Tipra/Twipra have been neglected and the names given by the dominant aliens have, to some extent, been imposed upon them. For, the very names 'Tripuri' or 'Tribal' or 'Pahari', 'Tripura' and names of several places of the state are the names given by the 'outsiders' who were not much sympathetic to the self-names and ethnic categories of the Boroks.

avermment, (v) a positive statement; a declaration, averment.”⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary* also defines the verb ‘assert’ as “(i) to claim, affirm, declare and state (anything or person), (ii) to grant or ensure liberty, to protect, to bring into freedom, set free, (iii) to claim (something) as belonging to (oneself or another), to declare one’s right to, or possession of, (iv) to maintain practically, insist upon, or vindicate, a claim to anything, (v) to assert oneself, to insist upon the recognition of one’s rights or claims, and take means to secure them, (vi) to declare formally and distinctly, to state positively, aver, affirm, (vii) to declare or affirm the existence of, and (viii) to declare the extent of, to state.”⁷ *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* also defines the verb ‘assert’ as “(i) to state or declare positively, and often forcefully or aggressively (ii) to demonstrate the existence of (iii) posit, postulate, (iv) affirm, protest, declare, assert.”⁸

It is said that when identity-assertion takes place in an ethnic community, the members of the community generally manifest their claims by organizing various types of movements including ethnic and cultural movements.

⁶*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically, Vol. I, A – O, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1971, p-127.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁸ *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, a Merriam – Webster ®, Indian Edition, Scientific Book Agency, Calcutta-1, India, 1973, p. 67.

Members of any community have various aims, objectives, desires, aspirations and expectations in life. When all these demands are not fulfilled in life, a kind of 'fear' is bound to occur in the minds of the members of the community. Perhaps, it is that very 'fear' in mind, which shakes the foundation of the very existence of life of the community. This fear ultimately gives birth to the idea of 'threat to existence' of the community as a whole. It is, I think, this identity-assertion manifested through organizing ethnic and cultural movements that is pre-supposed by the idea of 'threat to existence'. Thus, 'threat to existence' is behind all these movements in which identity-assertion by a community is manifested.

Ethnic groups could be bound together by common experiences of discrimination and social disadvantage. They may have special physical or cultural traits, which they feel, are held in low esteem by the dominant segments of society. By definition membership in an ethnic minority group entails various social consequences of being unlike the ethnic majority group. It also means suffering the structural disadvantage of being relatively deficient in power and resources. It logically implies that members of an ethnic minority group are excluded from taking a full share in the life of the society because they differ in certain ways from the dominant ethnic group. Sometimes, this trend

tends to develop attitudes of discrimination and prejudice against members of the minority, which in turn serves to strengthen the internal cohesion and structure of the ethnic minority group.⁹ Thus, there arises the question of identity assertion, which gets manifested through various types of mass movements, for instance, to fulfill various desires and aspirations of the group and thereby maintaining their distinct identity.

That groups use cultural symbols by which they become a subjectively self-conscious and self-evaluative community that establishes criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from their group is a well-known fact. Also matters relating to descent, birth, and kinship become important to them and they may celebrate and codify such events and matters through village councils and festivals. Given this view, it can be said that cultural symbols or elements are used as a means to achieve the goal of identity assertion positively by a particular group. In this way, the members of the ethnic group consolidate their common identity.

Let me take the concrete example of the Boroks of Twipra who in the past had a distinct identity of their own. Under the rule of their

⁹ Tajfel, H., *The Social Psychology of Minorities*, Minority Rights Group, London, 1978, p.312.

Borok (Tripuri) kings, as pointed out by historians they led a peaceful life in their ancestral land. Culturally, linguistically, historically, and racially they were a distinct people. Identity crisis was not known to them. They were the absolute majority in the land.

Thus, due to geographical barrier and many other factors, Boroks of Twipra remained isolated from the rest of India until the Twipra merger with the Indian Union (i.e. 15th October, 1949). This isolation helped the Boroks, whoever they may be; maintain a distinct identity with a peculiar sense of pride. They used to sing of their abundance. Their life was very easy, peaceful and comfortable and there were no significant efforts to make use of resources.

The Borok community we may say, is a self-perceived group sharing a sense of historical and cultural continuity and also a common set of traditions, which are not being shared by others with whom they are living as neighbours in Twipra. As George de Vos and Lola Romanucci-Ross aver "An ethnic group is a self-perceived group of people who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by the others with whom they are in contact. Such traditions typically include "folk" religious beliefs and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity,

and common ancestry or place of origin.”¹⁰ Indeed, when they interact with people belonging to other ethnic groups, they usually identify themselves as belonging to a separate kind of people, on the basis of sharing same overt characteristics and values and also same historical styles. In this regard it may be appropriate to refer to Royce’s statement that “An ‘ethnic group’ is a reference group invoked by people who share a common historical style (which may be only assumed), based on overt features and values, and who, through the process of interaction with others, identify themselves as sharing that style.”¹¹

Despite the apparent changes in the life-style of the Boroks in the villages due to many factors, the basic values of family ties and loyalties, obedience to village councils and their norms, the adherence to clan distinctions and all its implications, keeping up the traditions of cottage industries like weaving, bamboo and cane work, wood carving – all these have kept the cultural identity in the community a living force.

If there have been serious upheavals of identity crisis among the Boroks, they have originated basically in the minds of some educated

¹⁰ George de Vos and Lola Romanucci-Ross, (eds.) *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Communities and Change*, Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Co. 1975, p. 9.

¹¹ Royce, Anya, Peterson, *Ethnic Identities: Strategies of Diversity*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 18.

Boroks. A totally new psychological situation is baffling to the Boroks. The sense of inferiority that was generated in their minds went into a period of gestation, which emerged in various forms of protests, and assertions as India gained independence, Twipra merger and large scale influx of migrants took place and began to administer the Borok areas. The Boroks have begun to use their cultural identities as weapons of assertions, and demanded and got Autonomous District Council, which unfortunately has not brought about any reconciliation of attitude or emotional integration.

An important feature of Borok community is religion. Traditionally speaking, before religious conversion began in the Borok community, they professed their own indigenous religion which may be called 'Borok religion' which like other tribal religions centres on the worship of nature. The Kokborok term for God is *Kaitor* or *Subraj*. *Kaitor* is eternal. He is believed to be prior to all existence; hence the Boroks never seek an argument to prove the existence of God. He is the Creator of everything. He is infinite. He is formless and invisible. We cannot see Him nor can we hear Him. He is the only one single God, the Supreme or Almighty God. There is no other God besides Him. He is the designer of all and controls over all human beings and all the creatures of the universe. Borok God is above all gender. God is in us and around

us for the Boroks. God does not reveal Himself to mankind. No incarnation of God is possible in 'Borok religion'. He decides everything for human beings.

They believe in both male and female deities. They believe in the presence of supernatural powers at the back of high mountains, flooded rivers, big trees, stones and epidemics and they try to please these powers by means of different types of propitiations and worships. These powers are sometimes worshiped even without being given any name. They worship deities of families and village and crops and rains and try to please these gods and goddesses by offering the sacrifices of different types of animals and birds before them. They believe in many gods and worship sun and moon. In Borok religion animal sacrifices are not performed to the Supreme God or *Kaitor*, but only to the male and female deities. Some of the important deities to which animal sacrifices are performed with the help of *Ochaj* (priest) are as follows: *Mailuma* (goddess of rice), *Khuluma* (goddess of cotton and crops), *Noksuma* (goddess of family), *Twima-Sangrongma* (goddesses of water and river), *Ker Mwtai* (god of village protection/welfare), *Burasa* (god of mountain and hill), *Goriya / Kalaiya* (god of victory / war / agriculture), *Nakri* (deity of welfare and protection from diseases), *Tal Mwtai* (god of moon), *Sal Mwtai* (god of sun), *Parbani* (god of air), *Mahadevmadev /*

Mwtaikotor (supreme deities), *Thumnairok-Bonirok* (devil deities), *Rakhiya Kali* (evil deity), *Deur* (evil deity), and *Swkal* (evil deity) and *Soni Mwtai* (god of misfortune). The animal sacrifices, which are performed to the deities, are a debt that man owes to those deities. For example, if there is a member of a family who is seriously sick, when all the medicines failed to heal or cure him, his family members would pray to the deities, that if the deities could take away the sickness and heal the patient, the deities in return would be paid with animal sacrifices. However, the animal sacrifices, performed to the deities, in some cases, may not be a debt that man owes to the deities, but they may be performed as a means for the propitiation of the deities.

The principle of their religion as pointed out by social anthropologists is based on the following two beliefs: (1) There are powerful souls besides powerful Gods. The souls are connected with men, and feel pleasure and pain through them. They influence the events in this world and also control them. (2) The soul of man survives even after his death.

The souls of the ancestors along with the gods are remembered at the time of sowing and in the need of rains. Their religion is not only a

particular part of life, but it enters into every aspect of life. The religious and socio-cultural activities of the Borok people are closely inter-related.

