

A Study of Religious Identity  
Among the Bru of Mizoram



T. VANLALTLANI

**A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY  
AMONG THE BRU OF MIZORAM**

**T. VANLALTLANI**

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## Chapter 1

# INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an attempt to study the religious identity among the Bru of Mizoram, as a possible significant factor in their response, reaction and resistance to change in general and religious conversion in particular.

### 1.1. UNDERSTANDING OF IDENTITY

A study of religious identity among the Bru of Mizoram cannot be done without a general understanding of the concept of identity and its implications. This attempted study, therefore, calls for a brief discussion of the meaning of identity, the necessary elements for its formation and the multiplicity of identity. It also calls for a necessity to know how an individual or community can face and struggle with identity confusion and crisis as well as the search for the recovery of the needed identity. Since the title refers to the Bru of Mizoram the need is felt to present the Indian Constitutional provision of tribal identity to the Bru ethnic community of Mizoram.

#### 1.1.1. Meaning of Identity

The term 'identity' has various meanings, such as 'who a person is or what a thing is,' 'a statement of equality (an equation) which is true under all conditions' and so on.<sup>1</sup> When we want to know a person's identity, the knowledge of his/her name, family connections, status in society, education, profession, etc. will help us to know and talk about his/her identity. It is, however, not an easy task to define and discuss 'identity', because the term itself has a number of connotations. One meaning of identity is given by Erik H. Erikson: "A sense of identity means a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops; and it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community's sense of being at one with its future as well as its history or mythology."<sup>2</sup> On the basis of his definition, Erikson describes human identity in terms of a common

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, 1988 Edition, New York: Lexicon Publications, INC., 1988, p.481.

<sup>2</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Dimensions of New Identity*, New Delhi: Light & Life Publishers, 1975, pp. 27, 28. (Hereafter will be cited as Erikson, *Dimensions*).

cohesive correlation through which different tribes and nations, creeds and classes experience themselves to be a single species and will, especially in times of crises, sacrifice to this claim much of the knowledge, the logic, and the ethics that are theirs.<sup>3</sup> According to Gerald John Mathias, the term may refer to, at one time, 'a conscious sense of individual identity,' at another to 'an unconscious striving for a continuity of personal character' and yet a third time it may mean a 'criterion for the silent doings of ego synthesis;' and fourthly, it may be taken to mean 'a maintenance of an inner solidarity with a group's ideals and identity.'<sup>4</sup> It is, here, clearly stated that identity has several implications and, human identity is formed by several elements that characterize a human being as a distinctive self in relation to and connected with others with whom one lives.

The present author's understanding of 'identity' goes on the line of Erikson's definition and G.J.Mathias' fourth definition of identity because both are dealing with the relation between the formation of an individual identity and that of the ethnic group or community. Sajal Basu, quoting Erikson's definition of identity, acknowledges and discusses the complementarity and relativity of individual identity and collective ideology of several ethnic groups in India. He further argues that the concerned ethnic groups may take up language or culture or other themes such as ethnic nativism, religious purism, tribal consciousness, indigenism, etc. as identity inputs<sup>5</sup> for responding and retaliating against any forces that may affect their ethnic distinction from others. For the Bru their identity is essentially and integrally linked up with their religious beliefs and practices because in tribal society religion, politics, ethnicity, economy and social life are so closely related that one can hardly be separated from the others. Rather all these are important factors for the formation of the wholeness of community identity whether the concerned community belongs to either majority or minority group.

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<sup>3</sup> Erikson, *Dimensions*, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald John Mathias, *Moral Development and Psychological Development: A Comparative Study of the Development Theories of Lawrence Kohlberg and Erik H. Erikson*, Rom: n.p. 1987, p. 100 (Hereafter will be cited as G. J. Mathias, *Moral Development*).

<sup>5</sup> Sajal Basu, "Ethnic Identity and Ethnopolitics: Regional Movements in India" *Tribal Transformation in India, Vol-III Ethnopolitics and Identity Crisis*, Edited by Buddhadeb Chaudhuri, New Delhi : Inter-India Publications,1992; pp.512f.

### 1.1.2. Formation of Identity

Human identity, either individual or group identity, is not established in isolation but is formed through the combination of several causal factors. The role of society and the social environments is paramount in the formation of one's identity and the growth of individual personality. One's identity, truly, grows and develops through the influence and effect of family, neighbourhood, school education, social interaction with others which provide contact and experimental identification with younger and older members of the society. Thus, while developing the concept of identity, Erikson first focuses on the psychological aspect of an individual identity. He then further relates that individual's personal identity is closely related with the ethnic community's cultural influence by acknowledging the dynamic impact of the society on the individual's identity formation.<sup>6</sup> There is a close relationship between the individual and his/her society in the formation of human sense of self image. The individual seeks recognition in the society and the society too, in turn, feels recognized by the individuals who seek recognition. This interaction between the two is affirmed by Mathias:

Identity formation, therefore, is not only a developmental issue, but also a social issue. It is an individual and a communal issue. Much of an individual's identity, therefore, depends on the identity of the group or community to which one belongs.<sup>7</sup>

Terms like 'continuity' and 'sameness'<sup>8</sup> are often used when defining identity because identity establishes a temporal continuity between one's life and experience in the past and that in the future. One's hope and anticipation of the future also shape the past experience and memory causes one's present consciousness of one's self and this present identity. This anticipatory faculty is the guiding factor in the formation of ethnic groups' existence and development. Lalsangkima asserts the role of this anticipatory faculty: "The function of the anticipatory faculty is crucial for group identity

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<sup>6</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1968, p. 22. (Hereafter will be cited as 'Erikson, *Identity... Crisis*.)

<sup>7</sup> G. J. Mathias, *Moral Development.*, p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> Erikson, *Identity...Crisis*, p. 19. In another place Erikson said, "The term identity connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others." Quoted from Erikson, *Identity and Anxiety*, p.30 by Achin Vanaik, *Communalism Contested: Religion, Modernity and Secularization*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1997, p. 95. (Hereafter will be cited as A. Vanaik, *Communalism*).

because it asserts the needed group emotional energy for identity formation and development."<sup>9</sup> Memory and remembrance of the ethnic group's history and mythology are significant factors in forming the group's present identity, which is at the same time influenced by the group's anticipated future. Therefore, if we turn towards the Bru of Mizoram, we will see that the history and experience of their group in the past creates their present consciousness of ethnic emotional energy which is also affected and shaped by their hopes and dreams for their future

### 1.1.3. Multiple Identities

Human sense of identity is usually built and described in relation to others because one lives in the world of others. The family, the society and the environment in which one lives contribute to the formation of his/her identity. No one is an isolated being but is involved in constitutive relationships with others at various levels of interaction. This causes a personal profile, and multiple identities in his/her life. B. Saraswati affirmed that "each person plays multiple roles in multiple ways in multiple contexts, and thus, each individual self has multiple identities."<sup>10</sup> These multiple identities are mainly characterized by the roles played, such as husband, wife, parents, child, teacher, students, etc. and determined by physical-biological attributes such as shortness and tallness, male and female, black and white, etc. And, identity is also characterized by other socio-economic positions such as richness or poorness, foreigner or nationalist, literate or illiterate and so on. The prevalence of multiple identities in a personality is confirmed by M.Kishwar by saying, "Every human being is the product of many cross-cutting, multilayered identities."<sup>11</sup>

An individual may be molded into multiple personal identities as a result of causing factors such as nativity, ethnicity, language, geographical inhabited locale, religion, occupation, gender, status

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<sup>9</sup> Lalsangkima, Pachuau, "Ethnic Identity and Christianity in Northeast India: A Socio-Historical and Missiological Study With Special Reference to Mizoram." A dissertation submitted to the Princeton Theological Seminary in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 1998, p.10 (Hereafter will be cited as Lalsangkima, *Ph. D. Thesis*).

<sup>10</sup> Baidyanath Saraswati, "Introduction" *Interface of Cultural Identity and Development*, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1996, p.6.

<sup>11</sup> Madhu Kishwar, "Who Am I? Living Identities Vs Acquired Ones" *Manushi-A Journal About Women and Society*, No. 94, May-June, 1996, p. 6.

and others. For instance, the author of this thesis holds, at once multiple identities of being Indian, North East Indian tribal, a member of the Mizo community, Christian, student, female, married, professional woman, and so on. It is, therefore, affirmed that one's personal identity is not fixed in singleness but multiple. The same factors can affect the identity of the group too.

The Bru society of Mizoram, too, holds multiple identities caused by various factors. Their multiple identities can be summarized as their being Indian, of being North East Indian tribal, a minority ethnic group in their inhabited state, speakers of an unwritten language, people of the interior or rural locales and practitioners of their own traditional religion. These multiple identities exist and function together to identify the life of the Bru community, affecting all its members in their relationship and contact with others at various levels of interaction. Thus the Bru community identity is not fixed in singleness but in multiplicity.

#### 1.1.4. Identity Confusion, Crisis and Search for Rediscovery

Either individual or group can face an identity confusion or crisis. They can also develop identity consciousness or search for rediscovery in the presence of others and of forces of change. Individual identity confusion usually occurs during the period of late teenage and early twenties<sup>12</sup> when one feels changes in his/her biological structure. In addition to this, school education, career planing, clashing interaction with others in one's family life, questioning of values and the ethos of the society can cause individual identity confusion and crisis. Mathias cited, "The term 'identity crisis,' according to Erikson, was first used for a specific clinical purpose during the second world war when Erikson and other psychiatric workers discovered that their patients through the exigencies of war had 'lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity,' and therefore, had lost their 'ego identity.'"<sup>13</sup> Almost everyone faces

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<sup>12</sup> 'Identity Confusion' is defined as a term which describes "the inability of young people in the late teens and early twenties to establish their station and vocation in life, and the tendency of some to develop apparently malignant symptoms and regression." G. J. Mathias, *Moral Development*, p. 107. Due to the pressure of varied forces, one can get confused, to know and decide who and what he/she is. No settlement for one's career and occupation can create identity confusion to a person to know himself/herself whether he/she is independent or dependent, free or controlled.

<sup>13</sup> G.J. Mathias, *Moral Development*, p. 106, Erikson's definition of 'Ego-identity' is quoted: "Ego-identity, then, in its subjective aspect, is the awareness of the fact that there is a self-sameness and continuity to the ego's synthesising methods and these

identity confusion and crisis at sometime in his/her life due to the effect of accidental mental imbalance, psychoanalytical problems, any kind of tragedy and failure or any other traumatic incidents in one's life.

