INTRODUCTION

Contemporary India is a creation of the modern world. The possibility that India could be united into a single political community was the venture of India’s modern, educated, urban elite, whose intellectual horizons were extended by the modern ideas and whose sphere of action was expanded by the modern agencies.\(^1\) Hinduism as a category of unifying religious tradition and distinctiveness of its culture was fashioned from the seventeenth century due to interventions by colonial administrators, travelers, scholars, and missionaries in the Indian subcontinent\(^2\). The modern notion of Hindu nationalism began with V. D. Savarkar in his book ‘*Who is a Hindu?*’ a text that provided the ideology of Hindutva. The assertion of a Hindu identity in modern India is therefore the intellectual revolution of the nineteenth century Indian response to the Western colonial subjugation. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which claims it to be a ‘cultural’ organization believes in cultural nationalism. It promotes Hindu identity, cultural heritage which has political ramifications.

In post-independence India, the ideal of secular was widely shared by the political leaders and was embodied in the constitution. However, its actual implementation has not always been without tension and struggle, particularly where the relationship between the state and religious minority communities is concerned. This struggle has been exacerbated by the rapid growth of various Hindu nationalist movements, their campaign to uphold

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Hindutva, and their rejection of anything foreign on Indian soil. Hindu nationalists demanded a series of radical discontinuities between those who were loyal to Indian tradition and culture and those who do not. Conversion was regarded not only as a religious intrusion undermining confidence in Hindu religious ideology but also as a political scandal because it allowed the continuation of foreign influence and dominance even after independence.

Therefore, the RSS advocated the integration of the tribal through assimilation, and some even advocated the idea of absorption into Hindu society in a disguised term of mainstream culture. However, an attempt to produce cultural homogeneity and integration through induced assimilation would make the tribal become minority in their own land. For an instance, in the present state of Tripura, tribals have become minority in the state. The tribals that owned the entire land have been reduced to less than one third of the total population of the state. Besides, the tribals in the state are increasingly retreating to the interior, with hardly any representation in the government and administration. Nevertheless, free intermingling of cultures is beneficial so long as the borrowing are neutral, and in harmony with the cultural setting and the psychological make-up of the people. But, cultural homogeneity and integration through forceful or induced assimilation would lead to the annihilation of the existing tribal culture.

The claims of the RSS that tribal are Hindus has unprecedented consequences for the tribes in India. The RSS does not accept the term *adivasi* as the prefix *adi* implies that tribals were the original inhabitants and the Aryans came from outside. Instead the RSS has
coined the term *vanavasi* (forest dwellers) to address the tribals. For the RSS, Hindus generally do not convert the tribals. What it means to be a Hindu for the RSS is a larger question that is associated with cultural nationalism. In North East India, the motive and agenda of the RSS is that of building the Hindu nation. For an instance, an RSS activist in Pasighat asserted that “a person who had taken birth in India, who may follow any religion, caste, creed or any form of worship but who thinks that India is his motherland and holy land is a Hindu”. He further reiterated that the RSS tries to cultivate and impart the sense of nationalism to everyone and do not force anybody to be a Hindu, and that the similar pattern of worship and activities of some tribals with Hinduism is not necessarily the influence and proselytization work of the RSS. But rather, this has been the influence of Hinduism before the advent of the RSS. Nevertheless, religion became the sole criterion of defining and assimilating the tribals into the larger society for the RSS.

The Heraka is a socio-religious reform movement of the Zeliangrongs derived from their traditional religion. It was organised from disparate groups of the early 1930s into a centralised and effective movement in 1974 in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. Initially the movement was started by Jadonang in 1929. But due to his early execution, the movement was carried forward by his disciple Gaidinliu. The reform aims in the abolition of the obscurantist customs and superstitious practices. Heraka means pure, which is not mixing with other evil things. The word *Hera*-means God and *Ka*-means fence. It means God fencing out to the evil gods and kept his people inside his fencing. Those who are inside the

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5 The genesis of the reform movement and the brief life accounts of Jadonang and Gaidinliu are mentioned in Chapter 5.
fencing, they are called *Herakame*, which means the pure people. There are scholars who argued that the Heraka is a debased form of Hinduism, while others tries to maintain the Heraka distinct religious identity.

