CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The territory where the present research has undertaken is a part of the contemporary Northeast India and situated between the plains and the hills, the points where the central Brahmaputra valley and the northern Meghalaya hilly ranges merged (Chapter 2). Such geographical zones have variously been identified as a relative isolation zones (Subarao 1958, Rao 1977) in contradistinction to area of attraction (floodplain) and area of isolation (hilly plateau) and endowed with tremendous significance from the points of view of culture contact (Roy 1977). The Northeastern Indian Territory in toto is characterized by a unique geographical landscape with dual physiographic formations/zones. Therefore, it is not a homogeneous region, but divisible into two well defined physiographic zones; the plains and the hills, with idiosyncratic features of their own. It is the only connecting link between the South East Asian countries and the Indian subcontinent and therefore, it serves as a bridging land or corridor for the people of these two distinct geographical zones to move to and fro since the prehistorical times to date. Under these dichotomic geographical settings is inhabited by the genetically distinct cultural groups with distinct economic pursuits. One is mobile in nature and is practiced in
hilly areas in which the incipient agricultural elements found survived. The other type of economy is sedentary in nature and practiced in river valleys based on traction plough technology. In the process of the formation of these two distinct types of economy, however, the physiographical conditions played an important role. Again these differences in the economic strategy have evidently a direct impact on the development of the cultural forms of the region. The pattern of the socio-economic forms that are concentrated in the hilly areas exhibit a strong similarity with that of the cultures distributed in the Southeast Asian Nations while the cultures that are concentrated in the Plains corresponds to the socio-economic pattern of the Gangetic Valley (Roy 1977).

Although these cultures stand out two distinct socio-economic and socio-cultural phenomena within the same geographical zones, but there are certain areas which can be considered as buffer zones or points of contact where the two traditions melt or underwent the process of either the ‘melting pot’ or the ‘salad bowl’ principles of assimilation or integration. Such cultural phenomena do invariably occur in a place that lies between the plains and the hills. Bichhikri and Moring Morong sites represent the perfect archetype of one such centre as reflected via the artefacts recovered and the material aspects of the living culture group. As the material cultures of the people are chiefly determined by the given environmental conditions and partly by the type of economy followed, therefore, the material cultures of the people under study exhibit unique in its own way with dynamism in character in the midst of diversity of cultures. The material culture or technology keeps changes with the change of the environmental conditions and the economic pursuits in the process of adaptation or acclimatization. The new cultural element thus gained may eventually be transformed into established norms. For demonstrating these ideas, the swidden cultivation system with the modus operandi of the Karbi (Chapter 4) and the artefacts recovered from the archaeological contexts (Chapter 6) have been used as corroborative evidence.

It has been argued that pottery in the province of Northeast India have its origins in the Neolithic period in accompany with the farming technology. Although it is a debatable question as to who was the first to introduce this technology in the province, but each and every cultural group living in the hills have their own farming and food processing technology including pottery making with a little variation in manifestation. This variation can be attributed to ecological factors under which the
culture exists. The functional significance of this technology and the artefacts with different cultures, therefore, differs from time to time and place to place. These differentiations testify the nature of adaptation under different ecological and socio-economic conditions. These facts have been attested in the two contrasting contexts: the ethnographic (Chapter 3 & 4) and the archaeological (Chapter 6).

Archaeological data are almost always fragmentary in nature. Therefore, the information extracted from the archaeological data is always difficult to comprehend the cultural meaning fully but only part of it. On the other hand, the data generated through ethnographical context are more or less meaningful. Their roles in the systemic context can be observed empirically. As such a comparative study of these two categories of data can help us understand the cultural dynamics of the past as well as the present to a significant extent. In the present study these two sets of data have been used in order to explain the trajectory of agriculture being flourished in the province during the past that continue to the present. Though these two data are distinct entities, but on proper and insightful analysis they are complimentary to each other. The *modus operandi* of the Swidden cultivation with the belief and practices involved (Chapter 4) and the earthenwares of the *Karbi* consists ethnographic data. Pottery of the *Karbi* has been discussed in Chapter 3 under the subheading specialization of craftsmanship (Chapter 3: 3.5). No pottery is manufacture by the *Karbi* today, but their social life is incomplete without pottery which is attested by the case of *Phule kangthir* (holy vessel), *Sank-rank-tik* (rice storage vessel) and *Hor-hak-Hor-tebuk* (beverage pot and elongated basket). The requirement of pottery in various rites and rituals and the irreplaceability of it with other items, speak its entrenchment in the socio-cultural life and thus dispelled the obscurantism.