Identity confusion or crisis does not necessarily end with a total loss of identity. Rather this exact point can trigger the process of identity resolution and development. A struggle over one's identity or an identity crisis is neither a fatal catastrophe nor a pathological condition. It is rather "a crucial time, or an inescapable turning point for the better or for worse."<sup>14</sup> One can, with a counselor's help, pastor or friend's help or by his/her own means, resolve his/her struggle and reclaim his/her identity. This resolution of one's identity confusion and crisis involves the achieving of a new sense of identity, overcoming his/her sense of identity confusion, finding relief in passing through the identity crisis. Thus even identity problems can become the resources of identity growth, recovery and development. It is cited, "Erikson even affirms that 'worse' can ultimately lead to 'better' and reminds us that extraordinary individuals, in repeated crises, create the identity elements of the future."<sup>15</sup>

The use of identity confusion and crisis as the turning point for better has certainly happened to the Bru of Mizoram. The Bru, being a minority group whose members are mostly illiterate except for a few youngsters, cannot compete with the majority Mizo group who are more educated and politically expert in the democratic election of the State Assembly. They also cannot enjoy the socio-economic profit and advantage of the State because of their small size they are being socially dominated and economically exploited by the Mizo. Above all, the aggressive Mizo Christian evangelists who have tried for more than 60 years to replace the Bru religion with Christianity have attacked the Bru religion, along with its implied beliefs and practices. But the Bru are now aware of what has been going on around them and have become awakened to see that they face an ethnic identity crisis and confusion in their socio-economic, political and religious spheres. Such feeling of confusion

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methods are effective in safe-guarding the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others." A Vanaik, *Communalism*, p. 95. Vanaik commented this quotation by saying, "In Erikson's psychoanalytical approach, identity is ego-identity." *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> G.J. Mathias, *Moral Development*, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

and crisis has led them to ask about themselves who and what they are and what kind of rights they have as rightful citizens. Their experience of identity confusion and crisis has motivated the Bru to start their search for recovery of their community identity. For that purpose, their religious identity is the main factor uniting the Bru together and helping them to begin the process of identity resolution and development.

### 1.1.5. Consciousness of Ethnic Identity

Today every small ethnic group is trying to affirm and assert its own identity due to the pressure of dominant majority groups. The ethnic group is defined by George A. De Vos, "An ethnic group is a self-perceived inclusion of those who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others with whom they are in contact."<sup>16</sup> Also the ethnic group is commonly perceived as a minority group often dominated by a dominant majority group. It is therefore cited, "...ethnic group ordinarily refers to a non-dominant people with a shared interest and/or a common culture."<sup>17</sup> As the point of identity confusion and crisis can be the beginning of the process of identity resolution and development, the dominance and suppression by dominant elite groups awaken the sentiments of non-dominant ethnic groups to struggle and claim their identity. This is affirmed by K. C. Abraham, "Suppressed groups everywhere are conscious of their lost identities."<sup>18</sup> K. C. Abraham often argues his discussion about identity in relation to justice, participation and a vision for building a pluralistic community which allows different identities to flourish. According to him, ethnic identity has to be

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<sup>16</sup> George A. De Vos, "Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation," *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict, and Accommodation*, (3<sup>rd</sup>ed.), Edited by Lola Romanucci-Ross and George A. De Vos (Walnut Creeh [CA], London: New Delhi: Alta Mira Press, 1995, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Lalsangkima, *Ph. D. Thesis*, p. 12. Lalsangkima has acknowledged the existence of several ethnic groups in North East India. But he has nowhere mentioned the existence of the Bru who recently claim their identity as indigenous people while being exploited and suppressed by majority group, Mizo, in Mizoram.

<sup>18</sup> K. C. Abraham, "Dalit Theology - Some Tasks Ahead" *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol.-XXIX, Nos. 1 & 2 March & June, 1997, p. 45. (Hereafter will be cited as K. C. Abraham, *Dalit Theology*). While discussing Dalit identity under the framework of Dalit Theology, K. C. Abraham affirms that the dominant groups/classes/castes have been destroying the culture, religion and language of the suppressed groups in order to enslave those groups. He then further states, "Therefore, a recovery of identity, inevitable for the struggle of justice, should be a recovery of the past that has been submerged." K.C. Abraham, *Ibid.*

discussed against the background of two conflicting developments- emergence of modern Nation-State and the ideas of secularism. He, therefore, writes,

Threatened by the emergence of modern Nation-State and the ideas of secularism, some sections in all religions assert a fundamentalist posture in the major religions. Under the guise of identity struggle, the fundamentalists, particularly in major religions, are creating a volatile situation.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time marginal groups like Dalits and tribals are seeking a new identity for themselves based on their past religion and cultures which had been suppressed or destroyed by dominant communities. In their struggle against historical as well as contemporary process of domination, the Dalits and indigenous groups become conscious of their identity as people.<sup>20</sup>

When there is pressure from combination of religious fundamentalists of major religions and their controlling political process, the religious minority groups feel insecure in their identity. If dominant communities or any other threatening agents practise suppression of a minority group's religion and culture, minority ethnic groups are motivated to react by struggling for the survival of their ethnic identity. This is affirmed by H. L. Seneviratne saying, "One mechanism by which an ethnic or national groups awakens to a consciousness of identity is the perception of a threat to the group by a force external to it."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, a variety of reasons or purposes for people's asserting their identity is acknowledged by Nirmal:

There are those who are asserting their identities in order to preserve their privileges. There are also those who are trying to establish their identity because of the injustices heaped upon them<sup>22</sup>

In this modern period no individual or community can neglect its need for an identity because identity is the measure that gives is-ness to human beings. A. Vanaik expressed the need for having identity:

Humans must have identity for psychological well-being and stability. There is a need for identity or identification which is as powerful as any other human need or instinct...Psychological security comes from having an identity.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> K. C. Abraham, *Liberative Solidarity-Contemporary Perspectives on Mission*, Tiruvilla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 1996, pp. 100, 101. (Hereafter will be cited as K.C. Abraham, *Liberative Solidarity*)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> H. L. Seneviratne, (ed.), *Identity, Consciousness and the Past-Forging of Caste and Community in India and Sri Lanka*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 5 (Hereafter will be cited as Seneviratne, *Identity, Consciousness*).

<sup>22</sup> Quoted by K. C. Abraham, *Dalit Theology*, p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> A. Vanaik, *Communalism*, pp. 97, 98.

The ethnic groups, in accordance with the above expression, need to have identity for community psychological well-being, stability and security in order to preserve and foster religious identity of their own. Several ethnic groups may have some religious elements and ingredients in common. But this does not mean that they have everything in common, because each group may have religious elements which are distinctive and unique from that of others. While there is a need for a study of religious identity of many different ethnic groups, in this study we will cover only one, that is, the religious identity of the Bru, a minority ethnic group in Mizoram.

In the case of the Bru community of Mizoram, a consciousness of their ethnic identity has awakened since the last two decades, mainly due to the pressure of the dominant group, the Mizo community. The Bru, unlike other minority communities such as Lai, Mara and Chakma who have their respective Autonomous District Council (ADC), have no opportunity to take part in any decision making administrative body. Only two persons, Mr. V. Lalnunzira<sup>24</sup> and Mr. Zoduha, have participated in the State political administration since the formation of Union Territory in January, 1972. Both of them were given special political appointments to sit with elected members of the Mizoram Legislative Assembly. V. Lalnunzira was appointed during 1979-1984 and Zoduha's term was during 1984-1987. The projected population of Mizoram in 1998 was expected to be 8,71,609 persons.<sup>25</sup> (But no census took place in 1998). Meanwhile the Bru community claimed their population to be 85000 in 1998 indicating that almost 10% of the State population were Bru.<sup>26</sup> If so, it is reasonable for the Bru to ask the State authority to provide some constituency seats for their community members, particularly those in the more inhabited area, in the State Assembly.<sup>27</sup> Slowly the Bru have awakened to see the need to claim

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<sup>24</sup> Khuchauhla V. Lalnunzira is a resourceful person giving important informations about the Bru ethnic community life, beliefs, practices and experiences. Since his Mizo name, V. Lalnunzira is more popular we will continue to use it in this dissertation.

<sup>25</sup> Projected population from 1992 to 2001 A.D is drafted from the census figure of Mizoram state as 6,89,756 in 1991. Directorate of Economics & Statistics, *Mizoram at a Glance - 1995*, Aizawl : Directorate of Economics & Statistics. 1995, p.9

<sup>26</sup> *A Memorandum Submitted to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, New Delhi, by Bru National Union (BNU), Mizoram on 29.4.1998*, p.2 (Hereafter will be cited as *BNU Memorandum to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India on 29.4.1998*).

<sup>27</sup> Bru National Union (BNU) asked three (3) Assembly Constituencies to be reserved for their community. *BNU Memorandum to the Hon'ble Prme Minister on 29.4.1998*, p.7.

recognition of their ethnic community identity, which is distinct from others. They are no longer satisfied with how they are treated by dominant group, Mizo, who have politically suppressed them for many years. As they are more conscious of their ethnic existence and life condition of their community compared to that of other communities, the Bru cannot remain silent any longer but must raise their voices through their various memorandums and other means. This will be dealt with in the second half of this book.

In their struggle for the wholeness of their ethnopolitical and socio-economic status, the Bru make use of their religious identity because it is the faith which particularize them and by which they live and stand in unity and solidarity. They do not want to be known as *Riang* because the term refers to only one of the several clans in their community.<sup>28</sup> In addition, they cannot accept the term *Tuikuk* for referring to their community because the Mizo use it in a derogative sense, when referring to them.<sup>29</sup> They prefer to be known as *Bru* whose root word is *Borok* or *Brouh* means 'person' or 'human being' in their language, *Kau Bru*.<sup>30</sup> (This terminology will be dealt with in detail in chapter 2 of this book). Their insistence of the name *Bru* indicates their desire to show their indigenesness and nativity due to their claim for land ownership, and their ancient relationship to their land. As a result of their consciousness of a distinct ethnic existence, and of their constitutional rights, they now demand an autonomous power for their community, i.e. Autonomous District Council.<sup>31</sup> They have a great desire to be known as human beings, or people, who desire ownership rights to their land for their habitat and agro-economy. Such a desire of the indigenes groups to be recognised as peoples is affirmed by David C. Scott,

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*Memorandum Submitted to Shri. L.K. Advani, Honourable Union Home Minister of India, New Delhi, by Bru National Union (BNU) on 29.4.1998, p.2 (Hereafter will be cited as BNU Memorandum to Union Home Minister on 29.4.1998).*

<sup>28</sup> *Findings from Answers to Q. No. 5 of Questionnaire to traditional Bru. Findings from Answers to Q. No.5 of Questionnaire to Bru Christians.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Bruno Msha, "Bru Hnam Tobul leh An chanchin" *JATI HAWMCHAM-Bru Students' Association 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Magazine - 1993-94, p.27.* (Hereafter will be cited as Bruno Msha, *Bru Hnam To Bul*)

<sup>31</sup> *Memorandum jointly submitted to Shri Lalihanhawla, Chief Minister, Mizoram, Aizawl, by Bru National Union (BNU), Bru Welfare Committee (BWC), Bru Socio- Cultural Association (BSCA) and Bru Students' Association (BSA) on 29.5.1997, pp.3, 4.* (Hereafter will be cited as BNU, BWC, BSCA & BSA Memorandum on 29.5.1997).

Indigenous peoples resist categorisation in frequent common terms of class and caste structures. Instead, they insist on being recognised as “peoples” with a common identity based on ancient relationships to the land<sup>32</sup>

In their attempt to be recognised as ‘peoples’ the Bru tend to make use of their religious identity which pervades all aspects of their life, distinguishing them from all others. Therefore, such religious identity draws our attention for our attempt to identify and analyze their religion and practices due to their significant contribution for the purpose of our research.