Believing in the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, according to the Boroks after death the soul of a man survives the body and enters into the body of some animals, birds or other living beings. They have a custom of observing the funeral rites two times. The second rite is sometimes considered to be more important than the first. They believe that the soul is not destroyed on the death of the body and requires some food for a sufficiently long time. Interestingly, believing that the soul of the dead man will get liberation and peace in heaven, on the third day of the cremation of the dead body a piece of skull of the dead man is kept in a small house called *Ostinok* (a house of bone) specially built for this purpose till the day of *Hangraj* on which the piece of skull is taken out of the house with special care and thrown into the river or lake which is considered as sacred.* On a special day of the year, the dead man is significantly personified through a *Pakuri* (turban) placed on a wooden tool and invited by the family members and served like a living person with food and drinks and efforts are made to fulfill all its

* Here it may be noted that according to some Borok researchers practice of cremation of dead body of the grown up person and throwing of a small piece of skull of the deceased in a river or lake is believed to have been adopted by the Boroks only after the influence of Hinduism on the Borok traditional religion. This practice is thus claimed to be a recent development (i.e. less than one hundred years old). Traditionally, the dead body of baby is never cremated but buried.

needs for a long time in front of the house as a symbol of respect, careness and affection shown towards the dead man.

Borok community may be defined as a self-perceived group holding a common set of traditions which include folk, religious belief and practices, language, ancestry, common history, ecology and place of origin. Its ethnicity is a feeling of continuity with the past, a feeling that is maintained as an essential part of one's self-definition.

The Boroks have given names to many places, rivers and even to their children in their own language. The names of Shiva, Sati, Lunar dynasty, Yayati, Dhrujya, Kapil Muni, Pandavas, Kauravas, and the Kurukshetra war frequently occur in the mythology of Twipra. The kings or rulers of Twipra are said to be the descendents of Dhrujya an ancient Indian prince of the Lunar dynasty.¹² The Boroks thus claim descent from the Lunar dynasty.

As long as the Boroks stayed in the remote villages observing the age-old customs and way of life, there was no conflict or confusion about their identity. But in due course of time, certain forces, for instance, the large scale influx of migrants, bengalisation and westernization in the

¹² Chaudhuri, J.G., *A Political History of Tripura*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p. 4.

post-merger period, were set to work which were to jolt the Boroks from their accepted life-style and pose serious threats to the very base of what they were. In the post-merger period, the process of change began when the outsiders particularly the Bangladeshi migrants (Bengalees) came to Twipra. They brought along with them their language, culture, religion, history etc., which were completely alien to the Boroks. Before the advent of the Bangladeshi migrants, there was a situation where the Borok identity was location-specific and the outward manifestations of their identity constituted the ethnicity and culture of the community. There was no need for assertion of one's being a Borok in that situation. They simply were Borok tribal and everything about lives bore testimony to the fact, their territory, their language, their customs, religion, ecology, history and their belonging to a compact group of people.

In order to conceptualize the fundamental grounds of identity assertion of the Borok community it may be necessary to peep into the history of the Boroks. Take the history of the Boroks: Boroks are the aboriginal tribes, first settlers, sons of the soil or indigenous people of Twipra. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman groups of Mongoloid stock and have their distinct and unique ethnic and cultural heritage. They speak Kokborok as their mother tongue, which belongs to Tibeto-

Burman Linguistic family of Sino-Tibetan Linguistic family.¹³ Racially, linguistically and historically, they have very close affinity with the Boros of Assam. Though they identify themselves as Borok they are also known by different names such as Tipra, Twiprsa, Tipperah, Tripuri etc.

Myths, legends and stories gather around everything that is intimately linked with Borok (Tripuri) traditional life. Everything happening around them has a clear explanation, neatly documented and labeled and put away in that inexhaustible store-house of their prodigious memory, to be narrated or unraveled on auspicious occasions of the community. Their folk-tales and myths are mostly about their ultimate relation of man with nature and like all tribal communities they never tried to either dominate or unwitting natural forces; rather they learnt to live with nature in its various forms.

Similarly the Borok community has accounts of their origin, their gods and goddesses, their sacred habitats and so on. For instance, the Borok rulers of Twipra are said to be descendents of Dhrujya – an ancient Indian prince of the Lunar dynasty. The ruling Borok or Tripuri dynasty of Twipra kingdom belongs to Borok or Tripuri tribe although

¹³ Grierson, G.A., *The Linguistic Survey of India: Comparative Vocabulary*, Vol. 3.2, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1928.

the rulers have sought to establish their connection with the famous Lunar dynasty to show the long antiquity of the kingdom and also to connect certain local shrines and temples with the Puranic Siva and Sati episode.¹⁴

The origin of the famous Tripuri-Sundari temple has been mythologically explained by J.G. Chaudhuri as follows: - "When Sati committed suicide because of dishonour shown to her husband Siva by her father Daksha in a grand *Yagna*, Siva, overcome by grief, wandered about the world carrying her corpse on his shoulder. To desist the vagrant deity from restlessness, Vishnu followed him and trimmed the dead body into several pieces with his discus. It fell to earth into fifty-one pieces at different places. Whenever a piece fell, the ground was held to be sacred. Sati's right leg fell in Udaypur – the ancient capital of Tripura – where a big temple dedicated to the goddess Kali had been subsequently built by the kings of Tripura."¹⁵

Some historians pointed out that to exalt the position of the rulers of Twipra and also to invest the Borok or Tripuri dynasty with a heroic origin and a halo of antiquity by weaving an ancestral relation with the heroes of the great epics of India, the Twipra kings are claimed

¹⁴ Chaudhuri, J.G., *A Political History of Tripura*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

by the Boroks (Tripuris) to be direct descendents of the Lunar dynasty of the *Mahabharata*. One scion of the dynasty is believed to have moved and migrated as far as Assam and latter established a powerful kingdom. The story of the kingdom has been cut short thus:

One day, hermit Sukracarya with his disciples went to the house of king Yayati. The king failed to pay due attention to the saint. There were some defects and drawbacks in the entertainment and hospitality. So the ill-tempered hermit execrated the king. Being thus cursed by Sukracarya, king Yayati was suffering from premature infirmity (*Jara*). After much importunity from the side of the king, the hermit got pacified and agreed to abate the penance in that the infirmity was rendered transferable. In other words, the king could exchange his infirmity with the youth of another person. The king publicly announced that he would give entire empire to any young man who would agree to this. Nobody volunteered, not even his sons. At last, Puru, the youngest prince came forward and agreed. The other princes had incurred the displeasure of the king who exiled them to different directions.

Dhrujya, the third prince, moved eastwards along the lower course of the Ganga and reached Sagar island in the Sundarbans where

he was lucky enough to get the kind asylum in the hermitage of Kapil *Muni*. The blessings of Kapil *Muni* helped the prince a lot in building a new kingdom called Tribeg¹⁶ in the lower course of the Brahmaputra river.

In course of time, Tribeg kingdom grew in strength and stature. As the kingdom was enlarged north-eastward along the upper course of the Brahmaputra and extended upto Assam, its capital too was shifted there.

Dhrujya, the founder-king of Tribeg kingdom, is said to have been succeeded by nearly two hundred rulers. All of these rulers were not equally pious and capable rulers. The fortieth king was Tripur, who was an exception. Tripur was believed to be very irreligious, proud and rude. He named his kingdom and subjects after his own name. He harassed all. When their sufferings went to the extreme, the subjects sought redress from Mahadev. At last, Lord Siva killed him. Anarchy followed. Lord Siva again blessed the queen Hiravati of Tripur with a

¹⁶ "The word 'Tribeg' may thus have been corrupted from the 'Tibrog' as the former does carry no meaning in the Mongoloid words. Accordingly 'Ti-borok' or 'Tiporok' becomes 'Tripura' or 'Tripahra'. It appears likely from the corruption of the origin words of different branches of the great Bodo nation and other people groups." (Debbarma, Nanda Kumar, "Kokborok Words: Weapons to dig out the History", in *Proceedings of the Borok Conference : In Search of Linguistic and Cultural Identity among the Tibeto-Burman Languages in the South East Asia*, (ed.) Binoy Debbarma, TTAADC, Khumulwng, Twipra, 2002, p. 21)

virtuous son who was named Trilocan. Trilocan was pious and powerful. It is said that he attended the *Rajasuya* sacrifice organized by the Pandavas of the *Mahabharata*. He was duly honoured by Yudhisthira.¹⁷

According to *Sri Rajmala*¹⁸ there were 184 kings who ruled the kingdom for about an uninterrupted period of five thousand years. *Sri Rajmala* of Twipra and *Rajtarangini* of Kashmir compiled by Kalhan are said to be the only two written chronicles in India. It has been narrated about the close relationship between Aryans and Twipra kingdom in the Mahabharata that Trilocan, joined the great Kurukshetra war. After the war was over, Trilocan was invited by Maharaja Yudhisthira and he visited *Indraprastha* on the occasion of *Rajasuya Jagga*. On this occasion, Maharaja Yudhisthira presented a throne to Twipra king as a symbol of friendship. In Twipra, it is also believed that the throne is being kept in the Royal palace of Twipra even today.

The origin of the Borok community identity is mythically connected with the direct descendents of Dhrujya of the Lunar dynasty,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Sen, Kali Prasanna, *Sri Rajmala*, Chronicle of Tripura Kings, 1336 Twipra Era (1926 A.D.), Agartala, Tripura.

the first king¹⁹ of Twipra, Kirit Bikram being the last king. The Boroks (Tripuris) traditionally believe that their kings derived their authorities from God so as to rule the kingdom. Thus, kings were considered and honoured as God by the Boroks. In other words, they traditionally seem to believe that their kings were the direct descendents or representatives of God.