The *Karbi*, who are one of the most numerous and homogeneous of the many Tibeto-Burman races inhabiting the Province of Assam and thus, represents one of the prominent ethnic groups of Northeast India and possesses distinct tradition and culture (Chapter 3), continue to practice the age-old shifting cultivation or slash-and-burn cultivation with a total investment of human energy and the use of simple technology of crude hoe, axe, knife and fire. Their system of cultivation, where the land is prepared by cutting down the jungle and burning down the debris, is undeniably in no respect different from the kind of practice of all hill-tribes in the Province. What is intriguing in *Karbi* Swidden system is the continuation of the
primitive crops and system of organization of labour and the elaborate rituals and beliefs systems associated with it. Although it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether the shifting cultivation practice by the Karbi is Neolithic in origin but from the point of view of the continual use of hoe, axe and fire, primitive crops species and the exotic rites and practices associated with it one is quite save to assert that the culture under study is a population practice brought down from the past into the present. The development of the homogeneity in technology or *modus operandi* is, in fact, due to the similar ecological condition that all ethnic groups of the region experienced. It also evinces the economic and cultural interaction that different ethnic groups of the region have had in different points of time. In view of the elaborate rituals and practices associated with the agricultural life, a particular mention may be made of *Minu-kekur, sok-keroi* and *Hachha dance* (Chapter 4:4.4), it appeared that the Karbi are agriculturist for the past several millennia and counterbalanced by gathering as it is evidenced from the fact of having enormous knowledge vis-à-vis floral exploitation. Practice of agriculture in Karbi is full of rites and beliefs; start with *kechak* (inviting the local Gods of hills or rivers and promises to offer richly) and finishes with *Hachha dance* which is performed at the end of paddy transportation to granary (Chapter 4:4.4) and with hundreds of other rites and rituals in between which are exotic and antique in manifestation. But the Karbi perception of rice is now influenced by the Hindu philosophical concept. Rice is conceived and designated as *Lokhi* (*Laxmi*), or *Epi-Lokhi* (mother *Laxmi*). Besides, there are several elements which exhibit attestation of cultural interaction with their neighbouring cultures. The intensity of cultural interaction among the neighbouring ethnic groups is reflected not only with respect to the technological know-how of the agricultural systems but also in the very vocabularies denoting for a specific crop vis-à-vis specific paraphernalia and for a specific function (Chapter 3:3.6). For instance, farming vocabularies that exhibited extreme closeness in phonetics with eventual similarity in phonemics between Karbi and Jaintia indicate the phenomena that don’t lies in linguistic root but only are possible by means of culture contact. Similar is the case with Karbi’s and Tiwa’s shared rice-specific vocabularies. In view of this evidence, it does appear that the similarity of certain terms among these three language forms is the result of contact in consideration of the geographical proximity between them which in turn tells us that agricultural technology was not a monopoly of a single community.
The Karbi might have had partly abandoned hunting as principal economic strategy as is indicated from the fact that they lack any sophisticated weapon for hunting but fishing might have had been a popular practice as the knowledge for the same have been elaborate and rich (Chapter 3:3.4). They are also master of arts and crafts as is indicated from the fact that the women folk produces elaborate and intricate textile designs as also their male counterpart who are acclaimed of wooden and bamboo and cane craftsmanship per excellent (Chapter 3:3.5). Pottery as well as hoe and other horticultural implements were manufactured by themselves though these practices were no longer in vogue. This mastery over arts and crafts indicates self-sufficiency in their economic unit. Because it requires enough resources to devote enough time to produce the aforesaid items. Of all the craftsmanships, special mention may be made of pottery, product of which was a highly social demanding commodity and was a well developed industry in the past, though reason for the discontinuation of the same in the contemporary context cannot be articulated but the possibility is that the increase of cultural intercourse and cessation of isolation might compelled them to give up the domestic workmanship and rely more upon outside markets. The constant mobility with respect to settlement vis-à-vis Swidden cultivation which was not conducive to a steady development of pottery industry may also be another possibility. Under this circumstance the primary function rendered by pottery was partly substituted by bamboo tube and gourd. Use of bamboo tubes for cooking was reported from the second level of Spirit Cave- a Hoabinhian site of Thailand (Gorman 1971). This phenomenon is peculiar to the Southeast Asian countries and it may be taken as a way of functional adaptation to certain ecological condition. For such adaptation ecology plays a decisive role. In the Bichhikri and Karbi context such type of adaptation is a continuity rather than a case of survival.