### 1.1.6. Religious Identity

Religious identity is, in brief, an identity made up of religious people’s life, beliefs and practices, their faith in the existence of supernatural beings or deities and its implied rituals, the performance and activity of the people who maintain common religious tradition, cultural attributes like spoken language, religion, folklore, folk customs, rites and ceremonies, etc. Religious identity lets the people who maintain the said identity to have religious consciousness and belief in a common origin, often mythical, common shared memory of their past migrations in their history, socio-political and religious experiences. Religious identity is the inner means or factors helping the religious followers to see themselves as a distinct ethnic group with its own history, mythology, experience, beliefs and their required ritual performances. It also makes the religious community members to have common faith in the existence of deities, reality of supernatural powers and of animated objects, etc. Religious identity guides also the believers to behave in accordance with the will and expectation of objects of their worship and veneration which have power and authority over them. It directs them also to think, sense, act and live on the line of social, ethical and religious norms set and demanded by their beliefs and religious-minded opinions. Thus followers of every religious tradition maintain their respective religious identities jointly caused by their respective histories, languages, folklore, myths, beliefs, rites, ritual performances, cultures, customs, social practices, ethical norms, public criteria, value systems and so on. Therefore religious identity is not composed of a single factor but of multiple factors and elements touching all aspects of human life of religious community as well as of individuals who belong to their respective communities.

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<sup>32</sup> David C. Scott, “A mirror to M.M. Thomas’s Perspective on Inter - Religious Studies” *The SATHRI Journal*, Issue No. 2, 1993, p.85.

Religious identity, when it is used for referring to that of an ethnic group or community it plays a significant role to draw and unite ethnic community members together for common cause and purpose on several occasions wherever they may be. It may gather them together on religio-cultural occasions like worship, sacrificial ceremonies, festive celebrations and others. It can also unite them together in order to stand in solidarity at the time of ethnic identity crisis and that of normalcy. Religious identity awakens and strengthens the religious community members to maintain corporate personality, the bond of love and of co-operation while facing their common foes like religious threatening by means of conversion or proselytisation campaign, the process of assimilation through socio-cultural contact and influence, political raid and attack by outsiders with the purpose of economic and religious colonization, and other possible threatening forces. It can also help religious practitioners to preserve and appreciate their respective traditional values and to claim their respective uniqueness and distinctiveness.

Religious identity of the Bru is also understood as the binding force uniting the Bru community members together in solidarity in times of crisis as well as in times of normalcy. It also causes and inspires the Bru community members to stand together in unity in the face of outsiders (non-Bru friends) and against any forces of change that may attack their ethnic existence and community solidarity. Their religious identity holds the Bru to be loyal to both their traditional way of life and faith against those who attempt to convert them from their traditional religious tradition and faith. The Bru religious identity gives them also the source of psychological strength and self confidence to stand in unity and integrity in order to defend themselves from outside influence and its affecting factors. Therefore the Bru religious identity is composed of the followings: the claim for their ethnic community's historical existence from their ancestral period, their mythical history along with their migration experiences, their spoken language, their socio-cultural values and customary practices, their traditional beliefs along with ritual performances, their tribal minority consciousness as well as their claim for constitutional rights under secular India, their sense of distinct ethnicity from other tribal groups and indigenism, etc. All these distinguish the Bru community members from others in order to exist and survive as they are today and believe as they do in their own way in the midst of other

minority as well as of majority groups with whom they live together for many years.

With regard to the formation of religious identity among the Bru of Mizoram the history and mythology of the Bru play significant roles. For instance, the Bru folklore of their historical migration explains the Bru socio-cultural and eco-religious attachment to the rivers and aquatic animals like prawn and jungle products like plantains and trees (see chapter 2, footnote no. 17). Even today such rivers and jungle products are important elements forming the religious identity of the Bru. They are the factors upon which the Bru socio-economic and religio-cultural activities depend. The contribution of the Bru myths in forming their religious identity is noteworthy. For instance their myths (see chapter 3) contain their beliefs on the relationship between creation and sacrifice, between divine incarnation and intervention, and the instructions for the prescribed act of worship through the offering of sacrifice. The Bru ancestral origin and their historical experiences, with its mythical contents, are essential ingredients of their religion by playing a necessary role in the formation of the Bru religious identity. Also the Bru expect and imagine seeing the day in which their community would live in peace and unity. They look forward and struggle to get the place where they can settle and practise their beliefs without any disturbance. Such community consciousness and search for ethnopolitical and religio-cultural identity are shaping their present courage and struggle. Their longing and attempt to practise their traditional belief cannot become successful unless they are based on the constant maintenance of their religious identity. Religious identity of the Bru serves effectively for the Bru society by letting their community members sense and become conscious of their oneness in ethnic origin and ancestry. Although the Bru are divided into several clans and sub-clans their belief system draws them together for one and the same religious programme on multiple occasions. Such togetherness gives them sense of security in their own society by letting them feel that they are belonging to one of living human communities who occupy an important place in the total life of the whole human race. Their identity, too, is the supplement and complement to the total identity of the whole humanity. Therefore, the Bru religious identity, one of religious identities of people belonging to diversified religious traditions, plays a very important role for the completion and wholeness of religious identities of all religious people in the world.

### **1.1.7. Ethnic Identity and Religious Identity of the Bru**

As we have cited in the previous section the Bru community, although they have been staying in Mizoram since many years back, have been recently claiming openly their ethnopolitical distinctive identity of being original and indigenous people of Mizoram. But their claim for ancient settlement in Mizoram is denied by their fellow citizens, particularly the Mizo group who exercised their power domination over the subordinate/minority ethnic groups. In their struggle to be heard and recognized as people of distinctive ethnic community they introduce themselves and their existence as living and rightful citizens of their inhabited state from time immemorial. They claim to be not less than but equally ancient to the dominant group who threaten and suppress them to feel insecure, neglected and exploited in their inter-cultural contact and interaction. They, therefore, come out openly voicing their ethnic distinction and claiming their ethnic identity with their own unique religious and historical tradition, mythology, social and cultural heritage, customary practices, typical way of life and experiences.

The Bru ethnic identity cannot stand firmly unless it is supported and backed by their religious identity, composed and formed by their religious beliefs in many deities, spirits and supernatural powers and animated objects that are relating and interacting with them. (See chapter 3 for Bru religion, their beliefs and practices). Their religious identity implies several sacrificial performances and religious activities to be performed by them as their response to the objects of their worship. The Bru religious identity is the means and factors making their community different from other communities in order to survive as distinctive ethnic group in the midst of their dominant group's assimilating pressure, neglecting political administrative power, socio-cultural exploitation and biased Christian conversion process and mission. This religious identity lets the Bru friends feel their close attachment to nature, land and its resources, playing necessary and dynamic roles for their religious beliefs and performances as well as for their economic survival and prosperity. Their religious identity draws the Bru friends together to share common beliefs and participate unitedly in religio-sacrificial performances and on other occasions. It unites them to stand together in the face of other communities who have been threatening and attacking them in various ways. Therefore the Bru religious identity is the root of the wholeness of their ethnic identity making them to identify themselves as the Bru who have their own tradition, cul-

ture, society, economy, etc. in their struggle against majority dominating communities and several factors of change affecting the life of human communities. The Bru identity is also affected by the constitution of India which provided fundamental rights, freedom of religion, etc. to her citizens irrespective of the number of their community whether they are belonging to either majority or minority groups. The constitutional provision of religious freedom sanctions the needed courage to the religious minority groups in order to claim their rights in the face of religious majority groups.

### 1.1.8. Constitutional Status of the Bru and their Tribal Identity in India

The Bru of Mizoram, along with many other tribal communities and linguistic ethnic groups of North East India, are categorized under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The section on "The Scheduled and Tribal Areas" in Article 244 reads:

- 1) The provisions of the Fifth Schedule shall apply to the administration and control of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes in any state other than (the states of Assam [Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram]).
- 2) The provision of the Sixth Schedule shall apply to the administration of the tribal areas in (the states of Assam, [Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram]).<sup>33</sup>

The Bru, due to their inhabitation in Mizoram, are automatically considered as Scheduled Tribes by the Constitution. But neither the above quoted Article nor any other Article in the Constitution defines what the "Scheduled Tribes" means. Article 342 also speaks on "Scheduled Tribes":

- 1) The President (may with respect to any state or Union territory), and where it is a state, after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of a group within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State (or Union territory, as the case may be).

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<sup>33</sup> The text is quoted from Article 244 of Indian Constitution. *Constitution of India with Short Notes, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. Text Amended up to the Constitution (seventy-sixth Amendment) Act, 1994*, Lucknow: Eastern Book Company, 1995, p. 114. (Hereafter will be cited as *Constitution of India with Short Notes*). All tribal communities outside the Northeast, who are classified under the Fifth Schedule are administered by their respective states through "Tribes Advisory Council" whereas the tribals of the Northeast, who are administered with a special administrative provision with a good deal of autonomy. *Constitution of India with Short Notes*, pp. 206, 207.

- 2) Parliament may by law include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled Tribes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any tribe or tribal community or part of or group within any tribe or tribal community, but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore the Constitution, in spite of its extensive use of the term "Scheduled Tribes," avoids giving either its definition or explanation. Rather the Constitution, as affirmed by Lalsangkima, presumes the existence of people called "tribes or tribal communities" in India and authorizes the President and the Parliament to give political recognition to an identity of such people or communities for administrative purposes.<sup>35</sup>

The term "tribe" or "tribal" or "tribal communities," whether it is constitutional term or not, constantly has a myriad of negative connotations, and carries a derogatory sense in general public opinion in India. Among its several negative connotations, we will mention only two here. One is, its connotation with forest, hills and isolated regions. In India, the term is usually used for referring to original inhabitants or people of forests and hills<sup>36</sup> who are not highly civilized. The second one is, its connotation with the power of European colonization and superiority and dominating attitude of the colonizers. Pathy affirms:

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<sup>34</sup> The text here, too, is quoted from Article 342, of Indian Constitution. *Constitution of India with Short Notes*, pp. 154, 155.