The traditional Boroks (Tipras) were a small band of hardy people living in hill areas. As they attained political power and social prestige their number swelled. It was the glorious past of the Boroks. They were proud of their able rulers who were considered as equivalent to God. Their forefathers hardly could imagine that their descendents were destined to build and expand a strong kingdom and resist the advance of the Mughals. The dynasty passed through several vicissitudes of history and ruled Twipra for about three thousand years.²⁰

¹⁹ There is also another legend about the first king of the Boroks or Tipras. "Long, long ago there was a king called Subrai. He was the first king of the Tipras. He introduced all arts and crafts in Tripura. He had hundreds of wives. To encourage the arts and crafts, it was the declared policy of the king to marry those ladies who excelled in arts and crafts." (Vide Chaudhuri, J.G, *The land and Its People*, Leeladevi Publication, Delhi, 1980, p. 163.). This is why the Boroks still claim that they are rich in traditional arts and crafts.

²⁰ "From the year 507 B.C. to 8th century Maharaja Vanyagupta, a member of the dynasty of Imperial Guptas, ruled over Samatata and granted lands in Tripura region. The seat of his kingdom was situated in or near Tripura region." (Chaudhuri, J.G., 1980, p. 13).

"The Tripura Raj is mentioned in the list of Kingdoms on the Emperor Ashoka's Pillar in the Fort of Allahabad and is now, after a lapse of over 2200 years, the only one State of all those mentioned, extends another proof of its relatively incomparable antiquity."

It may be mentioned here that prior to the consolidation of the Tripuri kingdom, there was as yet no single and powerful kingdom over the entire tract, but only a multitude of small principalities ruled by tribal chiefs.²¹ Thus it is believed that all these principalities were under the control of Twipra kings. Each principality was, in fact, small, weak, poor and isolated utterly lacking in administrative sub-division, communication network, centralized bureaucracy, standing army, clear demarcation of boundary etc.

Historians have pointed out that although some changes were gradually taking place in the kingdom prior to the reign of King Bir Chandra Manikya, changes were by and large negligible from the side of Borok identity. It is said that it was basically during the reign of king Bir Chandra Manikya change took place in many aspects of life in the kingdom. For instance, introduction of Bengali language as official language of administration and also of the Royal Palace, and banning of Kokborok language in the circle of Royal families. Prior to acceptance of Hinduism and Bengali language by the Twipra *Maharajas*, the Boroks or Tripuris were racially, culturally, linguistically and religiously a

(Debbarma, N.K, "Kokborok Words: Weapons to dig out the History", in *Proceedings of the Borok Conference: In Search of Linguistic and Cultural Identity among the Tibeto-Burman Languages in the South East Asia*, (ed.) Binoy Debbarma, (TTAADC, Khumulwng, Twipra, 2002), p. 26.

²¹ Chaudhuri, J.G., *A Political History of Tripura*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p. 14.

distinct people living side by side with other ethnic groups. But, of course, the Boroks were the absolute and dominant group in the land. They had their own traditional system of administration introduced by their kings in the past. Each village had its own headman which is known as *Hodakra*, *Rai* or *Chokdri*. In other words, there were self-governing traditional institutions in all the villages.²² The village council was constituted of the chief of the village known as *Chokdri* or *Sardar*, *Karbari*, (the secretary to the chief), and *Khandal*, a peon-cum-sepoy. The main functions of the council were to administer justice, collect taxes, and perform community worship and to solve the common problems of villagers. At that time, justice was cheap, quick, simple and visible. The upper stratum of the Borok community was composed of the Raja, the princes and the *Thakurs*. The political system of the community of the past is understood to have been uncontaminated and unencroached. No corruption was known to them. There was absence of multiple leaderships and King was the only man who had authority over his subjects. There were, of course, some *Montri* (minister),

²² Each Borok clan had its own elementary self-governing institution, social and administrative organization starting from the village level and going upto the chieftainship of the whole clan. These were age-old systems, the remnants of which may be found even today. During the reigns of the earlier Twipra kings, the Boroks or Tipras enjoyed their traditional freedom based on the concept of self-administration; the relation between the king and the subjects was maintained through the Borok chiefs or *Sardars*. The hierarchy of the administrative pattern may be represented as follows: King → *Missip* or the Liaison Officer → *Rai* or Headman of the Borok clan → *Sardar* or Chief of the Village → The Individual Borok. (Chaudhuri, J.G., 1980, pp. 44-49).

Senapati (Army Chief) and other assistants in the court of King for his assistance. Their knowledge and experience had taught them to be honest so that the King with their help ruled the people with honesty. Although living in a peaceful atmosphere, the King, minister and other assistants had a feeling of oneness with the individual subjects who had the same feeling as well.

The Borok or Tripuri kings welcomed and brought some educated Bengalis from east Bengal mainly for administrative purpose of the kingdom. Skilled labourers were also welcomed as the kings welcomed them. The tribal subjects of the Maharajas were habituated to the wasteful practice of *jhuming*. So for extension of plough cultivation in the state, the kings encouraged the Bengali migrants who were efficient in plough cultivation. Some *Maharajas* of Twipra were great admirers and patrons of the Bengali culture too.²³ The *Maharajas* also invited many Bengalees of high castes, such as Brahmins and Kayastha, to settle in the state. For, influx of Bangladeshi migrants, Twipra merger, bengalisation and westernization are, I think, the four main causes of Borok identity dislocation causing Borok identity crisis in their own homeland.

²³ Bhattacharyya, G., *Refugee Rehabilitation and Its Impact on Tripura's Economy*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p. 11.

However, if the historical record is to be accepted as true, it was during the regime of King Birchandra Manikya (1862-1896) who banned the practice of Kokborok language and other cultural behaviour and introduced Bengali language and other cultural practice in the Palace and also in the circle of the royal families of the Kingdom that the royal families and the people attached to the Palace had come in contact with the alien culture of the Bengalees. The contact with the Bengalees brought the cultural shocks, which in due course of time generally uprooted the royal families from their distinct cultural moorage or anchorage. The contact of the Palace and the royal families with the Bengalis also led to the gradual erosion of Borok cultural life even among the ordinary Borok subjects living in touch with royal families in the capital of the Kingdom. Yet, even the acceptance of a foreign culture by the King could not influence the ordinary Borok subjects living outside the capital of the Kingdom. Only after the Twipra merger with the Indian Union (1949) the common Boroks mainly living in the rural areas of Twipra came into contact with alien culture of the Bengalis. They have come to realize the gradual and slow erosion of their Borok culture due to the severe influence by the Bengali culture. In their self-image they had felt the necessity of preserving and protecting their distinct cultural identity from being swamped by the Bengali culture. Although there is no 'High Culture' and no 'Low Culture' as such, but it

seems that in due course of time, due to various reasons some cultures are influenced by and assimilated with some other cultures. Of course, no culture is perfect; each culture is unique by itself, there is, in fact, no measuring rod for culture etc.

Historically speaking, Twipra, prior to its merger with the Indian Republic (1949), was one of the ancient princely states of the world ruled by Borok kings without any interruption for about than two thousand years. It may be noted that the Twipra kingdom or Hill Tipperah was never under the direct control of British imperialism. The British, however, collected revenue only from the plain Tipperah (present Chaklarosnabad in Bangladesh) and leaving the Hill Tipperah (the present Twipra or Tripura) as independent. In this connection, Alexander Mackenzie has made a vivid observation: "Covered with jungles and inhabited by tribes of whom nothing was known, save that they were uncouth in speech and not particular as to clothing, the hills were looked upon as something apart. The rajah claimed to exercise authority within them, but did not, as it seemed, derive much profit from them. Accordingly the hills became 'independent' Tipperah, and was for many years a more absolute monarch than Scindhia or Pattiala, - owning no law but his sovereign will, bound by no treaty, subject to no control, safe in his obscurity from criticism or

reform.”²⁴ The princely state was allowed to retain a distinct political character, which was very different from directly administered territories of British India. Under the colonial system of indirect rule, it did not experience direct colonial exploitation as those regions under British India. In fact, under the colonial system of indirect rule, a single British resident or political agent controlled the princely state through advice given to the local Twipra prince.

The second last king of the Twipra kingdom was His Highness Late Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya Bahadur Debbarma. His successor Kirit Bikram Debbarma was a minor ruler and nearly 15 years at the time of the death of his father King Bir Bikram (17.05.1947 A.D.), is still living today as a living Royal Symbol of Twipra history. Then, Council of Regency was formed to run the administration under the Presidentship of Queen Kanchanprabha Devi, mother of Kirit Bikram. Within few months after the death of King Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya Bahadur Debbarma, Twipra faced a great crisis and there was a threat both from internal and external forces. The president of the Council of Regency was under severe pressure and had to opt to join the Indian Union. In the meantime, the queen on the advice of the Government of India had to dissolve the Council of Regency and became herself as the sole Regent

²⁴ Mackenzie, Alexander, *The North East Frontier of India*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi (Reprint, 2001, p. 272.).

on 12th January 1948, and after about more than a year she on behalf of the minor Maharaja Kirit Bikram, had to sign the Twipra Merger Agreement on 9th September 1949. Thereafter, the administration of the Twipra Kingdom became a part of Indian Union from 15th October 1949 A.D. and was administered by the Chief Commissioner as a 'C' category state. Thus, the death of King Bir Bikram was followed by a period of political vacuum, chaos and confusion. The situation was nearer to anarchy due to lack of able leadership, communal riots in East Bengal, influx of refugees, struggle for succession, occupation of Kamalpur by the Muslims, attempts at annexing Tripura with Pakistan.²⁵

The demise of Bir Bikram, division of the country, communal riots, influx of refugees, secessionist movement, communist movement, *Bangal Kheda* movement – all these happened simultaneously. The State administration was on the verge of collapse.²⁶

In spite of a feudalistic-colonial rule, Twipra faced no major disturbance except the Reang Revolt of 1942-43 which was directed

²⁵ Chaudhuri, J.G., *A Political History of Tripura*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p. 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.81.

essentially against the ruling monarch.²⁷ Due to direct influence of India's freedom movement which began to penetrate the plains of Twipra / Tipperah from the first half of the 20th century, new socio-political movements soon emerged. Eventually, there emerged a number of socio-political organizations, which soon demanded for the immediate democratization of Twipra's political system and establishment of responsible government. Most vocal among newly formed political parties were the Tripura State Congress and the Communist party. Yielding to the public pressure, the regent queen, Maharani Kanchanprabha Devi, on behalf of the minor Maharaja Kirit Bikram Kishore Manikya Debbarma, announced the decision of the state to be a part of Indian Union on 9th September 1949, which was ratified by the Tripura Sangha in an open session attended by about 20,000 indigenous hill people particularly the Boroks and all other political organizations.