Similarly, in the recent years, indigenous beliefs and practices became a recurring theme among the Tani group of Arunachal Pradesh. Forging of religious and cultural identity based on indigenous tradition forms an important aspect of the Donyi-Polo movement. Talom Rukbo was considered as the father of the Donyi-Polo movement. This movement came in the wake of the perceived threat felt from the other dominant religious forces, especially Christianity and Hinduism, with the coming of the colonial British and the subsequent nation-state formation of India. Apart from the threat perceived, the introduction of education, contact with other societies have inculcated the people of Arunachal Pradesh, especially the Tani group who believe in Donyi-Polo to inquire and scrutinize their indigenous faith and practices, which was shrouded with mystery.

The project of Hindutva to include tribal cultures and its varied traditions into the larger Hindu society has been part of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and RSS. As early as 1978, the RSS had started their work with the Nagas under the organization Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram⁶ (Tribal Welfare Organization). In the words of Arkotong Longkumer, “The ideology of the RSS and VHP had already seeped into Heraka rhetoric and their talk is often peppered with these nation-building bumper stickers. Phrases such as ‘all religions have truth, compassion, and love and are like streams that go into one ocean’ or invasion of foreign religion and foreign culture will bring total destruction of Naga society. These

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⁶ The Kalyan Ashram was founded in 1952 at Jashpurnagar, Chhattisgarh, but it came to the North East only in 1978.
phrases reflect neo-Hindu projection of self and tradition and constitute part of the mass programme of such unifying Hindu solidarity.”7 Powerful symbol such as om, swastika and Hindu gods and goddesses are also commonly found in Heraka homes in town areas, distributed by Hindu organizations such as VHP8. Therefore, the RSS appropriated the Heraka, kept distance from the other Nagas whose populations are largely composed of Christians.

The RSS association of Heraka and Donyi-Polo made it difficult for the indigenous religious groups to maintain their distinct identities. Christians considers them as Hindus, and even some Heraka and Donyi-Polo claim themselves as Hindus. For the Christians, they are Hindus because they practice some of the Hindus way of life. For an instance, recently, the Heraka has stopped eating beef because of its close association with the RSS. Some Heraka have even stopped chewing betel nuts. Besides, in some Heraka and Donyi-Polo homes, especially in town areas, there are postures of Hindu gods, symbol of om, Hindu calendar published and circulated by Hindu organizations.

The Heraka and Donyi-Polo often accused the Christians responsible for the loss of indigenous culture. For the Heraka and Donyi-Polo, religion and culture are inseparable. The RSS extended their help to the Heraka and Donyi-Polo on the ground that like Hinduism, they are the indigenous religions of India. The RSS considers the (tribals) indigenous people as Hindus. For an instance, Golwalkar explains that tribals are very much Hindus though they have no knowledge of their religion (Hinduism).9 As a result, the

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8 Those symbols are found mostly in the urban elite educated homes, especially the leaders of Heraka.
9 Pralay Kanungo, RSS’S Tryst with Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan, op.cit., p. 149.
indigenous people are made to consider India as their motherland and holy land. Besides, the RSS inculcates the tribals to respect the ancient Indian culture and tradition. This similar line of thinking, that is respecting one’s culture, tradition and religion conveniently brought the tribals and the RSS together. Both for the Hindus and the tribals, Christianity is a foreign religion, and that their holy land is not in India.

The Heraka and Donyi-Polo movements which began with the sole purpose of preserving and promoting the indigenous religion and culture took a new turn with the intervention of Hindutva. In the initial years, most of the reform movements were rather a blending of Hinduism and Christianity. However, the rhetoric of Hindutva that Christianity is a foreign religion has enabled the Hindus to come closer to the indigenous groups. Besides, the Heraka and Donyi-Polo are largely anti-Christian in their rhetoric because of conversion tactics employed by Christians in the past. Therefore, they try to distance themselves from Christian schools and instead rely on government schools or schools run by VHP like Saraswati Vidhya Mandir, Vivekananda Vidhyalaya and Kendriya Vidyalaya.

The Christian proselytization also leads to the deterioration and demeaning of tribal culture and identity. The Heraka and Donyi-Polo contend that Christians are eroding the cultural and religious fabric of the society. The Christian converts desist themselves from associating or joining social functions including the festivals. The practices which are contrary to their religion are termed as satanic and sinful, and therefore, they openly denounce and dissociate themselves from such practices. It is also alleged that Christians

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11 ibid
are abandoning popular folk songs and dances merely on the ground that these are superstitious in nature. The non-converts argue that the conversion is causing tension within family, villagers and the community. The tension between the Christians and non-Christians alienated the same ethnic groups among themselves, while bringing closer relations with other ethnic groups who belong to the same religion. This opens the space for the intervention of Hindutva by bringing non-Christian tribals closer to Hinduism. The popular understanding here is that Hindu nationalism commands substantial support, and it is a source of potential disruption and violence in Indian politics. This is the concern that some Christians began to worry in the North East. Though, the RSS helps the tribals who are seeking to retain their indigenous religion, the politics of nation building is involved with the intrusion of Hindutva ideology which envisages of ruling over a nation singular in its culture.

