CHAPTER - 11
SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

I. Summary:

In the preceding chapters an attempt has been made to throw some light on the trends of culture change among the tribal populations of the Brahmaputra valley for which five tribal groups had been selected for detail investigation. The study was undertaken against a broader perspective covering not only other tribal groups of the hills and plains of North-east India but also keeping in view the all-India scenario. At the same time, a theoretical framework was taken up for putting the different issues in relevant conceptual slots.

Chapter-I, entitled ‘Introduction’, is made up of two sections as detailed below:

a. Section-I deals with the scope of the study which covers an account of the relevant geographical area, the demographic picture the area with particular focus on the tribal populations, and also the outstanding features of the tribal-non-tribal relationship with special reference to the Assamese society. This section also contains the background against which the particular topic has been selected for study.
b. Section-II describes and explains the methodology adopted for the conduct of the study including deskwork, library work, and various field techniques such as observation and interview methods as well as visual documentation.

As the title of the second chapter itself clearly indicates, it contains a general survey of the ethnographic pattern of each of the seven North-eastern states with a special focus on the tribes of Assam (excluding the five tribes taken for detailed study in this work).

In the third chapter detailed ethnographic accounts of the five tribes chosen for study have been incorporated in order that they can serve as the springboards for the case studies based on fieldwork in villages inhabited by the respective tribal communities.

"Culture Change – The Concept And Its Implication for the Present Study", the title of Chapter- 4, clearly spells out the nature of it's contents. The various sections of this chapter deal with such points as the concept of culture change, factor for culture change, processes of culture change, culture change in the context of the Indian society with special reference to North-Eastern India and Assam, and a overview of literature on culture change in the North-east.

The importance of this chapter for this work lies in the fact that it serves as the vital link between the general empirical data preceding this chapter and the specific field-based data following this chapter facilitating a logical cohesiveness of the study.

The next five chapters, Chapter -5 to Chapter -9, are case studies involving the five tribal communities under study viz., the Mising,
the Deuris, the Karbis, the Tiwas and the Rabhas - in that order. The field data in each case has been arranged as per the parameters adopted for this purpose – in the field of socio-economic life, in the field of social institution, in the field of socio-religious life, in the field of socio-political life, in the field of material culture and language. Each of these chapters starts with a background note and is followed by some relevant photographs by way of illustration of the concerned field data.

Chapter-X, which is entitled “Regional Trend”, represents an attempt to put the contents of the previous five chapters against the backdrop of the major patterns of change observed in the North-eastern region as a whole with particular emphasis on the recent trends involving ethnicity, revivalism, militancy and terrorism. This chapter has been rounded up by identifying those specific areas of change that are by and large applicable in the cases of the five communities under study – thus paving the way for giving shape to the points formulated by way of conclusion.

II. Conclusion:

In this study we have made an attempt to observe the changes that have taken place among the selected tribal communities with a presumption that such changes have by and large a uniform pattern in spite of specificities. Again, the assumption was that this pattern extends beyond the boundaries of these communities to encompass similar other communities both within the North-East India and even beyond.

As we have mentioned in Chapter-4, which deals with the conceptual framework of culture change, a number of factors are involved in the process. Various internal and external stimuli are always at work in bringing about changes in different aspects of life and culture. While such
internal stimuli as change of habitation, invention and innovation have contributed their shares, the major processes instrumental in bringing about change of these communities have in the past been acculturation, integration and assimilation vis-à-vis the dominant “non-tribal” society – in this case, the Assamese Hindu community.

The more recent factors responsible for culture change among these tribal communities have been the impact of modernization with all its technological, economic and cultural implications on the one hand, and the powerful waves of ethnic movements involving various manifestations in the form of search for roots, revivalism, assertive tendencies, and even militancy and terrorism.

In our study we have seen that the tribal communities inhabiting the rather isolated remote north-eastern corner of India have by no means remained untouched by even the latest developments – thanks to irresistible onslaught of the forces of globalization.

It may be pointed out here that of the various types of change that we have observed, some share a more or less common pattern while some others are characterized by individual peculiarities.