Indeed, in the post-merger period, identity of the Borok community has been tremendously 'threatened' due to the unprecedented influx of migrants and its subsequent impact of the dominant alien culture. After the partition (1947) of the Indian Sub-Continent and subsequent Merger of Twipra with the Indian Union,

²⁷ Jamatia, K.B., *The Jamatias of Tripura: A Historical Study, 1863 – 1985*, (An Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Dept. of History, Tripura University, Agartala, 2001, op.cit. p. 59).

there had been continuous influx of foreign nationals into the state particularly the Hindu Bengali refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Within a period of 24 years i.e. 15 August 1947 to 24 March 1971 the number of foreign nationals swelled to 6,09,998 officially.²⁸ However, it is claimed to be 7,30,017* persons by some researchers and intellectuals on the basis of authentic Government documents. Besides, lakhs of migrants were not recorded. There was no protective measure taken either by State Govt. or the Centre to prevent the process of continuous influx of immigrants into the State. In fact, the process of influx of illegal immigrants is still continuing and this is the crux of the problem of Twipra, today. It is true not only of Twipra, but also true of some other North East states of India. Now, the Borok peoples, the sons of the soil, once absolute majority having ruled their own Kingdom for ages together, have been marginalized and outnumbered and reduced to 30.95% (2001 Census) of the total population of the State by the refugees and illegal immigrants from across the international borders.

²⁸ Bhattacharyya, G., *Refugee Rehabilitation and Its Impact on Tripura's Economy*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p. 7.

* Debbarma, M., "Demographic Profile of Twipra – A Hidden Fact" in *Mukumu: A Souvenir On Ten Years In Service Of The Borok People By The Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission From August 10, 1993 – 2003*, (KOHM, Agartala, Twipra, 2003, p. 135).

Although the process of influx of the migrants began in the early 1940s, it was considered to be negligible. In fact, large scale influx of migrants took place in the post-merger period (to be more specific the period between 1950 and 1971) outnumbering the indigenous population of the state. This development of the demographic scenario of the state had become a serious issue on the part of the ethnic and cultural identity of the indigenous people particularly the Boroks. It was, they think, a 'threat to the very existence' of the Borok community. In other words, becoming a minority in their own land itself made the Boroks feel threatened at the hands of the alien people.

Twipra has become a state whose indigenous peoples (Boroks) have been transformed from being an absolutely numerical majority and ruling community into a minority with no economic and political influence within a period of five decades of its merger. This pathetic condition of the Boroks is mainly due to the unprecedented influx of foreign nationals and illegal immigrants into Twipra from erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

Most significant in all this development was the gradual polarization of Borok ethnic and cultural consciousness on the part of the Borok community causing identity assertion. This ethnic and

cultural consciousness ultimately resulted in the formation of the Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS) in June 1967. The Boroks felt themselves deprived of their fundamental rights. Convinced of the fact that the Congress and the Communist party did not play effective role for the protection and preservation of their identity, interests and self-determination. So, the TUJS in one of its slogans declared thus, *“kwchak kuphur chwngh siniya, buini tola chwngh tongya, kwchak kuphur chwngh hwnya, buini tola chwngh tongya”* (we do not know what is Communist or Congress, we will not stay under any one’s control, we do not any longer want to be under the umbrella of the Communist party or the Congress party). The party ideology of the TUJS, among others, centered on: (i) popularization of Kokborok (Borok language) as a symbol of Borok community identity; (ii) education in Kokborok; (iii) restoration of land, and (iv) demand for self-government.²⁹

Accordingly, in 1974 an official circular of the Government of Tripura to all departments desiring increasing use of the Bengali language in official correspondence was immediately reacted to by the TUJS and other Borok leaders. Their chief demands were: (i) reinstatement of the Princely order of reservation, (ii) reservation of

²⁹ Chakravarti, Mahadev; *Tribal Problem of Tripura: Some Historical Interpretation*, Studies in the History of North East India, edited by J.B. Bhattacharya, NEHU Publications, Shillong, 1986, p. 240.

tribal lands transferred after the TLR and LR Act, 1960, (iii) recognition of their language (Kokborok) as one of the state languages and (iv) recognition of the tribal villages under a District Council. In 1974, a socio-cultural organization named Barkhi Halam was formed which stood for the preservation and promotion of tribal traditions, culture, language and history. Some Bengalees particularly those living in the hills were unhappy at the decision of the government³⁰ to introduce District Council for the tribals. By the middle of 1979, communal tensions were running high. Consequently, in June 1980, communal riots broke out between the two communities, i.e. the tribal community and the Bengali community.

Identity assertion is acutely expressed through the activities of various Borok based organizations. Twipra Students' Federation (TSF), Borok People's Human Rights Organisation (BPHRO), Borok Women's Forum (BWF), Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission (KOHM), Kokborok Sahitya Sabha (KBSS), Tiyari Drama and Cultural Center (TDCC), Borok Artists' Association of Twipra (BAAT), Twipra Historical Society (THS) and other Borok based organizations.

³⁰ Chaudhuri, J.G., *A Political History of Tripura*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p. 63.

The three important movements organized, after the Twipra merger with the India Union (1949), under the leadership of Boroks which in subsequent years gave rise to the call for secession from the Indian state are Tripura National volunteers (TNV: 1979), All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF: 1988) and National Liberation Front of Twipra (NLFT: 1989). Such types of movements were organized, both before and after the merger, by Tripur Seva Samiti (1946), Seng Krak (1947), Paharia Union (1951), Tripura Rajya Adivasi Sangh (1953), Adivasi Samsad (1954), Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (1967) and Tribal Students' Federation (now Twipra Students' Federation) (1967) though without the call for secession from the Indian state.

Their resentment against the state and the 'outsiders' gets manifest in the persistent demand for restoration of lands transferred from the Boroks to the non-Boroks (specifically non-tribal) in the past, recognition of their mother tongue Kokborok as a medium of instruction at all levels of educations, introduction of Borok dress (*Rignai*) as school uniform in educational institutions for the Borok students, adoption of the Roman scripts for Kokborok, reservation of more seats in public services and appointments, proper settlement of the shifting cultivators, rapid educational developments among the Boroks and other indigenous people, preservation of history and culture of the Boroks, filling up of all

ST reserved vacant posts in various Govt. departments, preservation of historical monuments of former Twipra Kingdom, formation of Autonomous State, empowerment of TTAADC, 50% reservation of seats in Tripura Legislative Assembly and introduction of Inner Line Permission Act in TTAADC areas, deportation of foreign nationals with a base year in 1949, establishment of Borok Regiment, Self-Governance and Self-Determination, separate Sovereignty status, etc. Positively these organizations have help in restoring the ancient practice of Twipra Era.

Boroks have their own Era called Twipra Era or *Tring* of which they are very proud. According to *Sri Rajmala* (written by Kali Prasanna Sen) king Hamtorpha or Jujharupha³¹ or Himti (the 118th king) introduced the Era in commemoration of conquest and victory over some parts³² of Bengal by king Hamtorpha in 590 A.D. or 512 Saka Era. Twipra Era was popularly recognized and used in the Royal rules of the kingdom. Till 1970 A.D. the Era was used in Government documents and records. The Twipra Era of the Boroks lost its use and recognition in the Govt. departments. Recently, it had been revived under the

³¹ Debbarma, Binoy, "Kokborok is the Language of Borok Peoples in Twipra, India – A Brief Outline" in *Proceedings of the Borok Conference : In Search of Linguistic and Cultural Identity among the Tibeto-Burman Languages in the South East Asia*, (ed.) Binoy Debbarma, TTAADC, Khumulwng, Twipra, 2002, p. 66.

³² Rangamati: Maimonsingh, Rongpur, Dacca, and Murshidabad of Bengal (Debbarma, Shyamlal, "Tripurabda Twii Kok Kisa" in *The Historical Background of Tring (Tripura Era)*, (KOHM, Agartala, 1994, p. 29. Here he also referred to p. 145 of *Banglar Purabritya*.)

initiative of Tripura Tribal Socio-Cultural Development Organisation (TTSCDO), Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission (KOHM) and many other Borok based socio-cultural organizations. But it is not being recognized and used by the Government, whereas the Era was very popularly recognized and used in Government offices in the past. The Boroks now assert their identity positively through celebration of their Era which is a part of their glorious past of which they are proud of till today.

As we know in their mode of transmission of knowledge, the indigenous tribal cultures are essentially oral. But, today, due to their identity assertion, the current trends of the indigenous tribal communities particularly of the North-East India³³ are trying to textualize to their culture, language, tradition and history. The tribes believe that in the past they had their own script, which was lost or distorted in time. For example, the Boroks have made much effort to revive or rediscover their old script called 'koloma'. But functional difficulties of adopting a new script and other factors frustrate this venture of the community. The members of the community assert their identity through developing their own dialects into written language. Identity assertion is thus often manifested through script and language movements.

