Preface

I started my formal education in Marou village primary school in the early 1980s. The ruined government lower primary school in the village was the first school that I attended in my life. We were some twenty to twenty-five students spread in three class rooms. The school building was in ruins and a slight drizzle or gust of wind in the mornings was enough for the headmaster to call it a day. I remember singing the national anthem before the classes begin, everyday, with our heads held high. I also remember a couple of times the teacher coming to the school with his buffalo tacking along; he would let the animal graze in the front lawn where the school assembly are normally held while he taught us. Those days are long gone. But even now there are hardly any substantial changes that one can say with pride that ‘we have really moved on over the years’. The last time I visited the village for the fieldwork in the summer of 2006 I did not notice much change. I mean for the better; the school building was in complete ruins except for the couple of pillars which still hold up the frames of the wooden building. There is less number of students now because many of them go beyond the village for their studies, and equally many of them do not just go to schools. Teachers’ absenteeism, apathy of the state towards the primary education and corruption continues to take its toll. Many parents in the village could not afford to spare their meager resources to send their wards outside the village for education and prefer to keep them engage in the cultivation activities. Thus, in the following study, one will notice the poor literacy level in the village and the gender aspect of such differences.

What I pointed out above is just one aspect of the present day Marou village. What really draw me into taking up the present study in the first place are the unique practices like the lottery system with regard to land distribution for jhum cultivation which sets Marou apart from the other Tangkhul villages; the emerging land-use and land ownership pattern surrounding the ‘farm’; and within these relations and patterns
how the principle of egalitarianism is embedded. The study here also seeks to critically look at the larger picture of tribe. Tribe has always fascinated me and intrigued me at the same time. During my growing up years I used to believe that tribe is just another name for a group of people who dwell in the mountains, lead a simple subsistence life and, of course, whose food habits are primarily non-vegetarian. They differ from the non-tribal groups basically on these broad parameters. But gradually my perception of tribe became larger, more politicized and all the more perplexing. This phase of my perception of tribe coincided with the study of sociology as a discipline in the college and later on in the university which ultimately became a sort of obsession that I decided to write a thesis on it. My initial decision to write the present thesis on tribe was also partially influenced by my familiarity with the subject matter besides the aforementioned intrigue and interest. I thought, initially, that taking up such an issue would provide a safe way out to get my degrees and perhaps I could fit in my personal life experiences and situations—a native insight—into the work. In a way, the consideration for the objective approach or taking a detached standpoint by debunking all the preconceived notions or understanding, which marks a good sociological research, was thrown to the winds. In fact the choosing of the issue was taken subjectively specifically with the aim of relying on my life situation as a tribal. This fact will indeed be evident in the major areas of the present work.

I have been particularly concerned with the question of what happens to tribe when it changes or do they change at all; these are the two issues that I try to grapple with in the entire work presented here. These questions are set against the backdrop of another related question, that is, what/who is a tribe? Tribe, many of the available works, both anthropological, sociological or political would suggest, is a group of people located in a different time and space apart from the mainstream society. Moreover, most of these works present tribe as apolitical subject with its own structures unrelated and separated to the so-called mainstream society. Even those who view tribe in relation to the non-tribal communities merely relegate the relationship to the periphery with marginal or no significance at all. And this
relegation of the tribe to the periphery having marginal significance is more often than not treated as apolitical – something natural since time immemorial. Many works, either by the tribal scholars or non-tribal scholars, take this issue for granted which gradually establishes and crystallizes the identity of tribe as peripheral and marginal and therefore the need to integrate them into the fold of the mainstream. Also closely associated with this line of approach is the tendency to represent tribe as the mirror opposite of the so-called mainstream society. Tribe is seen something like a looking glass for the non-tribal mainstream community.

The tradition of viewing the tribe as the looking glass, as pointed out above, has resulted in the construction of the tribal identity; an identity which is apparently not inherently innate but something which has been imposed from without. For instance, most of the characteristics which is associated with the tribal would, on hindsight reflection, speak more of the non-tribal societies rather than the tribal society itself. Take for example, the common assertion that the tribal women have a high status in their society compared to the Hindu caste women who suffers from so many patriarchal prejudices like the dowry, purdah, child marriage, sati and so on. Indeed it is true that most of the tribal societies do not practice such social evils as reportedly practiced in the Hindu caste societies in regard to the women. Tribal women, when view from such a perspective, enjoy a better position than the Hindu caste women. Very often to further buttress their argument many works on the tribal women referred to the practice of bride-price practiced in the tribal societies. This, they argue, points to the privileged position that the tribal women enjoy in their society. But to end the argument here and accept it as representing the world of the tribal women is to tell half the truth, which unfortunately many studies on the tribe tends to do. The partial representation of the empirical situation of the tribal society and the gradual legitimacy such partial representation acquires points to the validity of the assertion that the construction and the representation of the tribal identity is in fact an attempt to construct the non-tribal identity by stating what it is not. This process of construction in the post-colonial literatures is referred to as the process of ‘othering’.
Thus, tribe becomes the 'other' for the non-tribal society and helps in the identification of the latter rather the former. Throughout the work here I have tried to critically looked at many of the characteristics that supposedly marks the tribe not so much with the intention of denying them but to determine how many of these are sort of thrust upon from outside.