Pottery generated through trial excavation from Bichhikri site and surface collection from Dikisir, on the other hand, exhibited standardized in their technological and morphological dimensions. They reflect the cultural identity/uniqueness which may be facilitated by the ecological and economic factors. In fact, pottery from these two sites exhibit strong similarity and commonness in their overall styles and techniques, but there are certain micro-level variations like thickness and types among them. This may be attributed to variation of needs within
the same group rather than two cultural groups living in close proximity because the pottery exhibit greater degree of similarity than dissimilarity. There may also be exploratory biasness. The similarity includes making technique, firing technique, morphological types like carination, round bottom, and pitcher; the dissimilarity include like thickness and sometime colour of which case the Bichhikri's pottery shows deeper than its Dikisir counterpart.

Comparative study from secondary sources revealed that the empirical pottery data shared certain key elements with pottery of the known sites i.e., Daojali Hading, Selbalgre, Maragdola and Ambari (both prehistoric and historic). It undeniably speaks about the degree of cultural interaction they once had and at the same time the continuance of the past elements. These facts have elaborately been discussed in Chapter 6. The key elements that the empirical pottery is sharing with those sites include the fabrics, the firing techniques and the styles. Bichhikri's pottery exhibiting a close similarity with those from Daojali Hading and Selbalgre includes the fabrics especially with respect to the tempered materials which are coarse quartz sand particles. This condition indicates the fact that the preparation of the clay was technically same though the potteries from these three sites belonged undoubtedly to different temporal dimension. It also indicates the probability that the clay was collected from locally available source as indicated from geo-chemical analysis (Chapter 6:6.2). Another intriguingly similar fact that has been observed among the potteries from these three sites was the unoxidized core. This undoubtedly point to the homogeneity in firing technique i.e., the pots were in all probable fired under open-air condition with light fuel like straw, leaves, twigs, etc. But the potteries from Bichhikri and Dikisir exhibit a greater advance in manufacturing technique and therefore approaching the similarity towards those potteries from Maragdola and Ambari. The most pertinent aspect is that of the shape of the pot with prominent carination. Most of the pots recovered from Bichhikri are carinated bowl vessels with rounded base. Carinated bowl type of vessels was the dominant vessel type in both Moragdola and Ambari. But potteries from these two sites exhibit a carinated bowl with flat base which is the point of difference with the potteries from Bichhikri. Flat based pottery remains have not been recovered from Bichhikri and Dikisir so far. Application of slip in pre-fired stage is another attribute Bichhikri's pottery is sharing with the potteries from Maragdola and Ambari. However, there were some very unique vessel types at
the site of Bichhikri. What is unique with the Bichhikri's pottery is the total devoid of any decorative design on the surface or any technique that applies as surface treatment. But surface decoration as a treatment or design is the conspicuous trait exhibited in all the potteries from those mentioned sites, i.e. Daojali Hading, Selbalgre, Ambari and Maragdola. With regard to the age, the potteries from Bichhikri could not be ascribed to any specific chronology due to the non-availability of absolute dating result. However, keeping in view of the morphology and the nature of accomplishment of manufacturing of the pot, it can safely be assumed that the empirical data certainly belong to the early historical date. Again considering from certain characteristics of the pots, for instance, similarity in fabrics and firing technique with that of Daojali Hading and Selbalgre (both are Neolithic) but the similarity in the morphology and the application of slip with that of Maragdola and Ambari (both are historic), suggest a possible combination of both the old and the new tradition. Thus the Bichhikri site seems to represent a continuum of Neolithic tradition through to the historic phase in this part of the territory.

From the archaeological perspective Neolithic period or culture has its specific time range as it is commonly known; but economically this state of affairs continues till date in the cultures distributed in the isolated hilly pockets of this territory. Continuance of this type of economic conditions favours the survival of culture retaining Neolithic character in techniques and forms. Most of these forms and techniques may easily be observed in the Bichhikri pottery. The survival of pottery designs and techniques as well as the Neolithic type of economy may be taken as continua that bridge up the gap between prehistory and history of the territory.

The similarities noted among the earthenware's pottery within the region, suggests that there was frequent inter-ethnic contact and trade among the communities of the region during the Prehistoric and Early Historic Age. This may be due to a regional trade in earthenwares or a movement of people (e.g., intermarriage) and/or ideas, which resulted in the addition and mixing of pottery styles or a sharing of ideologies/artistic ideas. But it should be kept in mind that stylistic similarities may result not only from exchange, but also from shared elite symbolism and participation in the same alliance systems (Bacus 2003:39). However, there were also some very unique vessel types at each of these sites, suggesting that the areas were independent polities with their own local industries or local trade in specific wares. For example,
the Bichhikri and Dikisir sites had a number of round bottomed pots with carination at the shoulder that resembled the pot called Phule that still used by the Karbi today. It is, however, not known who were the people behind the development of this culture and the resemblance may perhaps be coincidental. But it will not be irrelevant to assert that this local difference may also be a form of ethnic expression, i.e., as a way in which ancient communities maintained their ethnic identity, such as noted among contemporary textile weavers of the region. Such intermixing of cultural elements can also be observed empirically in the Swidden cultivation context. More detailed comparative research should help sort out the reasons for the particular patterns that we see in earthenware styles and distribution in the region. A further research in the region would recalibrate or reconsolidate this hypothesis.