³³ Sharma, S.P. and Sharma, J.B., (eds.), *Culture of Indian Tribes*, Vol. 2, Radha Publications, New Delhi, 1998, p. 71.

The intense search for Borok common identity, it may be noted was started by the upcoming Borok elites and intellectuals. Race, language, culture, tradition and history have become the main source of identity formation and participation in the Borok movement. Apart from rewriting history, attempts of going back to the origin, many new literature, drama, poems, stories and songs have been composed to assert their identity. Besides language, fairs, festivals and rituals have been asserted to uphold the special culture, viz., folk culture. What I wish to stress on here is, due to the movement and inclusion of cultural demands in it, the cultural festivals have become more assertive and integrative among the Boroks. The constant assertion of the demands on culture, language and history in the memoranda, deputations, public seminars and meetings, and demonstrations has led to more observance and practice of the rituals and festivals. The outside world or the dominant alien culture has to come to know about the festivals of the Boroks, for instance, as pointed out earlier celebration of Twipra Era or Tring on 22nd December of every year. The Era is well celebrated among the Boroks and for the popularization of the Era Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) administration plays a very important role every year.

The rising sense of cultural affinity may be considered as the positive contribution of the Borok movement. The concerned members of the Borok community now do not hesitate to assert their common symbols of identity through speaking their language, narrating their glorious past history, origin and observance of fairs, festivals and rituals.

The main reason behind the present identity crisis and unrest of the Boroks of Twipra is the domination of foreign nationals upon the Boroks, causes a threat to their ethnic and cultural identity, is a well-known fact. Besides, the demolition of historical facts or monuments by the dominant group is another reason, which makes the Boroks feel more threatened. Moreover, the foreign nationals have replaced many Kokborok names of several places by non-Kokborok names probably with a view to establishing purely a non-Borok state. This attitude of foreign nationals towards the natives seems to have created a threat to Borok existence. Moreover, there are genuine political, social and economic reasons for the identity crisis and unrest of Boroks in the state. Hence, they think that in order to protect their identity from being swamped by the foreign nationals and to protect their existence from being wiped away from Twipra's demographic scene, they think that they must be united to organize ethnic and cultural movements and

to establish a common platform for all Boroks. This attitude of Boroks has made them think and stick to their distinct identity, which is rigidly living in the minds of Boroks. Hence, the empirical fact of relative deprivation coupled with complex collective and demographic imbalance gives rise to frequent outpouring of communal venom in the state.

However, one must acknowledge that due to sankritisation, bengalisation and westernization the traditional Borok rites and rituals and singing of folk-songs have become taboo among the young generations. In the past, no occasion was complete or meaningful, unless accompanied by the lore in folk-songs. This abandonment of folk-singing and adoption of non-Kokborok singing viz. Hindi, English, Bengali song and hymn-singing has done more damage to the collective history of the Boroks than any one single factor connected with both Hindu and Christian religions. The Borok folk-songs contained the bulk of the peoples, *Huk* (shifting cultivation) life, settlement, important occasions, their heroic characters, legendary lovers and all other aspects of social and cultural life. As a result of this abandonment, there are very few Boroks in the villages today who are knowledgeable of their origins and the people have lost the most important source of information about who they are and from where they came. Thus, the Boroks have lost an integral part of their being.

Further, the change in the cultural identity of the educated people was most evident people whose life style changed as a result of their education. To put it in nutshell, as a result of their basing their new life style after Bengali, Indian and western culture, the Borok people have identified 'progress' with the idea of better living conditions. Here, of course, they are not very different from the non-Borok population of the State. The difference lies in their rejection of everything, their own, their culture, their religion, their God, their morality, their education, politics etc., sometimes they start regarding their culture as inferior to the alternative model. As a result of this, in the relatively stable Borok society that could handle its routine predictable affairs more and more problems have arisen and the traditional form of tribal organizations have proven inadequate to meet the new challenges of life.

Take the case of Borok political organization in Twipra. The political system of the Boroks of the past is understood to have been uncontaminated and unencroached. No corruption was known. There was absence of multiple leaderships and the king was the only man who had authority over his subjects. There did, of course, exist ministers (*Montri*) in the court of the king for his assistance. Their knowledge and experience had taught them to be honest so that the King with their

help ruled the people with honesty. Altogether living in a peaceful atmosphere the king and the ministers had a feeling of oneness with the individual members, who had the same feeling as well.

Modernization has resulted (because of blind copying of a 'foreign way of life') in the emergence of all the modern vices of individualism, opportunism and materialism. In *Webster's New 20th Century Dictionary*, the term, 'copying' is defined as (i) to make a reproduction or imitation of; (ii) to make or do something in imitation of (something or person), (iii) to copy the habits of the rich. Similarly, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, also defines 'copying' as (i) to change one's style, tone, behaviour or course of action, (ii) to assume another character, a more outward show or sign of what one would do or be; hence, pretence; (iii) to make or form an imitation of (anything); (iv) to imitate, reproduce, to follow. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, regards 'copying' as (i) an imitation, reproduction or transcription of an original, (ii) to follow as a pattern or model, imitate, (iii) to make or do something in imitation of something else. It is clear from the above that to copy means nothing but to express oneself not depending on one's own feature but by borrowing from others. A very simple and candid argument in this connection is that in traditional age, depression, violence, and suppression of human beings has very rarely occurred. But

modernity has done innumerable unwanted things to mankind and transformed the pure and unfolded traditional mind to indisciplinary concepts and actions. Let me put the same in Nirmal Verma's words, "If modernity has done any violence to man, it is in trying to suppress feelings, impulses, insights, visions, which once spontaneously, innately belonged to man. This has given a very distorted, a very crooked concept of man himself."³⁴

The Boroks here could learn a thing or line from Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhism has incorporated specific elements of tradition in order to establish a solidly rooted meaningful sense of identity, and solidarity to the process of modernization, education, industrial employment, and enlargement of urban life, within the traditional framework have helped to reinforce rather than destroy the organic conception of Indian society. Gandhi says, "In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things. Old as I am in age, I have no feeling that I have ceased to grow inwardly or that my growth will stop at the dissolution of the flesh. What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment, and, therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do

³⁴ Verma, Nirmal, "The Golden Threshold" in *Language, Tradition and Modern Civilisation*, Seminar Proceedings, (ed.) R. Gandhi, Hyderabad, 1980, p. 50.

well to choose the later of the two on the same subject.”³⁵ There is always that aspect of minor growth. Generally, the concept of growth or progress is always understood in terms of materialism. Of course, it cannot be denied that the progress of science and technology is there in our society. But Gandhi rather refers to more spiritual or ethical aspect of progress.

To recapitulate, what I have tried to show in this chapter is that it is the cultural symbols, which are used as a means of identity assertion. The reference to the various movements of the Boroks I have tried to show is to highlight this fact. Even though it is a fact that the Boroks today are outnumbered in their own territory, there is seriously no threat to their bare existence as a distinct biological group. What is threatened is their ecology, their language and their culture as a whole. Accordingly what I wish to stress here is that here identity assertion is basically assertion of cultural identity as against the identity of the dominant group i.e. the Bengali identity.

³⁵ Gandhi, M.K., *Harijan*, 29-4-1933.

Chapter - V

Conclusion

Ethnicity, culture and identity are intimately connected with each other in term of the identity-formation of a community. The biological cohesiveness or racial traits are to be seen as ethnic attributes of the identity of a community, whereas non-biological traits such as language, religion, collective consciousness, self-identity, common customs, traditions and institutions and common pride in the ancestral land of origin are to be seen as the basis of their cultural distinctness. Culture, language and ancestral history are the most fundamental determining elements for identity-formation of the Borok community. Accordingly, cultural symbols are generally used as a means of identity assertion manifested through various movements. I have also discussed identity assertion of the Boroks of Twipra in the light of (a) the large scale influx of Bangladeshi migrants, (b) the Twipra merger with the Indian Union, (c) Bengalisation and (d) Westernization being the fundamental causes.

It is generally admitted that a community identity is a synthesis of ethnicity and culture of the community. What I have been stressing in my thesis is that ethnic identity is formed on the basis of racial traits of the members of the community while cultural identity is

formed on the basis of cultural traits of the members of the community. Racial characteristics of a community are biologically transferable only to younger generations of the community primarily basing on blood relation between younger generations and older generations of the community. It implies that transfer of racial attributes of a community is possible only among the members of the same community, tribal community or any community. So, ethnic characteristics of a community are almost permanent features of the community. However, ethnic traits are not completely static. For, inter-marriage or inbreeding between two different ethnic communities is quite obvious and natural human behaviour. But this process of change of ethnic traits is definitely slow. Leaving aside this state of affairs of a people, ethnic traits of the community are generally seen as static. So long as the members of the community are provided with ethnic or racial certificates (caste/tribe certificates) by the government and are not tortured or disturbed racially or biologically by other ethnic communities, the ethnic identity of the community is, to some extent, secured. In this sense, question of ethnic identity crisis or threat to existence does not necessarily arise. In other words, there is no serious threat to the bare existence of the members of the community. For example, although the Boroks have been outnumbered by the 'outsiders' in their own ancestral land, there is seriously no ethnic threat as such to their bare existence as a racial

group. So long as there is no genocide by alien ethnic communities taking place in the community, the members of that community are normally supposed to be racially or ethnically free from ethnic threat.