<sup>35</sup> Lalsangkima, *Ph. D Thesis*, p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> L.P.Vidyarthi and B.K.Rai, *The Tribal Culture of India*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1985, p. 25. (Hereafter will be cited as Vidyarthi & Rai, *The Tribal Culture*. Vidyarthi and Rai wrote that popular names often used for referring to the tribals of India are *Vanyajati* (castes of forest), *Vanvasi* (inhabitants of forest), *Pahari* (hill-dwellers), *Adimjati* (original communities), *Adivasi* (first settlers), *Janjati* (folk people), *Adimjati* (primitive people) and *Anusuchit Janjati* (scheduled tribe) which is the Constitutional term. Today the term *Adivasi* is popularly known and extensively used. *Ibid.*

Regarding its origin, the term "tribe" in English word derived from the Latin *tribus* (tri=three, *bhuour* or *bu*=to be) literally means "to be three," and was used to identify the three basic divisions of the Roman people - the Tintienses, Ramnenses and Luceres. Thanzauva, by tracing its origin, further asserts that "tribe" was used primarily for the division of Roman citizens without a derogatory connotation. K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making*, Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997, p.1 (Hereafter will be cited as, Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*.) This term "tribe" is popularly known as belonging to the discipline of Anthropology. The anthropologists, in general, use the term to denote "a group of people speaking a common language, observing uniform rules of social organisation, and working together for some common purposes such as trade, agriculture, or warfare..." "Tribe"

The origin of the term (tribe) is closely connected with the rise of European colonialism and its racist ideology. It is crucial to acknowledge that several of the present day "tribes" were once considered as nations and peoples by the same Europeans who wanted to establish commercial and diplomatic relations with them. The colonial subjugation transformed such nations, countries, kingdoms and peoples into "tribes"... It is no exaggeration to say that tribe reflects the vocabulary of colonial administrators, who made it equivalent of savage, barbaric, primitive, jungle, bantu, nomadic, pagan, heathen and other disparaging and contemptuous terms.<sup>37</sup>

As we cited already, even the Constitution does not provide any definite criterion to qualify the term. Thanzauva observes that "The criteria used for determining which groups constitute Scheduled Tribes are religious identity on the one hand and social and economic status on the other."<sup>38</sup> The present author argues that the Bru tribal identity is based on the same line as of the criteria mentioned by Thanzauva, because the Bru are a homogenous community which belongs neither to the Hindu nor the Muslim communities. Rather they retain constantly their traditional religious beliefs and practices making them distinct and unique from other groups and their beliefs. At the same time, the Bru are economically poor and socially marginalised in various ways in their inhabited state. They are still jungle dwellers whose economy depends on nature and its resources.

However, the term "tribe" or "tribal," although it is not the best and the most preferable term for referring to people of the Northeast, needs to be used in our discussion throughout the whole thesis. It is affirmed at present, "It is difficult to find a suitable alternative term"<sup>39</sup> acceptable to all the people of the Northeast who are classified under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

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*Encyclopaedia Britannica Micropaedia*, Vol-X, 1979, p. 115. The term "tribe" is, therefore, commonly used within socio-anthropological discourse for referring to indigenous people who maintain their traditional belief. The term itself is known as being coined by the colonisers in order to separate the original inhabitants of their colonised countries from themselves.

<sup>37</sup> Jaganath Pathy, "The Idea of Tribe and the Indian Scene" in *Tribal Transformation in India*, Vol-III, *Ethnopolitics and Identity Crisis*, Edited by Buddhadeb Chaudhuri, New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1992, pp. 43, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Thanzauva, *Ibid.* pp.6-9. Thanzauva, a Mizo scholar and leading theologian, has made a very interesting argument on the term "tribal" by laying out the reasons for both the points on - "An Unredeemable term" and "A Redeemable term." He personally suggested the term "Northeasterners" to be used as a common name for the people in the region. But he himself noticed that it is much more comprehensive. At last he concluded his discussion with "it (the term "tribal") should be retained for some time."

Until fifteen years ago, the Bru of Mizoram did not speak or write down anything about their identity for public notice. But, due to the influence and impact of education, as well as to the echoes of their feelings of being suppressed and exploited by the dominant Mizo group, they became aware of 'who and why are they' in order to know and claim their community identity. As a result of such consciousness about themselves and their dissatisfaction with their socio-economic and political status, the Bru started the search for their constitutional status and rights. Such a search has resulted in their public claim and demand for their Constitutional rights by the sending of numerous memorandums to the concerned persons. Thus the Bru ethnic consciousness of 'realization by the members of an ethnos that they belong to'<sup>40</sup> has led Bru community members to the realization of their fundamental rights and privileges sanctioned by the Indian Constitutional provisions.

The Bru, whether they enjoy it or not, have found the Constitutional status and rights they expected in the article 244 (2) of the Sixth Scheduled of the Indian Constitution. Such status and rights were incorporated for the purpose of building autonomous administration by the creation of district councils and the regional councils in the hill areas. This autonomous administration meant that the tribal people could continue to follow their traditional way of life, preserving customs, manners and cultures, traditional laws, interest and judicial systems.<sup>41</sup> It was this law that created the Mizo District Council from 1952 to 1972. When Mizoram attained Union Territory status the Pawis, the Lakhers and the Takams (who are later known as Lai, Mara and Chakma respectively) wanted the benefits of the new political status. Although their demand for a creation of a separate Union Territory was rejected, the Indian Government accepted their next demand for the creation of three regional coun-

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Thanzauva, *ibid.* The present author acknowledges that the term "tribe" is not the chosen term by the people called "tribes" for identifying themselves. But she believes that the Constitutional use of the term is one of the dimensions determining the continuous use of the term by scholar, theologians, writers and common people in India and outside.

<sup>40</sup> S.K. Acharya, "Ethnic Process in North - Eastern India" *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in North - East India*, Edited by. B. Pakem, New Delhi : Guwahati : Omsons Publications, 1990, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> R.N. Prasad, "Mizo Autonomy Movement -Formation of Autonomous District Council and Regional Council : Issues and Problems of their Operation" *Autonomous Movements in Mizoram*, Edited by. R.N. Prasad, New Delhi : Vikas Publishing House, Pvt. Ltd., 1994, pp.14,15.

cils. Accordingly, after the Union Territory of Mizoram was set up, the Administrator of Mizoram passed an order as per the provisions of the North Eastern Areas (Re-organisation) of Mizoram Adaption of Laws Order, 1972, and the Government of Union Territories (Amendment) Act, 1971, creating three Regional Councils, one each for the Lai, the Mara and the Chakmas on April 2, 1972.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, the Bru didn't have any voice at that time and did not express their needs or desires for political status. This was mainly caused by a lack of education and of consciousness about their ethno-political condition and place in their inhabited state. On the other hand, their silence to claim any political position for their community may have given the Mizo an opportunity for trying to assimilate them.

As of now the Bru are aware of asserting their ethnic self-image for establishing their very essence, worth and being of a distinct ethnic community. They have started claiming that they are different from their dominant group, Mizo, and their fellow minority groups like Lai, Mara, Chakma, Hmar, and deserve an autonomous power sanctioned by the Sixth Scheduled of the Indian Constitution. In truth, Chaube's description of some tribal or folk cultural characteristics remains true for the Mizoram Bru community culture and ethno-political existence and survival. As he said, "A characteristic folk culture or tribal culture belongs to a small, isolated, close-knit society, in which person-to-person relations are prevalent, kinship is a dominant factor, and organization, both societal and cultural, is therefore largely on a basis of kinship-sometimes including fictitious kinship, as in many clans and societies."<sup>43</sup> The Bru of Mizoram, a small and isolated close-knit society, have been maintaining their ethnopolitical existence and socio-cultural unity that let them survive as distinct ethnic community. Their ethnic endogamous practice resulted on the kinship relation and closed-knit societal unity and cultural integrity. All these Bru ethnic elements are functioning significantly within their own racial community. But their ethnopolitical and social unity cannot give them peaceful life in the face of dominant groups. Therefore, the Bru sense of being distinct and unique community from others and their feeling of

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Chaube, "Tribal Societies and the Problem of Nation-Building" *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Integrity in North-East India*, Edited by. B. Pakem, New Delhi: Omsons Publication, 1990, p 15.

being exploited minority group let them search for the wholeness of their ethnic existence. For that purpose a courageous claim for their religious identity becomes the basis of their strength.

## 1.2. THE PROBLEM, METHODOLOGY, IMPORTANCE, SCOPE AND LIMITATION, AND CONTENTS OF THE THESIS

We are now attempting to introduce the problem dealt with in the thesis, the methodology applied, the importance of the study, scope and limitation of the study, and the main contents of the thesis.

### 1.2.1. The Problem

The Bru of Mizoram<sup>44</sup> are minority ethnic group in their own inhabited state. Over the years there have been major changes affecting all inhabitants of Mizoram. The new land demarcation caused by the British administration at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>45</sup> naturally brought about changes in the economy of its tribal inhabitants, that is, in jhum cultivation system. Consequently, Mizo jhum cultivation system has undergone changes due to the introduction of Wet Rice

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<sup>44</sup> Mizoram means "land of Mizo" (Mizo is a generic name that stands for several major tribes and sub-tribes in the area lying in the southern tip of North East India (NEI). Literally, *Mi* means 'human being' *Zo* means hill or highland. Therefore *Mizo* can mean 'hill people' or 'highlander.' *Ram* means 'land' or 'country' as if there is no other Mizo people except in Mizoram. The present day Mizoram was officially called 'Lushai Hills District' from 1898 till 28. 4. 1954 and 'Mizo District' from 29. 4. 1954 till January 20,1972. Since January 21, 1972 till today it is called 'Mizoram.' C. Lalhluna and K. C. Lalhluna, *Mizoram General Knowledge (For students, speakers, etc), Vol-I*, Aizawl: The Authors, 1988, pp. 29, 52, 61.(Hereafter will be cited as C. Lalhluna, *Mizoram GK*.) Roy Burman recorded that the Lushai Hills District Council was constituted in 1952. B. K. Roy Burman, "Emergence of Mizo Nationality" *International Seminar Souvenir*, Aizawl: Seminar Committee, Directorate of Higher and Technical Education, Govt. of India Mizoram, 1992, p. 16; V. L. Siama, whose historical record published in 1953 wrote that Mr. Bishnuram Medhi, Minister of Assam, inaugurated Mizo District Council on 25<sup>th</sup> April, 1952 and he delivered a meaningful and challenging message. V. L. Siama, *Mizo History* (rpt.), Aizawl: Lengchhawn Press, 1991, p. 177. (Hereafter will be cited as V.L.Siama, *Mizo History*) R. N. Prasad, *Government and Politics in Mizoram, 1947-1986*, New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1987, pp. 29,226, R. Thanhlira, the first Rajya Sabha member (1952-58) among the hills tribals of the north eastern India, unlike the above references, wrote that 'Mizo' District came into being, as a consequence of his appeal to Rajya Sabha from September, 1954, by an Act of Parliament. R. Thanlira, "My Prime Minister in Aizawl" *Aizawl Centenary 1990 Souvenir*, Aizawl: Convenor, Souvenir Committee of Aizawl Centenary Celebration Committee,1990, p. 3 of his article (no page number is given in this Souvenir).

<sup>45</sup> Liangkhaia, *Mizo Chanchin* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), Aizawl: Mizo Academy of Letters, 1976, p. 103;(Hereafter will be cited as Liangkhaia, *Mizo Chanchin*). Zatlouanga, *Mizo Chanchin*, Aizawl: Zatlouanga, 1966, pp. 143, 144; V. Langhnema, *Mizo Chronicles - 4000 BC - 1976 AD*, Churachandpur; Mr. H. Zairema, 1993, pp. 124-126. (Hereafter will be cited as V. Lunghnema, *Mizo Chronicles*)

Cultivation (WRC) system in the flat lands by the Britishers. "It was Maj. Shakespear, the first Supdt. of Lushai Hills (Mizoram) who introduced this WRC system in 1898."<sup>46</sup> The Mizo learned and practised this cultivation system very soon and started WRC in all the ploughable areas. Thus, Mizo have been using both the Jhum Cultivation System (JCS) and Wet Rice Cultivation system according to the suitability of the cultivated lands. But the Bru, in spite of being minority tribal ethnic group, retain their traditional system of shifting their settlements along with their shifting cultivation. After Indian independence, Mizoram underwent drastic political changes in its administrative set up. In spite of the introduction of a District Council system in 1952, of a Union Territory system in 1972, and of full-fledged State Government from 1987, the Bru chose to retain their traditional *Chaudhury* system.<sup>47</sup>

Even after immense social changes took place in Mizoram and cross-cultural interaction became the order of the day, the Bru continue to maintain their typical customs of marriage. For example, in one type of marriage, the bride price is paid by the groom's menial service to the bride's family for a determined period of service.<sup>48</sup> Apart from their strong attachment to their customary marriage, they also tend to stick to their tribal endogamy<sup>49</sup> vis-à-vis opportunities for cross-cultural marriage.