**Objectives**

(a) To understand the different perspectives on indigenous.

(b) To look into the nature of colonial enterprise and its machinery in proselytizing indigenous societies.

(c) To understand and locate the authenticity of Heraka and Donyi-Polo identity.

(d) To study the various factors that affects the Heraka and Donyi-Polo identity.

**Hypotheses**

The indigenous movements like Heraka and Donyi-Polo arose as a response to the threats to their identities posed by Christian proselytization and cultural assimilation by
Hinduism; these movements however under the influence of Hindutva forces, besides championing indigenous identity also became anti-Christian in character.

**Research Questions**

(a) What are the different perspectives on understanding ‘indigenous’ and the difficulty of its applicability in Asia, and more particularly in India?

(b) What are the factors that are responsible for the religious and cultural contestations in the North East?

(c) What are the issues involved and the relations between the colonial and the Christian missionaries in North East India?

(d) What are the agendas and motives of the Hindu organizations like the RSS in the North East in relation to the proselytization vis-à-vis the indigenous movements?

(e) What are the major discourses given by Donyi-Polo and Heraka in understanding the indigenous identity?

(f) What are the methods and measures adopted by these movements in order to revitalize their indigenous religious and cultural identity?

**Methodology**

This research is based on the larger understanding of cultural definition of indigeneity that reified its authenticity and distinctness from the mainstream as prevalent in a liberal democratic state like India. The research is an exploration of religious identity in the indigenous population of North East India. It aims to study the religious aspects of life attached to social and political systems.
The research work involved an ethnographic study. The most important primary sources have been generated through oral literature by conducting an exhaustive fieldwork with extensive interview (both structured and unstructured) method. The research is also based on participant observation method by interacting with the indigenous populations, attending in their religious functions, house of prayer for enriching in the study of their socio-religious realities. The research is engaged in qualitative method; therefore no attempt has been made to analyze them in quantitative terms. Nevertheless, in some instances, where data are amenable to quantification, a simple presentation of data is used with a precise analysis.

Interviews are conducted to the selected leaders of the movement, priests, Hindu leaders and activists, Christian leaders, and people who are devoted to their movements. Exhaustive fieldwork was undertaken for the Donyi-Polo movement in East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. In East Siang district, the interview sites are Ngopok village, Kiyit village, and the town areas of Pasighat. Besides, some interviews are also undertaken in Naharlagun and Itanagar. For the Heraka movement, extensive fieldwork was undertaken in NC Hills of Assam. The interview sites are Mahur town, Hungrum village, Hekaukang village, Asalu village, Impoi village, Haflong town, Lodi village, Nchureloa village and Nrianam village. However, for enriching the research, some fieldwork is also undertaken in Nagaland and Manipur. Descriptive and analytical methods are employed. The sources include both primary and secondary information. Primary sources include field work, census reports, documents reports of government, and various unpublished works. Secondary sources include published books, articles and journals. Besides, various available websites are used.
Chapter One

MAPPING INDIGENOUS

The term indigenous is complex and rather controversial as there is little agreement on precisely what constitutes an indigenous identity.\(^1\) The United Nations Working Group on the Rights of ‘Indigenous Peoples ‘did not succeed in trying to agree on a formal definition and opted to leave the issue unresolved so that groups could self-identify themselves as indigenous.\(^2\) Conversely, ‘there is almost uniform agreement about certain cultural groups-First Nations, Native Americans of North America, the residents of the Amazon Jungles, Inuit from the far North and the indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea’.\(^3\) But extending to the small societies of the mountainous regions of India, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam, many scholars, activists and politicians disagree or perhaps seemingly reluctant. To complicate matters further, there are difficulties identifying the unique identities of specific cultural groups. Some identified as indigenous but others identified as subsets of another culture. Despite such difficulties and misgivings, in fact ‘indigenous societies tend to devote their greatest attention to matters of cultural sustainability and continuity or, at a minimum, to managing change within certain cultural parameters’.\(^4\)

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\(^1\)Information and knowledge on indigenous peoples’ social systems are generally scarce due to their social, political and economic marginalization, and their relatively ‘remote’ locations. Moreover, formal and informal writings on such matters are sometimes restricted to indigenous or local languages.

