CHAPTER I

Introduction

This dissertation is a study of the Dimasa community in Assam and its neighbouring states. They are one of the earliest inhabitants of the region. Since the dawn of independence, the Dimasas have been struggling for an autonomous regime and the creation of a separate state. In the last decade of the last century, this separatist movement assumed a militant character leading to violent conflict in the area. This violence was not directed against the state agency alone. Since these militant movements articulate exclusive ethnicity, the violence also marred the inter-ethnic relations between different groups or clans who have been otherwise sharing the same eco-political space for centuries. This recent emergence of violent movements has had, and continues to have, serious social and political implications for the land.

Such ethnic movements for autonomy have, by and large, been studied by political scientists, anthropologists and sociologists. But many of their studies of such movements, particularly in the Northeast, often lack temporal depth. In seeking for such an historical perspective, this dissertation pays special attention to understanding the perceptions and mentalité of such communities as the Dimasas in their ‘pasts’. The articulation of their political demand for exclusive ethnic space is based on the idea of the ‘first settler’ or indigeniety. Thus their constructs of their ‘pasts’ plays an important role in their political movements. (The nation-states of the modern times have also resorted to such constructs of their pasts.)

1See, e.g., E Renan, What Is a Nation? Lecture delivered at Sorbonne on 11th March 1882, accessed online at ucpars.fr/files/9313/6549/9943/What_is_a_Nation.pdf; Rabindranath Tagore, Nation K? (in
But how does one approach the ‘pasts’ of the Dimasas who are an oral in their form of life. Indeed most of the communities in the Northeastern Region are oral communities and have not developed writing. Usually literacy is associated with the formation of ‘states’, since a state needs to keep records for financing its various agencies of administration and revenue collection. The Dimasas who are an oral community did undergo a process of state-formation. It is true that the Dimasa royalty became interested in languages as Sanksrit, Assamese and Bengali. But the larger society and the administrative structure remained oral in character. These oral communities in the region, like many others in the world, are termed as ‘people without history’, mainly because there are not enough written records.

Today there are attempts being made by the historians to find ways of recovering the pasts of such communities through the idea of memory, legends, fables and other linguistic practices reflecting their mentalité. This dissertation aims to go beyond the established academic historiographical habits and categories. (This is what I refer to as ‘disciplinary’ history in this dissertation). After all, the world is under no obligation to conform to our habitual categories. But these categories hardened as the independent Indian nation-state worked toward ‘national’ integration. The nation-state was imagined to have existed from time immemorial. The homogenising tendency of nationalism, particularly in India, has been less sensitive towards linguistic and cultural plurality which constitutes the land.

The reliance on the written sources combined with the state-centric approach in writing of ‘disciplinary’ history has had serious consequences for oral societies and

ethnic communities.² It has thus portrayed the oral communities and ethnicities as something to be reclaimed to the nationalist/ civilised space from the margins. Such attempts have been viewed by these communities as a threat to their identities and cultures. In such a situation, the creation of their ‘own history’³ is part of the political exigency for creating alternative space for themselves. This resistance to nation as the sole legitimate site for the production of history shows that the movements of these ethnic minorities are not against the state alone, but also against the constructs of ‘disciplinary’ history.

Objectives

In the context discussed above, the present study delves into the issues leading to the emergence of movement for autonomy and identity by various ethnic minorities in the region, through an empirical study of the Dimasa case. It enquires into the emergence of the contemporary Dimasa society as shaped by its past. Their ‘pasts’ covers both ‘historical,’ which is informed by sources acceptable to ‘disciplinary’ history, and ‘non-historical’ sources in their various oral forms. These oral sources are constitutive of their collective social memory. The effort is at combining both the sources towards an inclusive history of the Dimasa. The objective of the study is thus presented in the following forms.

1. Dimasa approach to their pasts as mediated through folk narratives and their perception of their pasts as represented in disciplinary history.

² In his lectures on nationalism Tagore had pointed that there is a mismatch with the idea of the ‘nation-state’ as it had evolved in the West and the hard facts of Indian social and political life, See Rabindranath Tagore, Nationalism, Macmillan Paper Back, 1991 or Rupa & Company Paper Back, 1992.

³This idea of ‘own history’ is on the agenda of the same minds who champion their construct of the Indian ‘nation-state.
2. To analyses the gap between disciplinary history and traditional narrative of the Dimasa pasts.