In addition to, and beyond all the above points of retention to their tradition, the Bru cling to their traditional religious identity in the face of the tremendous evangelizing activities of the Mizo Christians in their area. In fact, many of the changes seem to be

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<sup>46</sup> Rin Sanga, "Food Production and Ecology" *Chhinlung* Vol. IX, 1995-96, Bangalore : Bangalore Mizo Association, 1996, p.45.

<sup>47</sup> *Chaudhury* system is the Bru traditional village autonomous administrative system in which *Chaudhury* is the head of the village, appointed by the villagers on the basis of his leadership quality. Tribal Research Institute, *A Brief Account of Riangs in Mizoram*, Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1994, pp. 25-28 (Hereafter will be cited as TRI, *A Brief Account*). The term *Riang* appearing in this title of the book is the term used in Government records for referring to the Bru.

<sup>48</sup> The author has witnessed this groom's menial service to the bride's family during her empirical study in October-December, 1996. In Damparengpui village the author had morning meal with the *Chandhury's* family and that family has a daughter for whom one boy, the groom, is giving menial service. Already that groom and his wife had a child who became a grandchild to *Chandhury* and his wife.

<sup>49</sup> Tribal Research Institute, *The Tribes of Mizoram A Dissertation*, Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1994, pp. 73-75. (Hereafter will be cited as TRI, *The Tribes of Mizoram*).

incorporated into the process of religious change since the Mizo Christian missionary activity and their Government authorities, either explicitly or implicitly, tend to be the agents of converting the Bru into Christianity. Ironically, the Christian missionaries, by taking advantage of Mizoram Government authority and facilities, try to achieve their objective of evangelization. Both the mission and Government run schools in the Bru area and introduce the Mizo language as the medium of teaching.<sup>50</sup> The students are expected to be well-versed in Mizo language which is also the medium for evangelizing the Bru. A natural consequence is that the Bru become suspicious of the missionaries' intention. The evangelizing activities of the Mizo Christians, along with the other agents of change, appear to the Bru to be an attack on their language and culture, which are important aspects of their religious faith and practice. As a result, the Bru, by and large, have shown a strong inclination to remain in their traditional religion. Only a small number of the Bru population has adopted the new religion of the Mizo, that is Christianity. The author then assumes that the Bru have been using their religious identity as a factor to strengthen their response, reaction and resistance to change in general and conversion in particular.

The Mizo have a popular idiom or catch-phrase to tell of the Bru's obstinate resistance to religious change that says, *Tuikuk Pathuan siam theih loh* which may be translated, "the Bru whom even the Almighty God cannot change."<sup>51</sup> Despite hundreds of Mizo Christian missionaries trying to evangelize the Bru, a huge number of the Bru<sup>52</sup> remain loyal to their traditional religion. Hence, the Mizo

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<sup>50</sup> The author has personally witnessed the existence of the schools run with the introduction of Mizo language as the medium of teaching during her visit to the Bru villages for 5 times in late 1970s and 1980s. The school teachers do not have any prior language study to speak in Bru language as there is no demand for the same from either Government or Christian Mission.

<sup>51</sup> This catch-phrase is often heard by the author from the mouths of the missionaries and common people of Mizo community. Even the Bru know very well that this catch-phrase and other similar sayings are common among the Mizo Christians. Rawnawnzawi Zonunmawia Molshoy, *Bru Hnam Chanchin Thenkat*, Unpublished manuscript dated 13.12, 1996, p. 8. Rawnawnzawi has adopted Mizo name Zonunmawia and his Bru name is not popular at all. (Hereafter we will use the name Zonunmawia for referring to him, and his article will be referred as Zonunmawia, *Bru Hnam*)

<sup>52</sup> The author regrets that it is impossible to give the exact number or percentage of the Bru population in Mizoram. The Bru memorandum on 29.5.1997 claims their population to be about 75,000. *BNU, BWC, BSCA & BSA Memorandum on 29.5.1997*, p.4. Another memorandum submitted on 29.4.1998 claims the Bru population to be about 85,000. *BNU Memorandum to the Hon'ble Prime Minister on 29.4.1998*, p.2. Mr.

catch-phrase remains true from Mizo Christian perspective. But the Bru have their own reasons to remain as they are, because their traditional religion gives them durable identity, values and a sense of community. Their religious identity holds the community members together, helps and strengthens them to stand against the corroding forces of modernity<sup>53</sup> and the aggressive evangelistic activities of the Mizo Christians. Therefore, the study of the present thesis topic tries to identify and analyse the Bru religious identity which serves as a major factor in Bru resistance to the change.

The Bru resistance to change and their use of their religious identity for responding to the religious change might have been

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J. Lalsangzuala was critical to such claims for Bru population. J. Lalsangzuala, *Calling Attention Statement Vide Rules of Procedure – Riang/Tuikuk/Bru*, Unpublished manuscript presented at Mizoram State Assembly Session on 22.7.1998 as a reply to Calling Attention Motion, p.1.(Hereafter will be cited as Lalsangzuala, *Calling Attention Statement*).

Neither the Bru community nor the Census Department of the Government makes a separate census for Bru population. It is, therefore, not possible to give a number of Bru population or the percentage from the total number of Mizoram population. Not only that, different denominational churches do mission and evangelism among the Bru; but none of them can give exact number of Bru Christians under their respective mission. The problem to know the exact number of Bru Christians is indicated below.

Often the Mizo Christian missionaries (Evangelists and Evangelists teachers) told the author that it is extremely difficult to tell whether the Bru are truly converted to Christianity or not because the Bru often said, “*Kei chu hmanah kristian tawh, tunah chuan inthawi leh tawh maw le*” means “I was a Christian long ago, but now I offer my traditional sacrifice again.” This shows that Bru obstinate retention of their religious identity binds them not to accept any other religious teachings constantly.

<sup>53</sup> Modernity, according to Sam D. Gill, “refers to the conditions and way of life issuing from the industrial, technological, and intellectual revolutions in the Western world during the last century”. Sam D. Gill, *Beyond “The Primitive” the Religions of Nonliterate Peoples*, N. J. 07632: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982, p. 99 (Hereafter will be cited as Gill, *Beyond The Primitive*). Gill has affirmed that “It has been largely from the perspective of modernity that nonliterate peoples have been incorrectly evaluated as ‘primitive’ ” *Ibid.* As Gill also has recognised modernity is borne by Colonial and missionary efforts, which is confronted again and again by the nonliterate people. With the understanding of modernity on the same line of the above quoted statements, Longchar has cited that some of the components of modernity are science and technology, urbanization, industrialization, rapid means of communication, new education, political process, economic systems, etc. A Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity-Focus on North East India*, Jorhat: N. Limala Lkr, 1995, p. 98 (Hereafter will be cited as Longchar, *Tribal Worldview*.) It is from the perspective of the western dominant catch up development model that the tribal people like the Bru and others are looked down upon and anything that does not conform to the western and modernity worldview is considered as “devilish” “irrational,” “inhuman,” “inferior,” “backward,” “primitive” and so forth. Longchar, *Ibid.*, p. 158.

caused by their past bitter experience with the Mizo. In the course of their contact with the Mizo, the Bru were raided, killed, arrested and enslaved by the Mizo chiefs sometime in 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>54</sup> The Mizo chiefs interpreted their raids as revenge against the British encroachment upon their claimed territory and hunting field. Although the author did not find any legitimate cause for Mizo suspicion of Bru complicity with the British she personally feels that there were grounds for the Mizo to suspect the Bru to be supporters of the British colonial government because some Bru served as language interpreters for the British military officers. In spite of the atrocities caused to them, the Bru did not retaliate to the Mizo aggression in any way. However, their silence and patience did not at all imply their approval of maintaining a close relationship with the Mizo. Instead, they kept as aloof from the Mizo as much as possible.<sup>55</sup> It is asserted by the answers of 29.59% traditional Bru respondents<sup>56</sup> that their past bitter experience with the Mizo has also been a factor causing them to resist religious change particularly to religious conversion to Christianity and its accompanying Mizo language and culture which would mean a loss of their religious identity.

Another dimension of the Bru reaction to religious conversion to Christianity is their identification of Christianity with the dominating spirit of the Mizo, which they deplore. The very name *Tuikuk* given to them by the Mizo conveys a strong sense of contempt and

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<sup>54</sup> Lalrintluanga, *Mizote Chanchin*, Aizawl: n.p., 1990, pp. 41, 46. R. Vanlawma, *Ka Ram Leh Kei: Political History of Modern Mizoram*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Aizawl: M. C. Lalrinthanga, 1989, p. 33. R. Vanlawma, "Aizawl Khawpui Kum Za a lo Tling Ta Hi" *Aizawl Centenary 1990 Souvenir*, Aizawl: Convenor, Souvenir Committee, 1990, pp. 1, 2 of the article. (No page number is given in this Souvenir). V. Lunghnema, *Mizo Chronicles*, pp. 104, 106; Zairemthanga (Zaia), *Tripura Mizo History*, Zawlunam: Kailuia Zote, 1992, p. 5; Liangkhai, *Mizo Chanchin*, pp. 88, 89; Zatlounga, *Mizo Chanchin*, pp. 131, 135; V. L. Siana, *Mizo History*, pp. 96-98.

<sup>55</sup> The Bru, even if they live together in the same village with the Mizo, often isolate themselves by occupying a distant area of habitation. They hardly mingle with the Mizo as if they dislike any personal relationship with them for any purpose. They do not feel free to mix with the Mizo due to inferiority complex. The author has personal experience to see the Bru seemingly very uneasy to speak first to the Mizo for any reason during her occasional visit to their living area as well as from a Bru girl living with her for about 4 months. She personally saw that a group of Bru families living in Borai North village and Zamuang Ramthar (during her empirical study) very close to living areas of the Mizo groups. But one can easily notice that the Bru prefer at least little distant locale or street isolated from the Mizo group.

<sup>56</sup> Findings from Answers to Q. No. 136 of Questionnaire to traditional Bru.

mockery.<sup>57</sup> The Mizo's disregard for the Bru's social, cultural and religious values expresses itself in the Mizo attempt to substitute all Bru's culture and religion by their Mizo ones, and call it a change for the better. In this regard Hrangkhuma may well be justified when he commented that "the Mizo Christian mission among the Bru has been an attempt to make the Bru 'Mizo Christians.'"<sup>58</sup> The Bru must have been fully aware of this Mizo attitude towards them and perhaps wanted to take their own stand against such an onslaught. Even though the Bru have a strong desire to resist the Mizo dominating nature they have nothing to fall back on except their religious identity. The preference of the very term *Bru* for the generic name of their community sounds a strategy for safe-guarding their religious identity.<sup>59</sup> In addition, the recent formation of several associations aimed at gathering and uniting the Bru community members, too, sounds like another strategy for ensuring and preserving their traditional religious essence, faith and practices that meant a strength for their religious identity.