At this point it would perhaps be advisable to pause and ponder over the connotations of such terms as ‘tribal’ and ‘non-tribal’. It appears that these terms are being used as a matter of convention and they have not stood for clearly formulated concepts with academic justification. We are quoting below extracts from a recent article by a leading social scientist of India:

“The word tribal in the Indian context, as most of us would admit, seems to be a misnomer. It has political and racial
connotations. In a poor country like India, every layman and woman is a tribal in the sense that he or she is living in social conditions which can be termed preindustrial. However, if ethnic origins or affiliations are any criteria for this classification, the non-tribal population settled in the mainland of the country has more of it (caste and other systems for instance) than the so-called tribal peoples. The tribal and non-tribal dichotomy, therefore, needs to be viewed in terms of its relation to basic resources (economic and other) and their management. In other words, rather than treating this problem as an economic problem, and a problem of sharing resources and technology, it has been, because of the borrowed colonial ideas treated as a problem of ethnicity and racism by scholars.” (Handoo 2002).

In fact in recent times scholars of various disciplines have been seriously considering the acceptance of some other term(s) to replace the term tribe and its derivations.

However, until some universally acceptable term(s) can be agreed upon, tribal and non-tribal will continue to have their use. While it is true that the tribals still retain traces of colonial hangover, these terms now stand for classificatory categories for identification of the privileged and non-privileged sections of the Indian society for apportioning rights and privileges – social, economic and political – in the interest of distributive justice. The term tribe appears in the Constitution of India and various central and state laws with this specific function in view.
We undertook our study by formulating a theoretical framework and identifying a number of relevant parameters with the help of which we tested on basic assumptions through field investigation. After analyzing the data collected from the field against the backdrop of a wider canvas, we have come to feel that our basic assumptions stand verified. Accordingly, we are in a position to draw conclusions along the following lines:

a. The changes that have been noticed in the five selected tribal communities are identical in nature and as such conform to a common pattern.

b. Such commonness is not confined to the five communities concerned but encompasses similar other communities not only in the region but also beyond.

c. Going a step further, it can also be said that similar trends of culture change have been visible in all tradition-bound non-Western societies, whether tribal or non-tribal.

Parallely, we can also point out some specific features characterizing the trends of change during the period covered by our study.

a) Change has been an ever-present phenomenon in cultures of all societies at all times. But earlier they had been slow and mostly imperceptible. In contrast changes in the recent past have been very rapid and often glaring.

b) Changes in the past had come as a natural process without the awareness of the society concerned. But now the societies are aware of the changes. Sometimes they are welcomed and sometimes resented.
c) The newly emerging ethnic consciousness has been a potent factor of change. Changes are now often brought in through calculated and deliberate efforts.

d) The ethnic movements which have been noticed in the communities under study (and also in other such communities) in most cases involve a tendency towards revivalism and search for roots. This tendency is almost always accompanied by the glorification of selected items from the oral tradition.

Coming to the specific area of integration and assimilation of the various tribal groups into the broader Assamese fold, it has been observed by some modern scholars that a hegemonic element has been present in the process. The tribal groups they feel, have not been given a far deal. This is common tendency in a multi-ethnic society with a dominant group. A scholar of the above persuasion has put his view in the following manner -

"The quest for a greater Assamese nationality by accommodating various tribal and ethnic groups has obviously failed despite the best of intentions. This has failed because assimilation was attempted on Assamese terms instead of a mutual reaching out……" (Sharma 2002).

While there is no doubt considerable substance in the above line of thinking, the factor of Assamese hegemony vis-à-vis the plains tribes of Assam can not be held responsible for all the developments involving ethnic consciousness and ethnic conflict. First, the processes of integration and assimilation had been welcomed by the tribal groups themselves until
a few decades back and it was not considered by the concerned group as an imposition. Secondly, ethnicity-related assertion movements have been launched by such tribal groups of this region in which the Assamese hegemony factor had no role to play. Thirdly, even though in the past “Assamese domination attempts” – real or imaginary - had been the flogging horse of the tribal movement leaderships, lately there has taken place some curious turns of events: various other non-tribal groups have been made the targets of hatred and attack, and more significantly, various tribal groups have themselves been fighting with one another on various grounds and pretexts.

The situation today is extremely complicated and it needs to be studied in depth by social scientists and handled with utmost care by the powers that be.

From the foregoing discussion it appears that a basic dichotomy is associated with the phenomenon of culture-change. While a more or less uniform pattern is discernible in the trends of change involving not only the communities under study but also others, both within and outside this region, there are also areas of specificity in respect of particular communities. If the various instances of change that have been listed are carefully observed, a plausible explanation of the basic dichotomy referred to above seems to suggest itself: uniformity is found in the case of the spontaneous changes coming from within; but when it comes to changes induced by extraneous forces, variations are clearly visible.
References:

Journal of Indian Folkloristics, Vol. IV, No. 1,2, Mysore.

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Journal of Indian Folkloristics, Vol. IV, No. 1,2, Mysore.