3. Folk perception of the Colonial rule and resistance reflected in various forms of folk narratives used to represent the condition during the colonial rule.

4. Impact of colonial rule and their response to modernity.

5. To assess the role of their pasts and the role of state in the emergence of contemporary Dimasa society.

Methodology

As for the ‘historical’ sources, for the per-modern period, I have used information obtained from the archaeological, epigraphic, numismatic and various literary texts composed in the per-modern times. For the modern period, various archival materials have been used, largely materials in the National Archives of India, New Delhi and the Assam State Archives at Guwahati. The ethnographic reports by various British officers, census and other administrative reports also have been consulted. As for the post-independent period, a large numbers of government reports made by various commissions, memoranda and pamphlets of different organisations have been primarily used as sources. Personal communications and interviews have also been conducted for the study. In the case of ‘non-historical’ sources, various oral traditions, like myth of origin, ballads, and songs have been used as expression of collective experience of the past. The large number of secondary readings is listed in the bibliography.

Chapterisation

The subject of the study has been grouped into various temporal sections, i.e., i) the per-modern historical background of the Dimasas; ii) early contacts with the British,
annexation of the Dimasa State and administration; iii) resistance to the British rule and movement for identity and autonomy; iv) epilogue. A brief outlines of these chapters have been presented below.

Chapter II discusses the pre-modern history of the Dimasas as described in 'disciplinary' history and the community’s perceptions of their pasts. In the absence of their kind of sources, the present historiography of Assam does not throw much light on the pre-Dimapur phase of the Dimasa history. Even the beginning of Dimasa rule in Dimapur is not known and remains a matter of conjecture. These gaps have been sought to be filled by the sources collected from the community in the present study. For instance, the date of sacking of Dimapur is known to us from the Ahom sources. In the community narratives the duration of Dimasa rule is measured in terms of the flowering of muli bamboo. On the basis of such oral narratives one can trace back their establishment in Dimapur to around 1050 AD. Similarly, it discusses their claim of the Barman dynasts of early Kamarupa state as their ancestors in the light of Chinese sources. Inter-alia, the chapter also discusses wet-rice farming and its relation to state-formation in the Brahmaputra valley. Over all, this chapter focuses the limitations of 'disciplinary' history in the reconstruction of the past of oral societies.

4The Ahoms are a section of Tai-Shan groups who migrated to the Brahmaputra valley in the beginning of the thirteenth century AD. The Ahoms had long standing political rivalry with the Dimasas before they finally established political paramountcy. The Ahoms carried along with them the tradition of writing chronicles called Buranjis. This constitutes a major source for the reconstruction of the history of the region.

5Muli (Melocanna baccifera) is one of local species of bamboo, which flowers once every fifty years.
Chapter III focuses on the early contact and relations with the British, who had already begun to establish themselves as the Paramount Power in the rest of India after acquiring the Diwani of Bengal. It looks at how the British perception of the Dimasa state was shaped by the larger imperial vision over time, and who finally annexed the territory. The British annexation of Dimasa state, in three different installments, brought the Dimasa people under the direct control of the British administration with far reaching effects. It discusses the impact of various colonial administrative policies and schemes on the community. For instance, the Dimasa kingdom was distributed into several administrative units in the interests of economic and strategic gains. The British also encouraged immigration from Bengal to enhance revenue by expanding agriculture in the Cachar and the Nagaon plains. Together, these steps had a vital impact on the Dimasas and they were reduced to a microscopic minority in their habitat. Besides, with a view to justify the dismemberment of their territory and thwart any possibility of united resistance, the Dimasa identity had been fragmented into smaller groups such Barman, Hojais as per the areas they lived in and accordingly described in various ethnographic and census reports. This would later become a major issue in regard to the movement for the retrieval of Dimasa territory. This section also discusses the evolution of administrative mechanism for the hill areas which came to shape the post-independence administrative arrangement for this region.

Chapter IV brings the story to 2012. It deals with the ways in which contemporary Dimasa society was informed by the eventful history of its pre-modern past, and post-independent India. It has a detailed discussion on the genesis of various autonomy movements in Assam and the positions adopted by the Dimasa political leadership in
this regard. This chapter also marks the slippage of democratic movements to militant movements and the violence it generated in the area.

Chapter V is a brief summarisation of this dissertation.

I present this dissertation with a plea for an imaginative inter-disciplinary approach when we study oral ethnic communities and their movements, in order to gain a more plausible understanding of these.