The changes brought about by the combined forces of socio-economic, political, and religious Mizoram State and the Mizo Christian mission have caused much pressure on the Bru. In return, the

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<sup>57</sup> The Bru dislike the term *Tuikuk* given to them by the Mizo. The term itself is a corruptive word of the Bru language *Tuikung mi* means 'I am bathing.' (The details of terminology of *Tuikuk* will be dealt with in Chapter 2). But the Mizo way of using this term, even from the tone and accent of their voice can indicate and convey their looking down upon the Bru. For instance, some Mizo often say the phrase like '*Tuikuk hi zaung an kuk reng dawn*' means '*Tuikuk* will remain as *Tuikuk*' and it conveys a strong sense of derogative and demeaning intent indicating that the Bru can not be really developed to catch up with the life style that suits modernity.

<sup>58</sup> F. Hrangkhuma, "A Historical Study of Indigenous Missions Among the Members of Other Tribes," A Thesis Submitted to the Senate of Serampore College (University) in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Theology, 1976, p. 56. (Hereafter cited as Hrangkhuma, *M.Th Thesis*.)

<sup>59</sup> The ethnic minority population of Mizoram who call themselves *Bru* are recorded with the name *Riang*. Although the word *Riang* has been used in all Government records and publications they call themselves *Bru* means 'human' while the Mizo call them *Tuikuk*. It is also claimed that the Bru community descended from their ancestor called Bruha. A Bru Pastor, named R. Zolawma, affirmed, "though the tribe has been labelled as '*Riang*' or '*Tuikuk*' or '*Tipperah*,' the name Bru has been used and cherished by the native people to preserve their identity throughout their history." R. Zolawma, "The Mission of BCM to the Bru Tribe in Mizoram," A thesis submitted to the Senate of Serampore College in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Divinity, 1997, p. 8. (Hereafter will be cited as Zolawma, *B.D. Thesis*) Zolawma belongs to Bru community and he is the right person who feels, thinks and expresses as a Bru whose feeling, thought and expression are identified with that of other Bru members.

Bru have been compelled to respond to the changes, irrespective of their choice. While they have been adjusted to certain changes, they are not adapting to any change that has anything to do with the basic elements of their religious identity. Possible reasons for retaining their religious identity may be drawn as cited below.

The religious identity of the Bru is composed of their religious beliefs and all their implied practices and performances plus their ethnic-political, economic and also social identities. Their historico-political migration experience along with their suffering under their dominant exploiters awakened and inspired them to have strong ethnic political consciousness. Such ethnic political consciousness has the foundation on their religious identity that demands sufficient area of living where they would retain and continue their agricultural economy which is essentially linked up with their belief in agricultural deities of blessing. Therefore the present thesis problem needs to deal with the elements of Bru religious identity that unites their religion and economy. The Bru of Mizoram, unlike the Mizo who could easily embrace Christianity, cannot embrace or adjust with Christianity easily because their belief system on objects of their worship is so different from that of the Christians. The Bru religious identity is partly made up of their polytheistic belief in several benevolent and malevolent deities believed to involve in their day-to-day life and activities whereas monotheistic belief in God as found in Christianity does not immediately have an effective influence upon the Bru. Therefore the problem needs to search out the depth of Bru belief regarding the character and function of their deities that serves effectively and dynamically in their religious way of life.

The Bru community members of Mizoram today have insecure feeling due to their smallness in number and the pressure of majority groups in their own living state. This insecure feeling pressed and awakened them to find the ways and means for attaining stable feeling of ethnopolitical security that cannot be challenged by bigness in number and strength in ethnopolitics. Therefore the Bru, acknowledging that they live in secular India where religious partiality is not entertained, start to rediscover and reclaim their constitutional ethnic right on the basis of their religious identity. Under secular government even the members of religious majority groups cannot simply put away or ill-treat those who are belonging to religious minority groups. The Bru, however, acknowledge the pressure of Mizo Christian mission with conversion tendency that

can minimize the value of their traditional faith which they want to retain and preserve. For that purpose they have chosen their traditional religious identity that made them united in the face of majority dominant groups and their religious beliefs. Nevertheless a certain amount of technological backwardness is still a problem for them. But whatever the problems, the Bru friends are holding on to their tribal ethnic identity religiously backed by their traditional beliefs and practices. The present problem needs to search out how effective this Bru religious identity is for the maintenance of the totality of their identity.

### 1.2.2. Methodology

The moment religion or any other topic needs to be studied, the necessity for a methodology arises. The necessity of applying methods for finding the facts is expressed by Arnold M. Rose as cited below:

Facts do not simply lie around waiting to be picked up. Facts must be carved out of the continuous web of ongoing reality, must be observed where they can be related to other relevant facts. All of this involves 'methods.'<sup>60</sup>

In connecting the above statements to our present task, methods are understood as instruments for carving out the facts of primal<sup>61</sup> religion as practised by the Bru because such facts are

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<sup>60</sup> Quoted by James A. Black & Dean J. Champion, *Methods of Issues in Social Research*, New York/London/Sydney/Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1976, pp. 5, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Several terms are used for referring the people who maintain and practise primal religion, such as Primitives, Backward, Indigenous, Natives, Folk, Aborigines (especially in Australia), *Adivasi* (especially in India), Archaic, Tribals, and Others. Each of the term is used by the users from their respective contexts of usage. For instance:

The terms 'Primitive' and 'Backward' are understood by Suresh Sharma and others to mirror the people living in the distant past of progress and advanced societies. Thus they have a derogative and demeaning intent.

The word 'Indigenous' is a very broad term. Even the Dalits and other communities of India claim to be indigenous communities. Thus, the use of the term 'indigenous' does not necessarily mean primal society.

The term 'Natives' is more prevalent in American countries and some parts of Europe (e.g. UK). It is generally understood to mean original settlers of the land. Thus it is not sufficient for referring to the practitioners of primal religion (original settlers and emigrants as well).

The term 'Folk' is generally understood as common people whose religion is considered different from that of elite class. This kind of differentiation is not found in primal society.

The term 'Aborigines' is commonly used in Australia to mean the original settlers of the land and it is not a sufficient term for referring practitioners of primal religion living outside the Australia.

essential elements of Bru religious identity. A study of primal religion implies an appliance of various methods of study, some of which are applied by the author to this study. Being a researcher who studies a religion that has neither scriptural texts nor sufficient documented sources, the author has made use of an anthropological method accompanied by empirical investigation in order to produce reliable findings.

Anthropological method to the study of religion gives concentration on nonliterate societies and shapes its approach to religious belief and practices in general. An anthropology of religion, according to James A. Boon, builds upon many foundations: Emil Durkheim's view of religious social facts, Max Weber's ideal types of implicit universal process behind religious, economic and bureaucratic reformisms, Marxist and Freudian explorations of ideological and expressive behaviour.<sup>62</sup> An anthropological method of study, in general, deals with people's language, customs and social institutions, etc. As the term implies, anthropology is essential for the study of human beings, and the relevance and effectiveness of its use for the study of primal religion like that of the Bru community is expressed by E.J. Lott, "Anthropology is the discipline that has proved most effective in investigating primal religion in particular"<sup>63</sup>

The anthropologists are interested mainly with non-urban primal communities; and they often pursue their studies among the

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The term 'Adivasi' is also commonly used in India (except in the North East India where the Bru, our present topic of study, live) to mean the original inhabitants. Thus, it is not a sufficient relevant term for referring to the Bru community of Mizoram.

The term 'Archaic' is used to refer to the ancient and uncivilized people and their religion. Thus it is rejected in this paper because the primal people and their religion are the present living and growing people and religion respectively.

The term 'Tribals' as already discussed earlier in this chapter, is commonly used for referring to the people who maintain their own religion and it is the constitutional term in India. The author of the present thesis, too, will use it here and there without feeling any of its probable derogative and demeaning intent.

The term 'Primal' is used here to acknowledge that it is worldwide used for referring to the people who practice their original or traditional religion and their belief systems. Here the author's understanding of the term 'primal' goes on the same line as 'primal' put forward in *Primal World-Views* Edited by John B. Taylor, 1976.

<sup>62</sup> James A. Boon, "Anthropology, Ethnology, and Religion" *Encyclopaedia of Religion* Vol. 1, p.308.

<sup>63</sup> Eric J. Lott, "Approaching a Religious Tradition" *Religious Traditions of India*, Edited by P.S. Daniel, David C.Scott and G.R.Singh, Kottayam:Indian Theological Library and Senate of Serampore, 1988, p.20

peoples whose languages, customs and social institutions differ from their own. Nadel has stated the anthropologists tend to become the biographers of single societies; often they have chosen small groups where intensive studies could be more adequately applied.<sup>64</sup> In its wider sense, anthropology is presented as embracing the total spectrum of human's social and natural behaviour<sup>65</sup> whereas the particular anthropology is given attention by only two schools of thought, namely, cultural and social anthropology.<sup>66</sup> These two varieties of methods give emphasis to the culture and social institutions of the primal community. To tell in brief, the anthropological approach studies religion as a cultural order that gives significance to human beings and their world.<sup>67</sup> Hence the author has made use of anthropological method wherever it is applicable becoming a participant observer with the purpose of gaining certain information for the analysis. The present author and several other researchers have applied the anthropological method for the study of human beings, their beliefs, customs, practices and their daily life. After observation and study, the author will describe the social life of this primal community to reveal its underlying structure.

The method of cultural anthropology,<sup>68</sup> a sub-theory of the anthropological method, is also kept in mind and applied by the author because it gives particular attention to the culture<sup>69</sup> of the

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<sup>64</sup> Cited by J.C. Mitchel, "On Quantification in Social Anthropology" *The Craft of Social Anthropology*, Edited by A.L Epstein, London : Tavistock Publications, 1967, p.17

<sup>65</sup> K.P. Aleaz, *Dimensions of India Religion: Study, Experience and Interaction*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1995, p. 23. (Hereafter will be cited as Aleaz, *Dimensions of Indian Religion*).

<sup>66</sup> Antony Jackson, "Social Anthropological Approaches" *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, Vol-II, The Social Sciences*, Edited by Frank Whaling, Berlin:New York:Amsterdam : Mouton Publishers, 1984, p.222

<sup>67</sup> Aleaz, *Dimensions of Indian Religion*, p. 24

<sup>68</sup> This method is usefully applied by Bronislaw Malinowski (founder of British tradition of cultural anthropology), Edward Evans. Pritchard, Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas who 'focussed heavily on empirical materials from tribal groups.' Robert Wuthnow, et al, *Cultural Analysis*, London & New York: Routledge, 1991, p.11. (Hereafter will be cited as Wuthnow, *Cultural Analysis*).