Furthermore, the issue of tribal identity and change in the sub-continent touches upon an equally important area - that of power; the overall position of the tribe vis-à-vis the non-tribe. It has been briefly noted above that the tribal are situated at the periphery and occupies a marginal position. Generally, they are the backward, marginal and discriminated section of the nation's population. The attitude of the state towards the tribe tends to be paternalistic and indulging. Tribe along with other marginal groups in the society like the scheduled castes are provided with special provision, commonly known as the positive discrimination, in order to empower them and bring them at par with the rest of the society. Whereas it is still too early, even after more than sixty years of independence and pursuance of the policy, to tell with surety if the policy has really enabled in producing the desired result for the tribal community as a whole, there is no doubt that some sections within the tribal community has definitely benefited from the scheme. These beneficiaries within the tribal community are loosely categorized as the middle class, though the feasibility of the term is still debated. The emergence and the growth of the middle class in the tribal society is one of the most conspicuous changes that one witnesses in the contemporary tribal socio-political and economic structure in the sub-continent. Today they have eventually managed to establish themselves as the undisputed leaders of the society. They are also the main agents of change in the tribal society.

The understanding of the emergence and the growth of the middle class within the tribal community, their role as the new modern leaders of the society, their orientation and their bases of authority presents a significant area for analyzing the contemporary dynamics of change and identity in most of the tribal societies. One
significant feature is the emergence of the middle class in the tribal society undermining the role and authority of the traditional tribal village authority which is represented by the village council and the village chief, on the one hand, and the processes of revivalism or 'rooting' under the aegis of the middle class in their struggle for establishing their legitimacy, on the other. It is important to note here that the issue here is not just about the middle class in the tribal society elbowing out the traditional leaders. More than just a simple process of one institution becoming decadent in the face of a more modern, dynamic and vibrant structure what one observes in a tribal society like Marou village presents a complex and often fuzzy picture. For instance, the growth of the middle class in Marou village implies the modernization processes taking root. The middle class in Marou village, like the middle class in other societies, are generally government employed, non-agriculture based, politically active and aware, literate and so on. But their emergence and growth is also associated with the revivalism of many 'traditional' practices and markers of identity. It is in this context that I approach the process of 'inventing tradition' in Marou village in particular and the Tangkhul society in general. It is also important to note that along with the growth of the middle class in Marou village there is also a simultaneous growth of modern institutions like the Church overriding the role and importance of the traditional village institutions like the office of the village chief and the village council. This phenomena, I have maintained, is due to the need for the middle class to root their claim to leadership in the institutions of the village so that the common villagers would recognize and accept their claim as legitimate.

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that the present study is also beset with many difficulties and unforeseen circumstances. The initial enthusiasm and interest of studying something very close to 'home' came under unexpected difficulties which threaten to ruin the whole exercise. For instance, doing fieldwork was extremely difficult from the perspective of maintaining objectivity because of the close association and rapport with the villagers. Moreover, there are some Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (example, the World Vision) and also
governmental projects which involves taking interview and collecting data on various aspects of the village. So when the villagers were administered the questionnaire and interviewed they were kind of quite calculative and not spontaneous in their response. This is so because most of the schemes and benefits provided by the state or the NGOs were based on the prior studies. During my study also quite a good number of the villagers assumed that I am working for some project of the state. Given such a situation the outcomes were sometimes exaggerated or understated. Fortunately, some information I could manage to verify and authenticate owing to my familiarity with the area and the people but this, I should admit, was not always the story. There are many areas which due to my familiarity and rapport with the villagers prevented me from prodding further. And there are still other areas where an 'outsider: would have definitely presented in a more objective manner. Nevertheless what is consoling in the end is that I have at least attempted to study something that is complex and evasive such as tribal identity and change in Marou Village.