But it seems to be true that even though they are not racially tortured or disturbed by the dominant alien people, their identity is sometimes seriously threatened and dislocated at the hands of the dominant alien community. The Boroks are not racially threatened or disturbed by the dominant alien people. What is seriously threatened is not their bare existence as an ethnic group, but their cultural identity.

Ethnicity and culture are two aspects or sides of the same coin in the context of the notion of identity of a community. The rate of change of culture of a member is faster than that of the entire community. The rate of change of culture of a community is faster than that of ethnic identity of the community. Community members are more responsible for losing their own identity than by other factors.

Culture of a community may be viewed as a system of the patterns and the modes of expectations, aims, desires, expressions, values, institutionalization, and enjoyment habits of individual members of the community. It is the source of the more-or-less

spontaneous actions and reactions of the community and their mode of dealing with objective reality and subjective formations. It follows from this that culture is a human construct whose primary function is to provide a community in general with a mode of dealing with objective reality and subjective formations in the forms of various types of operations such as adjustment, manipulation, reaction, response, and so on and so forth. These operations of the individuals of the community are seen to be more or less spontaneous and thus they, more often than not, get mixed up with the culturally free or natural responses. Therefore, it may be generally admitted that culture of a community, for example, the Borok community, is, in a sense, created phenomenon (Durkhem and Berger), not a part of nature,¹ for culture is something acquired, not instinctive.² However, culture is not simply an individual acquisition, for, an acquired feature of life which begins and ends with the individual members of the community will hardly qualify for being included in culture. Indeed, it must, in some sense, be handed down to the younger generations from the older ones to be considered as part of culture, which is thus at once an individual acquisition and a social tradition. It is, in fact, something, which guides and improves and fulfils the individuals and in the meantime constitutes the inner meaning of

¹ The word 'culture' and 'civilization' first came to be used in an idealistic sense in Western Europe from the second half of the 18th century – Sorokin, *Sociological Theories of Today*, pp. 353-354, cf. OED, Vol. II, p. 1248, Col. 1; *Ib.* p. 448, Col. 1.

² Tylor, E.B., *Primitive Culture*, 7th Edition, p. 1. and also see Kroeber's *Anthropology*, Indian Edition, 1967, p. 253..

social value-experience of the community. It is, in a sense, basically a feeling or sense of belongingness grounded in the minds of the individuals of human communities particularly the tribal community, toward their past or tradition which binds them together in term of identity formation of the community.

Of late, the pace and extent of change of human groups particularly the tribal community have tended to evoke some anxious reflection over the widening gap between the past and the present i.e. between tradition and modernity. Social scientists generally consider tradition and modernity to be simply the dimensions of continuity and change at any given time, thus making their contrast present everywhere. The concern with tradition of a community, for instance, the Borok community, is a common problem in the context of rapid, contemporary and globalizational change. The specificity of traditions is naturally different in different communities, whereas modernity is considered as an inevitable historical transition comparable to the emergence of individualism, opportunism, materialism and civilization out of primitivism. As G.C. Pande observes:

“Tradition plays the same role in social life as memory does in individual life. Institutional and educational continuity keeps alive the fruit of past experience and learning and no society can neglect the past in this sense,

for institutions and learning never begin *de novo* in any absolute sense the past must always tend to recede further and further away, for the process of experience and learning continuously changes and the thread of tradition must lengthen and become ever more tenuous. Social institutions change insensibly or violently, languages become inevitably archaic, and ancient texts become increasingly the object of historical study, The relevant or living past thus becomes an indistinguishable part of the present, which the rest, thrown into the scrap-heap of time, becomes only the object of a historian's memory. Tradition thus tends to become either an organic or an external, historical memory of the past."³

G.C. Pande regards culture of a community as the tradition of values, of self-realisation of the individuals of that community. Values are the objects of valuing, a fundamental human activity. The act of valuing implies seeking, choosing and approving. Just as motion is inherent in matter, seeking is inherent in human life. At the level of human mind the seeking becomes self-conscious and critical and its objects as well as the process of seeking and its elements become symbolized. All human seeking is grounded in human nature, arising spontaneously, oriented but undefined. Thus, human nature exists at many levels, from the biological to the purely spiritual, seeking self-fulfillment at each level. Consequently, the gamut of values extends from self-preservation to mythical communion.

³ Pande, G.C., *The Meaning and Process of Culture*, Shivalal Agrawala and co. Agra, 1972, p. 102.

According to Roop Rekha Verma the artifacts of culture of a community range over a variety of concreteness and abstraction. They include dress, food, language, rituals, myths symbols, codes of relationships, modes of expressions, ways of life-sustenance, polity, arts, and values. Ranging over such complex and vast areas of life, culture remains the basic force of, and the focal reference point in determining one's identity. Culture, and therefore cultural identity, is variable and optional, although, as a matter of fact, in all the cultures their optionality is either not available at all, or only minimally available. Although culture is a human construction and thus a matter of human choice, at the level of the individual this choice is mostly not exerted in freedom and therefore it remains a pseudo choice. Since the primary bearer of freedom is the individual, the optional character of culture, and consequently of cultural identity, remains unfructified or frozen. This unfructification or freezing of cultural optionality is partly inevitable but to a great extent escapable even though very difficult.⁴ For instance, in order to recognize and appreciate the options, one needs a language and therefore has to acquire a language before even seeing what is available for choice. Therefore, a language becomes a condition of the very perception of cultural choices. Like language, she points out, a value system also may seem to be subject to transcendental choice.

⁴ Verma, Roop Rekha, "The Concept of Progress and Cultural Identity" in *Culture and Modernity*, (ed.) Eliot Deutsch, Motilal Banarsidass publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1994, p. 530-531.

This is because not only *perceiving choices* but also *making the choices* has some conditions. The value system of the culture of a community handed down to the individuals functioning as the “natural” value system for the individuals and it enables them to understand what exerting a choice is like. The valuation exercise in one’s own value system of one’s own culture makes it possible for the individuals of the community to understand alternative value system, compare them, and either consciously to reaffirm one’s own culture’s value system or to choose another or else to create a new one. So, a value system can emerge out of its transcendental choice-freeze and enter the arena of optionality.

Thus, culture is a very strong and effective working force in determining the identity of the individuals, and is strengthened by optionality amnesia and hence becomes almost imperative. This dialectic of what Berger calls ‘creation-objectivation-optionality amnesia’ is behind most identity formations of communities, Verma points out. In these identity formations, the tradition (i.e. the past) becomes the most effective and all-enveloping reality, and the ethos of individuals with such identity formations is committed to the past, thereby making the ultimate yardstick for the determination of values and thus progress of any community.

The central reference point of a value system of a community is the present individuals and their community. For, the tradition or the past, by itself, cannot be its own ground or testimony and it cannot authenticate itself. Their past, their tradition is always in the court of their life, seeking the lease of approval. In order to sustain their cultural identity, their values have to be realized in present social context and they have to be willed, aimed at, and aspired to by the individuals of the community. Without this possibility of constituting the world-view of the community and the possibility of the individuals striving to achieve it, a value system can only be either an item in the “thought-museum” of cultural artifacts or a fantasy. On the other hand, modernity represents the supremacy of action guiding principle of the present society. For, modernity is not always a rejection of the tradition or the past of the community. It may be total acceptance of the tradition. But it can be possible only if the acceptance of the tradition is conscious, realistic and critical reaffirmation – a regrounding of the traditional values in the context of the present.

The essence of modernity is to recognize new situations and phenomena of life, and to review and modify, if necessary, the institutions and the value system in the light of the new phenomena

with the ultimate aim of maintaining the maximum possible harmonious balance between different facets of life. It is perpetual preparedness to make cultural changes with a view to obtaining this balance.⁵

Modernity must be dependent on tradition, which implies that there must be continuity between the old and the new so as to preserve one's identity. This condition can only be fulfilled if the cultural change is from within the individual's inner world or the self-drawing and self-evaluating out of the individual inner and outer faculties for the development and progress of the entire life-style of the Borok community on the basis of a genuinely integrating, what Miri calls 'deep' value which rests upon their language, culture, ecology and pride in ancestral history. I am afraid, in Borok community there is no such satisfactory link between tradition and modernity; the Boroks like other tribals of the State seem to be adrift in the sea of utter helplessness and conceptual perplexity. Whatever identity that is professed by them seems to be only for the sake of saying and is really not self-consciously realized.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 532.

While discussing the concept of identity I had referred to Mrinal Miri's concept of identity – personal identity and community identity enshrined in his two articles titled, "Identity and the Tribesman" and "Identity, Tribesman and Development"(Refer Chapter – III, pp. 68 and 75). I agree with him that the answer to the question "What is my identity?" cannot consist in a simple enumeration of properties that I happen to possess. He describes tribal identity or any community identity in the light of its being determined by strong evaluation – evaluation in terms of a value such as 'allegiance to the tribe' or 'allegiance to my own community' – in a way such that this value overrides other values in a fundamental way.