<sup>69</sup> The author's understanding of culture goes on the same line of sociologist's and cultural anthropologist's as it is written, "To the sociologist and cultural anthropologist, the term 'culture' means the sum total of: (1) inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, and (2) social heritages, ideas, habits, customs, attitudes, values, morals, law, and art, which have meaning to the group." Pauline V.Young, *Scientific Social Surveys and Research*, (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India, 1988, p.493. Young's explanation of a cultural group is quite relevant for understanding the Bru community

human community. Since religion and culture are closely related to each other among the primal people the method of cultural anthropology is very useful for the study of tribal religion since it provides special information on cultural elements of the tribal community. The relation between religion and culture in tribal society is expressed by P.Kullu as cited below:

We can say that tribal religion is nothing else than beliefs expressed culturally. In the same way regarding tribal culture we can say that it is nothing else but beliefs being lived out, or in one word: religion in practice. Thus, we come to the conclusion that from the tribal point of view religion and culture are constitutively related like two faces of the same coin.<sup>70</sup>

The inter-relatedness of religion and culture in human community (not only in tribal community) in the context of an anthropological study is well affirmed by Aleaz. He stated that every culture could be considered as a particular way of ordering the world: concepts, emotions and religious experiences are all shaped by the cultural order.<sup>71</sup> Aleaz continues his argument on interconnection between culture and religion by saying,

Every culture has a set of beliefs, practices, institutions that explains the origin and nature of the cultural order and preserves its existence. It is this set of beliefs, practices and institutions, which the anthropologists call religion and study.<sup>72</sup>

The above statements enlightened and led the author to apply the methods of cultural and social anthropology in order to understand an interlink between religion and culture. She, by applying an anthropological method of study, has looked at and studied a set of the Bru beliefs, practices and institutions which are no other than their religion. The true understanding of and recognition of the inter-relatedness of religion and culture is necessary because this inter-relatedness is the key element which makes the tribal religion and culture different from other non-tribal religions and cultures.<sup>73</sup>

With such an understanding, one can see that in tribal societies like that of the Bru, there can be no compartmentalization or clear

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and their religious identity. He asserts, "A culture group is a union of persons who have a common material and social heritage, common beliefs, habits, activities, and interests, and who live in the same social environment, whether urban or rural, foreign or native, civilized or primitive." *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Paulus Kullu, "Tribal Culture" *Sevartham*, No. 18 (1993), p.15. (Hereafter will be cited as P.Kullu, *Tribal culture*).

<sup>71</sup> Aleaz, *Dimensions of Indian Religion*, p.23

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.23,24

<sup>73</sup> P. Kullu, *Tribal Culture*. p.15.

cut division between secular and sacred, religious and profane, because everything and every activity is sacred and religious. This concept of oneness and the sameness of religion and culture makes the tribal people look at and accept their whole life as a religious life and enjoy their lives whatever the conditions may be.

Therefore, the author, by keeping in mind the meanings of 'culture' given by sociologists and cultural anthropologists and the interconnection between religion and culture in tribal society, has applied the methods of cultural and social anthropology in her research work. By applying such methods during her field work, she has observed and learned the common practices and the social heritage of the Bru community - their habits, customs, activities, ceremonies, performances and interests that cause the building and maintenance of their traditional beliefs and religious identity.

The researcher also usefully applies the sociological method of study, because this method gives importance to human society and social facts, which are taken as objective facts of study. It raises concerns about the operation of religion as uniting human, primal or non-primal, into 'one single moral community'. According to a sociologist of religion, Emile Durkheim,<sup>74</sup> religion 'is' society in a projected and symbolized form, and the reality symbolized by the religion is a social reality.<sup>75</sup> Taking religion as an eminently collective matter, Durkheim rightly asserted, "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community..."<sup>76</sup>

The sociological method of study tries to search for the religious perception and experience of the community. The researchers who apply this method usually treat religion as a social given. They are not merely concerned to describe or expand on the beliefs, practices, artefacts, doctrines and organizations of religion; but they seek to find social structural principles beneath the overlay of specific cultural style and look for the context.<sup>77</sup> From the perspective

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<sup>74</sup> Emile Durkheim is a French sociologist who popularized sociology as a scholarly discipline for the study of religion.

<sup>75</sup> Jacques Waardenburg, ed., *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, The Hague: Mouton & Co. N.U., 1973, p. 44.

<sup>76</sup> L. Schneider, *Sociological Approach to Religion*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1970, p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> B. Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspectives*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. p. 20.

of the sociological approach, religion of the societal groups reveals relationships that transcended the understanding of believers about their own society and its operation. Members of the community give vital support to their social organization by participating in religion. In this functionalist theory of religion, Durkheim stated that religious activity allowed the aboriginal tribes in Australia to take cognizance of themselves as a society to symbolize their social order as well as to gain an objective sense of their own society in the representation of a totemic animal. In this religious function, the myths and rituals of the primal community permitted the members to entertain collective sentiments and express a sense of social unity. "Religion, then, functioned to maintain social cohesion."<sup>78</sup>

The author, by applying sociological method of study, looks at Bru religion as uniting the community members together in order to form one single moral community maintaining social cohesion and identity. The sociological approach has led her see that religion provided occasions of reunion, the reassertion of social solidarity and also sustained social cohesion and solemnizes the social order. With a sociological perspective, the author looks at the varieties of religious experiences of the people, which have provided social unity along with cohesive identity. Since culture is inseparable, involved with human social life and activity the study of the Bru religious identity, too, has a great deal to do with the rich Bru tribal cultural components. After all, sociology of religion is concerned with an eminently cultural phenomenon that generates human social unity.

However, anthropology and sociology are appropriate disciplines not only for the study of primal religion and culture but also for the study of human identity, particularly primal community identity. Anthropological and sociological methods of study attempt to learn ethnic communities' self-image, language, ethnopolitical existence and nativism, customs, social cohesion and institutions, mythical elements, religious systems and cultural components that are essential elements and inputs of human identity. Such essential elements are used significantly by the anthropologists and sociologists for analyzing an identity of the targeted community. Therefore, anthropological and sociological approaches are appropriate disciplines for the study of ethnic groups' sense of identity like that of the Bru community.

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

The phenomenological method of study<sup>79</sup> is also applied making use of its two distinct principles, that is, *epoche* and eidetic vision.<sup>80</sup> While making phenomenological investigation the researcher has tried her best to bracket or suspend her own biases and opinions about the goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness, legitimacy or illegitimacy of the religious phenomena of the Bru religion with all its implied activities and practices. There was a strong attempt to suspend a judgement on the questions of what 'is' or what 'ought to be' on the part of the investigator.<sup>81</sup> As a phenomenologist who studies primal religion needs to live among the people whose religion she deals with, the author stayed with Bru friends during October-December, 1996, and became involved in their social activities, ritualistic practices and performances in order to witness everything on the spot.<sup>82</sup> While doing that, she tried to avoid presumption and presuppositions from colouring her observation and, instead attempted to see things just as they were, were done, or performed. By applying the phenomenological method one can observe and study religious phenomena, such as religious rites, acts, rituals, cult, customs, etc., that reveal meaning of religious people's beliefs, ideas, sentiments, thoughts, concepts and doctrines.

By keeping and applying the study methods of anthropologists, cultural anthropologists in particular, of sociologists and of phenomenologists of religion, the author did her best to be with the Bru, forming personal relationship with them for further correspondence, making friends for local assistance to meet the Bru who speak only *Kau Bru*,<sup>83</sup> i.e., Bru language, which the author could not

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<sup>79</sup> The term 'phenomenology of religion' was first used by Chatepie de la Saussaye in 1887 and the philosophy of phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl later. Phenomenological method describes the attempt to investigate the essence and to group phenomena in a typological manner. Ursula King, "Historical and Phenomenological Approaches" *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, Vol-I, The Humanities*, Edited by Frank Whaling, New York: Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers, 1984, p. 39. (Hereafter will be cited as Ursula, *Approaches*).

<sup>80</sup> *Epoche* is described as 'bracketing,' that is a suspension of judgement on the part of investigator. Eidetic vision aims to grasp the essence of phenomena by means of empathy and intuition. Ursula, *Approaches*, p.39.

<sup>81</sup> Wuthnow, *Cultural Analysis*, p. 33.

<sup>82</sup> The author, during her empirical study period, personally witnessed Bru cultural dance, ritual sacrifices in three places of jhum cultivated area and at the bank of a small river. She has been keeping several photographs taken in the sacrificial spots and dancing courtyard in her personal file.

<sup>83</sup> *Kau Bru* is one of the dialects of the *Kag barak* or *Kok borok* language, which belongs to the Bodo branch of the Tibeto - Burman linguistic group.

speak. Two kinds of questionnaires were prepared: one was addressed to the traditional Bru: 115 copies were distributed and 98 respondents returned the questionnaires. An analysis has been made from the answers of those 98 traditional Bru respondents.

**Table 1. Age & Gender Classification of Traditional Bru Respondents.**

Sex	Age Below 30	Age between 30&50	Age between 50&70	Age above 70	No age indicated	Total	Percentage
Male	3	28	45	10	1	87	88.97%
Female	2	3	6	Nil	Nil	11	11.22%
Total	5	31	51	10	1	98	100%

This table shows that 88.97% of total traditional Bru respondents are male in gender whereas only 11.22% are female in gender. The respondents who are between 30 and 70 years of age are contributing most of the information of the data collected whereas very less respondents are below 30 years or above 70 years.

Another set of questionnaire was addressed to Bru Christians: 120 copies were distributed and 102 respondents returned the questionnaires. An analysis was made on the basis of the answers given by those 102 respondents. The details about the Bru Christian respondents, their age and gender are found below.

**Table 2. Age & Gender Classification of Bru Christian Respondents.**

Sex	Age Below 30	Age between 30&50	Age between 50&70	Age above 70	No age indicated	Total	Percentage
Male	40	33	16	Nil	Nil	89	87.25%
Female	11	1	1	Nil	Nil	13	12.74%
Total	51	34	17	Nil	Nil	102	100%

Among the Bru Christians too, male persons seem to be more active in responding the local assistants of the researcher who helped her while distributing the questionnaire. This is indicated by the above table showing 87.25% male respondents whereas female respondents are only 12.74%. Besides, the above two tables indicate that the younger generations seem to be more active in embracing Christianity and responding to the questionnaire. Such hypothesis

is affirmed by the appearance of 85 Bru Christian respondents who are below 50 years of age whereas only 36 traditional Bru respondents are below 50 years of age. However, the probable reasons can be drawn to identify this. One is, most of old aged traditional Bru are not able to read, understand and write in order to respond to the questionnaire. The second reason is the local assistants' problem of contact to the old aged traditional Bru. And the third reason is the close contact of younger generation of the Bru with Mizo Christian school teachers and Mizo students through their education. One more possible reason is the more mingling of the young Bru with Mizo Christian friends who have an evangelical zeal in order to convert the Bru into Christianity. Therefore, it is assumed that Christianity is more acceptable to the younger generations of Bru community than it was to the older Bru ones.