Analysis on Neolithic ground tools retrieved from Bichhikri area (Chapter 6:6.3) - double shoulder celt, axe, adze and chisel, (Fig. 22a) indicated that the people led a sedentary life pattern followed by an adoption of intensive food production (farming) strategy. Because the classes of tools under study particularly the three categories of tools i.e., axes, adzes and chisels seem to have been suggested that they were part of a ‘carpentry’ tool kit designed to make wooden utensils or smooth and planing wooden boards. The abundancy of shouldered celt tool type seem to indicate that agriculture was both intensively and extensively practiced though absent (or few number of recovery) of other tools cannot interpret as not intensive or extensive. The absent of incipient tang and the present of well developed double shoulder also suggest that tool making technology was well advanced in the society. In any case the use of ground tools was an indication of greater manipulation of natural resources. During the first phase of the Neolithic period, a new tool type was introduced—the ground and polished tools. These distinctive tools must have played a significant role in a different arena of Neolithic life. Bifacial and ground tools were used by Neolithic people in order to manipulate nature and make efficient use of natural resources. Many of the innovative crafts and conceptions of semi-sedentary agricultural societies could not be implemented without these classes of tools. The development of sophisticated woodworking vis-à-vis agricultural technique seemed to have originated during the early Neolithic period in the Northeast India as indicated from the character of tools under this study. While the form of the shouldered celts, axes, adzes, and chisels undergoes changes during the later Neolithic periods and early
historic period, and the use of stone tool is gradually abandoned as the raw material was replaced by a new media particularly when iron become more common, woodworking and agricultural technique seemed to be a rather constant activity. But nothing can be said with certainty the specific function of each of the sample under study. Future microwear studies should help us understand the full range activities that were conducted at the sites. The microscopic examination of Neolithic tools must be complemented by the replication experiments and ethnoarchaeological studies if we wish to reconstruct ancient human behaviour in Northeast India in general and Assam in particular during the transition from foraging to food production.

The people of Bichikri and Moring Morong have undeniably been using rice, but how early its use began, when it became domesticated, and under what circumstances are the issues which needed to be studied rigorously and establish scientifically.

The ability to absorb new technology and strategies relates to the need for continues adaptation to a rigorous environment. It is consistent with traditional practice for the Karbi to incorporate the artefacts and materials of other cultures into their own systems. What is traditional about the Karbi is their ability to adapt to the different environments. In the past, the main focus of adaptation was to the natural elements. Now the major challenges involves the acceptance of modern ideas, institutions and artefacts while still maintaining their way of life of the Land.

Society is inherently dialectical in character; the socio-cultural context in which we live influences and, to a large extent, determines the interpretation of basic ‘facts’ about the world around us (Bourdieu, 1990). The same is true of Karbi culture and society. The Karbi/any ethnic groups generate a cumulative body of knowledge adapted to the land that was passed down through generations. Their knowledge consisted of not more than culturally interpreted facts about the environment, wildlife, social relations and beliefs but it also consisted of a way of thinking, acting and applying that knowledge to changing circumstances. Traditional knowledge is more than content; it is a way of knowing, process more than object (Blakney, 2009). To gain an adaptive advantage in what was described as an uncertain environment; they acquired new strategies, technologies and remained flexible in their organization, size and social institutions to meet the challenges of obtaining subsistence resources and family needs. Under different historical phases the Karbi (and other ethnic
community of the region) over several generations moved from territory to territory while adapting to different weather and seasonal cycles, hunting and subsistence techniques, and clothing and food production, to name a few, thus gain new trait or lost some elements of their culture.

We might, therefore, describe the Karbi Culture with its land and forest based economy as a deep, flowing river. Starting from its own headwaters far back beyond human memory, it has flowed down through the ages, carrying with it those values that provide physical and spiritual nourishment and guidance for its people. Then, quite recently, the river encounters another river, much larger, much stronger, that sweeps in from the side. It, too, is a culture with its own very different value systems. There is a sudden violent turbulence as the two waters clash together, each one trying to retain its own identity. At first the new river completely dominates the smaller river. But gradually, over a period of time, the smaller river fights back. Finally, many miles downstream, after a long period of turbulence, the chaos begins to subside, and waters and value systems mix together and the two rivers become one river — paraphrased from ‘The clash of economic cultures’, unpublished document of the Government of Nunavut.