A person who has 'allegiance to his own community' or nation is ready even to give his own life and take the life of others for the cause of his community / nation. The 'allegiance to the tribe' or "allegiance to one's own community" as Mrinal Miri points out, is considered to be a genuinely integrating, 'deep' value. According to Miri, a tribe gets its particular specificity from: "(i) its history; (ii) its ecology and (iii) its own peculiar way of dealing with questions about itself (Refer Chapter III, p. 88). But it is extremely difficult for me to think how I am, as a tribesman, related to my own tribal community. My self-consciousness or feeling in regard to my own community identity is genuinely

integrating and in it a 'deep' value is involved. Here Miri is worth quoting, "But think of the difficulties for me as a tribesman (i) of making clear to myself my relationship to my history; (ii) of gaining an authentic insight into the ordered world of meanings and values into which I am born; and (iii) of asking questions of my own tradition – questions to which the tradition itself might provide creative answers. (Every living tradition must have room for a *yagadharma* without which the tradition will stagnate and collapse)."6 In spite of all the obstacles placed by the modernity to exploring the moral and spiritual depth of 'allegiance to a tribe', it is certainly possible imaginatively to reconstruct the tribal form of life in an abstract, general, if entirely functional way. Miri observes "such a reconstruction might represent a tribe as a group of people which is strongly community-oriented: its social structure simple (unlike the highly bureaucratized modern society), its hierarchy broken by naturalness and spontaneity of all interpersonal relationships – a community which believes in an abiding continuity between nature, earth, and what we call the supernatural, instead of in the divisive distinctions between these that modern man makes, a community which

⁶ Miri, Mrinal, "Identity, Tribesman and Development" in *Interface of Cultural Identity and Development*, (ed.) Baidyanath Saraswati, Indra Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd. New Delhi 1996, p.74-75.

is also free from numerous stress and anxiety-producing distortions of natural biological life that modern man is subject to.”⁷

My concern with Miri’s notion of ‘allegiance to the tribe’ as a genuinely integrating, ‘deep’ value for the identity of a community basically rests upon the self-drawing and self-evaluating out of the individual’s mental, physical, material, moral and spiritual faculty for the development and progress of the entire life-style of an individual or a community.

It is this self-drawing genuinely integrating distinct value-experience of the individual members, which keeps the community identity particularly the tribal identity still alive and powerful. This genuine self-assurance seems to enable the tribesmen and their community to face the world outside their community without being wholly overpowered or swamped up by it. Perhaps, the values of the tribesmen and their community are the moral principles and beliefs toward their community that they think are important in life and that they may tend to live their lives by.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Take the literal meaning of the word 'allegiance'. According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, the term 'allegiance' means "(i) the duty of fidelity owed by a subject or citizen to his sovereign or government, (ii) devotion or loyalty especially to a person, group, or cause entitled to obedience or service and respect."⁸ *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* defines the word 'allegiance' as "(i) the loyalty of a citizen to his government or of a subject to his sovereign, (ii) loyalty or devotion to some person, group, cause, or the like."⁹ *The Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary* defines the term 'allegiance' as "loyalty to a person of higher status or a group or cause."¹⁰ According to *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* the word 'allegiance' means as "duty, support, loyalty, due to a ruler or government."¹¹ *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* defines the word 'allegiance' as "a person or group's allegiance is their support for and loyalty to a particular group, person, or belief".¹²

⁸ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Vol. I, A – G, Chicago/London, William Benton, Publishers, G & C Merriam Co., 1966, p. 55.

⁹ *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, The Unabridged Edition*, Jess Stein (Editor-in-Chief), 1966, p. 39.

¹⁰ Soanes, Catherine, *The Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, p. 20.

¹¹ Hornby, A.S., *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Third Edition, 1974, p. 23.

¹² *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*, Indus, An imprint of Harper Collins Publishers India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1991, p. 37.

As pointed out earlier it is very obvious that the Boroks are also partially responsible for their identity crisis of their own in their own ancestral territory. For, like any other communities, cultural identity of the Borok community consists of the ideas, certain beliefs, language, morals, customs, music, dance, literature and artistic achievements that are produced or shared by the Boroks themselves. In this sense, cultural identity of a community is much to do basically with the individuals of the community from within. It has, in a sense, nothing to do with alien people. It is mainly the moral duty and responsibility of the Boroks themselves to maintain their distinct identity from within. It is basically the intellectual, material, artistic, moral and spiritual faculties of the Boroks, which sustain their cultural identity. Of course, influence of Bengali culture being the dominant culture on the Borok culture and vice-versa is quite a natural human phenomenon. To some extent, distinctness and relatedness of two different cultures can go hand in hand. My main point of contention is that when a community is engaged in blind borrowing of alien cultures the community is likely to become a rootless community, which in turn, creates a serious cultural perplexity in the minds of the individuals of the community. It ultimately widens the gap between their past (i.e. tradition) and the present (i.e. modernity). The Boroks are engaged in blind copying of alien cultures i.e. the Bengalee culture and the western culture. For instance, some

Boroks who profess pan-Hinduism and live close to other non-Borok people, specially the Bengalis, often tend to feel proud of them when they give English, Hindu and Bengali names to their children. On the other hand, some Boroks who profess Christianity often tend to give English and Bible names to their children. By so doing, perhaps they themselves feel that they are more developed than other Boroks in all aspects of life. At this juncture, the Boroks are confused with their identity in the midst of alien cultures dominated by the idea of humanism and globalization. This state of affairs has also considerably contributed to the emergence of Borok identity crisis causing identity assertion (i.e. cultural identity assertion) movements in the state, which in their turn have led to the emergence of all the modern vices of individualism, opportunism and materialism. These movements have caused a tension leading to disastrous consequences between the two communities i.e. the Borok community and the Bengali community (for instance, the 1980 communal riot). In line with the rest of Twipra, they are seriously confronted with a high rate of social change, especially in the field of educational, economic and political development. Consequently, their basing their new life style after alien cultures, they have identified 'progress' with the idea of better living conditions. Here, of course, they are not very different from the non-Borok population of the state. The difference lies in their rejection of everything, their own,

their religion, their God, their morality, their education, politics etc., and even sometimes their culture as inferior to the alternative models. For this reason, in the relatively stable Borok community that could handle its routine predictable affairs, more and more problems have arisen and the traditional form of Borok tribal organizations has proven inadequate to meet the new challenges in the midst of globalisation.

Tradition is like a home, which is essentially a place, to which one belongs. In a home an individual is not only a role-player but is also simply an individual. These possibilities of being simply as an individual and of feeling belongingness are realizable only in situations which allow authentic identities, since the situations generating inauthentic identities are essentially the situations of alienation. It may seem paradoxical, but outwardly it is the individual with authentic identity who appears to be suffering from alienation rather than the one with inauthentic identity. In the case of the latter, one's conformity to the tradition is mistaken for belongingness and the confines of the institution of one's personal relationship for home. But unreflective conformity to tradition is entirely different from belongingness. Belongingness essentially implies a conscious and willing identification that is possible only in the case of individuals who have authentic identity without modernity as understood earlier. Thus, progress,

modernity, and authentic cultural identity form a network of such conceptual connections that one is not possible without the other.

All forms of culture-experience depend on a self-awareness. For something to become an image of culture, it has to become expressive of awareness. Indeed, unity is found in self-consciousness, which binds individuals of a particular people. Whenever people are impressed in a culture by a painting or a philosophy, the really unifying element is the unity of self-consciousness: the unity of the feeling or sense of belongingness that the self is realized through these. It is the image, which the mind gathers, the awareness of different types of activities of a community tends to produce the mind an increasing sense of order and connection towards the ethnic and cultural identity of a community. The unity of a culture is not the unity of an objective system but the unity of self-awareness. Culture thus is said to be a symbolic world expressive of spiritual order. It is the self-realisation, which sustains community identity. It is "the validity of each set of norms for the people whose lives are guided by them and the values they represent"¹³ is very significant for maintaining community identity.

¹³ Herskovites, M. J., *Man and His Works*, New York: Knopt Publishers, 1947, p. 76.

Culture becomes the form and achievement of a community, a social tradition. Leaving aside tradition being a memory of the past, tradition serves, like a memory and a value, to create a sense of ethnic and cultural identity of a community or society. The weakening of the tradition or the past of a community weakens the very substance of social being which is a fellowship extending in time, a partnership of generations of the community. A community without a past or tradition is without a name and identity, a rope of sand. A rootless community cannot be capable of commitment. For, even the most revolutionary societies like China and Russia have stressed their cultural identity in terms of past glorious achievements. My point is that certain amount of change is indispensable in any community, but a community identity, for instance, the Borok community identity, without its past will cease to survive. Whatever change that may occur in the community must be based on its original root. For, any community cannot maintain or sustain its own distinct identity without its root. There must be a continuity between the past (tradition) and the present (modernity) so as to sustain a genuine community identity. Whatever change that may take place in the Borok community must be deeply rooted in a genuinely integrating 'deep' value (Miri) of its tradition.

Accordingly, tradition of a community is to be taken to mean a communion with the past, a continuing dialogue, which reinterprets the old, and also the new. This aspect of tradition is fundamental to the self-awareness of values. Thus, a community identity is deeply rooted in the traditional values of the community. This value is so deeply linked with the individual members of the community for keeping its identity distinct from other communities that it remains in the ultimate analysis imponderable, a 'matter of unarguable insight' (G.C. Pande). Here the cognition of value is not subject to any automatic diffusion as is common in the history of positive cognition or technology. Indeed, value can never be stated or proved or learned impersonally from a book to which one is emotionally indifferent; it can be experienced, symbolically expressed and personally communicated. Value-experience is not always static and final, but it grows from within like the unfolding of a flower in time. This is the essence of tradition – it is a developing communion of the foundational experience of value.¹⁴

It logically follows from the above discussion that change is unavoidable in any community. In other words, a kind of fusion of cultural horizon of a community seems to be acknowledged, and there is no necessary contradiction between tradition (i.e. the old) and modernity

¹⁴ Pande, G.C., *The Meaning and Process of Culture*, Shivalal Agrawala and co. Agra, 1972, p. 103.