The former mentioned questionnaires contained 140 questions whereas the latter had only 50 questions. Direct answers given by questionnaire respondents are usefully applied for finding the Bru ideas, opinions and concepts on their traditional religion, and its socio-economic and ethnopolitical implications. In addition, the respondents contribute the Bru myths, pithy sayings, songs and dances that are closely attached to their religious life and experiences. One may wonder that the present researcher has only 200 Bru friends to answer her questionnaire. Her reason has been caused by the limitation of the period of empirical study and the practical problem to let the questionnaire reach many Bru who have been scattering in several Bru villages and jhum houses. Personal interviews were conducted with some reliable persons, Bru and Mizo friends whose knowledge and information would be helpful for the research work. Correspondence was carried out with some Bru friends till the final stage of writing. Another kind of letter was sent to non-Bru friends (Mizo) such as Christian mission workers and church leaders of different denominations as the necessity arose. The author tried her best to make use of her relationship with Bru friends to learn what and how they believe and practise their religion. She made use of her past personal witness to the life and experience of the Bru. She used also her knowledge about them through personal contact and interaction along with her pre-surveyed findings in 1995 through personal interviews. In addition, she continues her updating collection of materials dealing with the Bru problem till the final stage of writing for enriching her study about the Bru religious identity. Since the present research is done mainly in the

field a scientific use of empirical research is applied for analyzing the findings brought out by the data collected and their results are shown by several tabulations wherever it is necessary. At the same time some of the findings are not tabulated due to the limitation of space and less importance whereas the very necessary ones are not left out. (All questionnaires, names of questionnaire respondents, names of persons with whom personal interviews were conducted, and names of persons with whom correspondence was made will be found in Appendices and Bibliography).

### 1.2.3. Importance of the Study

Increasingly, studies in religion and culture are concerned with identity and culture of the people involved. The present study is important as an attempt to identify and analyse a Bru religious identity that has held them together in the face of change. While the forces and agents of change have convinced and converted the Mizo community, their fellow tribal and majority group in the same region, the Bru, on the other hand, seems to stand against such forces of change. Their religious identity is a major factor in their negative response to change. The significant and essential values of such a stable religious identity deserve a deeper probe and careful analysis.

Lack of literature, dealing with the Bru and their religious identity necessitates and demands the present study. Former writers have not considered the Bru as important. Most of the Bru except a few young members are illiterate and unable to produce literature describing themselves. The Bru have not yet produced any major document, only a few short articles in their magazines tell of their religious identity, their origin and history. Therefore, the present study is important in that it will contribute a documented information describing them and analyzing their religious identity with the use of data collected from first hand study.

The issue of minority is a concern our present Bru community is facing. It is both an ancient and a modern problem affecting global, national and regional levels.<sup>84</sup> Minority groups and their problems are now receiving attention from scholars, writers and

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<sup>84</sup> James Massey, *Place of Minorities In a Democracy*, Unpublished Manuscript, 1997, pp.4-11. The Rev. Dr. Habil James Massey is a Member of the National Commission for Minorities of the Government of India. The above mentioned unpublished manuscript was delivered by him in United Theological College, Bangalore in 1997 when he gave a public lecture.

the media as well as national and international leaders. This interest began particularly after the formation of the League of Nations and the United Nations and after the last two world wars. The United Nations formed a special group to study all aspects of minority rights and problems. They then gave a definition of a minority, which can be, more or less, taken as a universal definition: A minority is:

A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members - being nationals of the State - possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language<sup>85</sup>

Our present study of Bru religious identity is necessitated by the minority problems faced by the Bru who are numerically inferior to the rest of the population of Mizoram. Their long year of silent suffering at the hands of the dominant group, Mizo Christians, has been voiciferously resented since the last quarter of 1997. Their cry in the public notice declaring that they are presently living as the down-trodden, deprived, neglected and exploited has been caused by the aggressive and chauvinistic anti-minority policy of the Mizoram State Government dominated by the reactionary Mizo people.<sup>86</sup> The ethnic tension between Bru and Mizo, which started in 1997, continues even today affecting many Bru,<sup>87</sup> some who are leaving Mizoram and staying in the refugee camp in Tripura with insufficient food and lack of basic provisions.

Although this kind of minority problem has been faced by some ethnic minority groups in Mizoram there is a strong opinion among the Mizo intending to say that there is neither a minority group nor a minority group problem in Mizoram.<sup>88</sup> Such opinion is pregnant

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted by James Massey, *Ibid.* p.6.

<sup>86</sup> *Memorandum Submitted to Chief Election Commissioner of India, New Delhi, by the Bru Students' Association, Mizoram on 15.2.1996, p.1.* (Hereafter will be cited as *BSA Memorandum on 15.2.1996*)

<sup>87</sup> The exact number of the Bru refugees in Tripura is not known because the numbers given by daily newspapers and periodical magazines differ from one to another. According to the report of Riang Refugee Committee more than 20,000 Bru left Mizoram and live in Tripura. *Memorandum Submitted to the Hon'ble Home Minister, Government of Mizoram by the Riang (Bru) Refugees sheltered in Tripura on 1.11.1997, p.1* (Hereafter will be cited as *Bru Refugee Memorandum on 1.11.1997*)

<sup>88</sup> Lalthara, "Ram leh Hnam Humhalh Kumpulan Agenda" *Ram leh Hnam Humhalh*, Aizawl: Central Young Mizo Association, 1998. pp.21-24. (Hereafter will be cited as *Lalthara, Ram leh Hnam*).

showing inclination to absorb or assimilate all minority groups and their identities into the Mizo identity. Therefore, this present study identifies the presence of minority groups and their problems in the face of the dominant group, Mizo Christians, their mission and evangelism. This kind of in depth study is essential and urgent to analyse and rectify minority problems which affected the loss of several houses, goods, property and the precious life of some persons. (Most of unpublished materials such as the Bru Memoranda, Press releases, Pamphlets, etc., were seized already by the State policemen from the hands of the Bru friends. They are not available for the public any more. Thus, this present research tries to documentate such Bru ethno-political and cultural heritage. The researcher feels necessary to preserve all such materials available to her reach).

#### 1.2.4. Scope and Limitation of the Study

The scope of study covers the history and phenomena of Bru religion as elements linked together to become the core of their religious identity. The geographical area of the study is limited due to methodological and practical reasons. In spite of many Bru found in other states<sup>89</sup> outside Mizoram the main focus of this present study is limited to the Bru found in Mizoram only. For instance, the application of phenomenological and anthropological methods necessitates limiting the area of the field study. Hence, the author of this thesis has limited her scope of study to the Bru in Mizoram, visiting some Bru villages where she could meet the *Auchai*, *Dwari Chaudhury*, *Bawidaw*<sup>90</sup> and others who can be reliable informants about their beliefs and practices.

The scope of the present study is limited for various other reasons. Since the study requires an empirical investigation, knowl-

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<sup>89</sup> The Bru are extensively found in Tripura, Assam and in the hill tracts of Chittagong in Bangladesh. In 1980s they were the second largest tribe in Tripura. Jagadis Gan Chaudhuri, *The Riangs of Tripura*, Agartala: Directorate of Research, Department of Welfare for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, Government of Tripura, 1983, p. 6. (Hereafter will be cited as Chaudhuri, *The Riangs*).

<sup>90</sup> *Auchai* is the term used for referring to the Bru traditional priest. *Dwari* is the term used for referring to the expert or special person who can find out the reason of one's sickness and suffering and prescribe the required sacrifices to be offered. *Bawidaw* is the term used for referring to the medicine experts for curing several kinds of illness. Details about *Auchai*, *Dwari* and *Bawidaw* will be found in chapter 3. *Chaudhury* is the term used for referring to the head of the village appointed by the villagers on the basis of his leadership quality.

edge of Bru language, *Kau Bru*, is of utmost importance and would be profitable. However owing to the absence of a Bru script, a thorough study of their dialect was difficult. In fact such a deep knowledge of their dialect was not required for the present study, as only a working knowledge was needed. This limitation was further minimized by the ability of several Bru to communicate in Mizo, the mother tongue of the researcher. Besides the availability of interpreters in every Bru village helped the researcher. This was another advantage in conducting an empirical study.

Another limitation is that of the researcher being an outsider. Since the researcher is not a Bru, she cannot fully understand, think, believe or practice as a Bru. This usually causes a minor, though not insurmountable, limitation in the study as long as a researcher studies a religion that is not her/his own. Nevertheless, the present researcher cannot avoid the most severe limitation because she is a member of the oppressing dominant group, Mizo tribe, and missionary sending church. Thus her membership in both is a major and significant problem affecting her attempt to conduct a research free from a Mizo Christian biased tendency.

One more point is a methodological limitation that is often caused by possible biased or prejudiced attitude towards the object of study. To forego or completely forget one's presuppositions and judgements, although it is possible, is often difficult. The researcher being a Christian, may easily observe, view or judge her object of study from her own Christian perspective. This human tendency and weaknesses have to be kept well within one's control in course of the study.

### **1.2.5. Contents of the Thesis**

As we have seen already, the present thesis attempts to analyse and articulate the religious identity of the Bru of Mizoram in the light of change caused by several outside forces and factors. Keeping this in mind, the author starts the first chapter with an introductory discussion on general understanding of the term 'identity' and its implications for analysing the tribal Bru ethnic religious identity. Also it introduces the problem of the thesis to be discussed and dealt with throughout the whole thesis, and implies methodology to be employed. It also informs the readers of the importance of this thesis in spite of its narrow scope and several limitations.

The second chapter tries to introduce who the Bru are by tracing their history from their original home, telling their migration history and experience and ending with their present settlement in Mizoram State, to which the scope of the study is confined.

After learning that the Bru have experienced several stages of migration, the third chapter discusses their beliefs and practices affected, more or less, by their long journey as nomadic or semi-nomadic wanderers until the present day. As they find difficulty in settling permanently in one village or location, they never construct permanent shrines or altars for the places of their worship and religious practices. Rather they have several special people serving their community to help in every place of their temporary settlements and worship places wherever they live.<sup>91</sup> This is possible because the objects of their worship are not confined to any fixed place.

The fourth chapter discusses the present situation of the Bru listing the factors and forces of change that confront the tribal Bru who maintain their traditional beliefs and practices. Those factors of change, their forces and pressures are briefly described and analyzed. It deals also with the response and reaction of the Bru against the change in general using their religious identity as their main deterrent. The forces and pressures of change are a challenge to the Bru who show a strong inclination to remain in their traditional beliefs and practices which served them in the past and formed, directly or indirectly, their tribal ethnopolitical and religious identity.

The fifth chapter discusses the interaction between the minority group, Bru and majority group, Mizo. First, it traces historico-political interaction between Bru and Mizo. The discussion then proceeds on to deal with the religious interaction between Bru (both traditional Bru and Bru Christians) and Mizo Christians. An analysis is also made on the effect of Christian mission upon the Bru. At last, the Bru religious identity is given full concentration with particular study on its role as the main factor for resistance to Mizo Christianity and a re-affirmation of Bru community identity.

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<sup>91</sup> The Bru attachment to and connection with the land goes on the same line of the tribal concept of land as summarised by Thanzauva who said: "Land, for the tribals, is sacred because their religion does not centre around a temple or a church or a particular shrine, the whole earth is the temple where they worship God." Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*: p. 177.

The concluding chapter deals with important issues arising from a discussion presented in the previous five chapters and the religious minority group problems constantly faced by the Bru community in the face of dominant groups, their religion and its missionary movement.

It is now time for us to open our mind to see how the Bru came to be found as one of the tribal communities in Mizoram and its neighbouring states by maintaining their traditional religious identity. One will surely notice with wonder how the non-dominant nomadic tribe, actively survived by upholding their traditional beliefs and way of life in the midst of changing factors and forces as well as of religious influence and impact of the dominant group, Mizo Christians.