(i.e. the new), but only between tradition and a change of values, which is really a case of replacing one tradition by another. Indeed, the inevitable nature of the contemporary sense of antithesis between tradition and modernity is a conflict of cultures or values, the conflict of the older tradition of a relatively stable community, for example, the Borok community, with the newer tendencies imported from the dominant alien cultures.

Let me say a few words about the role of language in the maintenance of any community identity. Community identity is indeed intimately tied to language identity. In this regard, N.K. Das observes, "Language is a major component in the maintenance of ethnic identity. Group identity is indeed closely tied to language identity. North-East India represents an exceedingly complex plurilingual setting where language boundaries provide strong bases for ethnic tribal specificities and identities."¹⁵ Identity of an ethnic group is in fact closely tied to language. Language reveals a person's origin, identity and culture. It is also a means for a person to interact with others. It is thus one of the fundamental indicators for the identity of a group. It is no less important in fostering identity assertion of an ethnic group. Members of

¹⁵ Das, N.K., "Cultural Identity and Tribal Heritage of North-East India" in *Tribal Identity in India: Extinction or Adaptation!*, edited by K.K. Chakravarti, Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal, India, 1996, p. 21.

an ethnic group speak the mother tongue while conversing with family or with the members of the same group. For instance, Borok community identity is closely tied to Kokborok language identity. Kokborok language boundary provides a strong base for the Borok specificity and identity making the Boroks distinct from the dominant alien people i.e. the Bengali community. Thus Kokborok language reveals a Borok's origin, identity and culture. It is also a means for a Borok to interact with other Boroks of the community. Thus language identity binds the Boroks together.*

Language differs from community to community, society to society, nation to nation and country to country and no language is to be considered less developed or inferior to the Bengali language or the other. The role that Kokborok plays in the cultural upliftment of the Boroks is the same with other languages. All languages are one in nature and form. In this sense, a particular language is no 'higher' or 'lower' than another language.

“An important corollary of this fundamental unity of all languages is that it ensures the mutual sharability of human experiences. Also, since all human languages must equally share the same basic equipement, it is

* In order to preserve their language, the Boroks need to revive the Kokborok names of all the places of Twipra. They need to name their children in Kokborok.

impossible that any language can be, in any fundamental sense, inferior to another language.”¹⁶

A language is often considered undeveloped and criticized on various reasons: - it has no a script (for example, “Kokborok has no script of its own whereas Bengali language has script of its own”); it has no literature (for example “Kokborok language has no a literature but Bengali language has its literature”), and it is underdeveloped (for example, “Bengali language is more developed than Kokborok language”). As Miris rightly pointed out that”.... to criticize another language, on the ground that it does not have a script, it is peculiarly misplaced. The script of a language is not an integral part of it. It shows, as it were, outside the language. A script without language is ‘dead’ but a language without a script is still very much a language.....The absence of a script is not a criterion of the poverty of a language.”¹⁷ It may be noted here that no language can be said to be completely developed. All human languages remain undeveloped in various degrees. Nevertheless, it would be practically disastrous to modify and develop a language of a community by borrowing (blindly) various elements from any other languages of other communities. For, any language with the addition of elements from any other languages will never remain the same and the

¹⁶ Mrinal and Sujata Miri, “Unity in Diversity” (Paper presented at the Seminar on North-East Region of CRRID, Chandigarh, April 28, 1981), p.3.

¹⁷ Miri, Mrinal and Sujata, “Unity in Diversity” in *North East Region: Problems and Prospects of Development*, (ed.) B.L. Abbi, Centre for Research and Industrial Development, (CRRID), 1984, p.159.

addition will pulverize the core elements of the language. The point which I intend to say here is that all 'undeveloped' and 'unwritten' dialects must be considered as language(s)¹⁸ and no individual member of any community, for example, the Borok community, must feel his language inferior to any other languages of other communities.

As we all know that different communities have different ethnicities and cultures where they all formulate various relevant moral codes or norms that suit them. The cultural life of a particular community which suits the community does not necessarily suit another community. Likewise, the moral norms or codes laid down in a certain community may not necessarily be an important and valuable norm for another community. People whose culture differs from our own are neither more nor less moral than us. For, each community has its own moral laws by which it divides its own people into good and evil, and one can certainly not form a judgement on the morality of a culture.¹⁹ Thus, all cultures are equal.

¹⁸ Daniel, S.C., "Ethnicity, Language and Nationalism" in *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North-East India*, (ed.) M.M. Agrawal, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1996, p. 55.

¹⁹ Leiris, Michael, "An Article", in *Race, Science and Society*, edited by Leo Kuper, Paris, The UNESCO Press, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1975, p. 165.

It logically follows from the above that there is no possible logical ground to say that one's ethnic and cultural identity must be in authority over that of another. The concept of a genuine ethnic and cultural value being concerned primarily with the individual's effort in uplifting his own mental, physical, moral and spiritual world this process would be the same with another individual, belonging to a different community. So there is no logical possibility for any community to establish a hierarchical form of cultures over its contemporary societies in a true sense.

Of course, identity assertion to status, recognition and distinct entity either as a superior group or at least equal to other groups is quite natural. For, identity assertion is prevalent in all ethnic and cultural groups in one form or other. In restricted sense, there cannot be any 'High race' and 'Low race' and 'High Culture' and 'Low Culture' of human beings. Every race is unique and every culture is also unique in itself. Identity assertion by a community is generally strong when the community undergoes different phases of oppression and exploitation by the dominant alien group. For example, the Borok community is strongly undergoing various facets of exploitation and suppression caused by the dominant alien people. They need to remove the feeling of inferiority complex existing in their minds so as to resist their identity

from the extreme influence of the dominant alien group. When there are two different ethnic communities co-existing side by side in a state, influence of one ethnic group on another is quite natural. It can be said that when one ethnic group is less developed than another in terms of material development, it is quite possible for the former to face identity crisis by the influence of the latter and thereby lead to identity assertion.

To conclude let me state once again that to preserve one's identity, one need not copy alien culture, when one can frame one's own culture out of one's own self-drawing and self-reflection. In other words, for a self-evaluative, self-reflective or conscientious person there is always scope to sublimate his energy for creativity. In this regard, Gandhi is worth quoting, "I believe that the sum total of the energy of mankind is not to bring us down but to lift us up."²⁰ Gandhi could never tolerate the subordination of one nation or individual to the other. In his philosophy in a healthy society or community, the individual is granted the maximum scope for self-expression. He would not dream of a healthy society, joyous and prosperous community which deprives the individuals of their freedom. To him a healthy society is contingent upon

²⁰ Raghavan N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford University Press, Newyork, 1978, p.92.

the individual liberty. In reality even those who do not believe in the liberty of the individual believe in their own.²¹

The central reference point of a value system of a community is the present individuals and their community. For, the tradition or the past, by itself, cannot be its own ground or testimony and it cannot authenticate itself. Their past, their tradition is always in the court of their life, seeking the lease of approval. In order to sustain their cultural identity, their values have to be realized in present social context and they have to be willed, aimed at, and aspired to by the individuals of the community. Without this possibility of constituting the world-view of the community and the possibility of the individuals striving to achieve it, a value system can only be either an item in the “thought-museum” (R.R. Verma) of cultural artifacts or a fantasy. On the other hand, modernity represents the supremacy of action guiding principle of the present society. For, modernity is not always a rejection of the tradition or the past of the community. It may be total acceptance of the tradition. But it can be possible only if the acceptance of the tradition is conscious, realistic and critical reaffirmation – a regrounding of the traditional values in the context of the present.

²¹ Raghavan, N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford University Press, Newyork, 1978, p. 351.

The essence of modernity is to recognize new situations and phenomena of life, and to review and modify, if necessary, the institutions and the value system in the light of the new phenomena with the ultimate aim of maintaining the maximum possible harmonious balance between different facets of life. It is perpetual preparedness to make cultural changes with a view to obtaining this balance.²²

It is undoubtedly true that the gradual de-culturation of the Boroks, which began in the early twentieth century, has eroded the people's image of themselves as a group with a valid culture, which has constantly been described as savage and primitive.

However, all this has not undermined the value of Borok culture and tradition. It is well known that modernization has a tradition reinforcing effect, and Boroks are no different. For instance, introduction of both Roman script and Bengali script widened the usage of Kokborok. The Bible and Mahabharata have been translated in Kokborok, with the result that Kokborok rather than English and Bengali is generally used during discourse at church and temples. At school level, particularly in District Council areas, the traditional

²² Verma, R. R., "The Concept of Progress and Cultural Identity" in *Culture and Modernity*, (ed.) Eliot Deutsch, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pt. Ltd., Delhi, 1994, p. 532.

Kokborok language is taught, news papers, and hand bill are also printed in Kokborok.

Then again the 'Christian way of living', which is seen among the Boroks, now is quite different from what was proposed by the first missionaries and Borok converted Christians. The missionaries had barred the converts from participating in all traditional festivals, dance and songs. But nowadays, the Borok Christians celebrate their main traditional festivals, which are not of ritual performance. Traditional dances of the Boroks have become part of any festivity ranging from State day and TTAADC day celebration to the Tripura Baptist Christian Union Jubilee celebration. In fact, keeping apart the religion, the Borok Christians seem to be more active in identity assertion than the Borok non-Christians. This cultural revival on the part of the Boroks can, to a large extent, be explained as their assertion of having a distinct identity even in the midst of globalization.

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