\(^2\)Despite the fact that the concept of ‘indigenous peoples’ as a global concept is not workable, by the early 1970’s, it has become a concept with considerable power, as a basis for group mobilization, international standard setting, transnational networks and programmatic activity of intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations.


\(^4\) Ibid., pp.22-23.
There are strands of ideological interpretation on understanding the question of indigenous. However, among them the colonial perspective has been the most prevalent in the post colonial world. It has been the understanding of post colonial politics that the term indigenous is a political provision to a community in a specified political state for self determination within the given territory, due to its independent cultural, social and political nature of the people. But the vehement challenge to the colonial conception has been the indigenous perspective itself, which argues that the indigenous by the term itself is referred to the community with sovereign rights of the community over their territory, culture, politics, etc.

The colonial definition of indigenous varies according to the types of colonization. For example, settler colonies of the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand are states controlled by the descendants of the first colonists. On the other hand, in the non-settler colonies of Asia and Africa, following European rule, those peoples previously termed ‘indigenous’ took power. In many cases, they placed themselves in the positions of their former colonial oppressors. In the Indian sub-continent, as in other parts of Asia, indigenous refers to tribal and semi-tribal communities, previously threatened with what is sometimes called ‘internal colonization’.

5 Internal colonization refers to the structural political and economic inequalities between regions within a nation state. The term is used to describe the uneven effects of economic development on a regional basis, otherwise known as ‘uneven development, and to describe the exploitation of minority groups within a wider society. The first known use of the concept was in a 1957 book by Leo Marquard, regarding South Africa. However, widespread use followed Pablo González Casanova, who used it to describe Mexico in a 1965 article.
There are regions of the globe where the tribal population is the indigenous population and is clearly established by historical evidence. There are other regions, very large one at that, where this is by no means the case, and the blanket use of indigenous people in place of tribal population then becomes seriously misleading. But the new phrase has a merit of political correctness, and it is by no means easy to dislodge from academic discourse a phrase that becomes established by virtue of its being politically correct. Australia is one good example where a tribal population is also the indigenous population. The native population of Australia before white settlement was small, dispersed, isolated, and homogenous to an unusual degree. From the very beginning of their encounter, indigenous and settler populations were marked by the sharpest contrasts in race, language, and culture. The indigenous had no resources for withstanding the onslaught of the settlers, who not only greatly outnumbered them but were also technologically immeasurably their superiors. Their rights were treated with disregard and contempt, and there was very little regret for their fate among those who set about building a new society in Australia.

In regions of older settlement, in Asia, in particular, population diversity has arisen and been maintained by processes of a somewhat different nature. There tribal and non-tribal populations have coexisted for centuries and millennia. In India, the history of interaction between tribal and non-tribal populations have been a long and

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6 Ethnographic material from India did not figure prominently in the general discussion regarding the definition of tribe. The problem in India was to identify rather than define tribes, and scientific or theoretical considerations were never allowed to displace administrative or political ones. This is not to say that those engaged in drawing up lists of Indian tribes did not have their own conceptions of tribe, but those conceptions were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied. See Andre Beteille, ‘Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective’, in Indigenous Perspectives: India 2005 (New Delhi: Intercultural Resources & International Honors Program, 2005), p. 26.
complex one in which both populations have undergone many transformations through usurpation, miscegenation, and migration.

In legal terms, the major controversy that concerns in the United Nations is the proposed requirement of historical continuity with a pre-invasion or pre-colonial society established on the territory. Most of the Asian countries including India have espoused the position that the concept of “indigenous peoples” does not apply within their borders. Similarly, in recent years, the People’s Republic of China has taken assertive public positions against the applicability of the concept in China.

The problem with the term indigenous in Asia arises from a gap between coherence and applicability. The way out of this problem is to see the term as a phenomenon to be understood and not as an analytic tool to aid understanding. On the abstract level, it may have some value as a general descriptive term of orientation but to apply it has to understand it as a political tool operating as an imperative term within a glowing social movement.

**The United Nations on ‘Indigenous’**

The working definition of “indigenous populations” was originally proposed by the United Nations Study on Indigenous Populations which is linked to the history of classical colonialism. Within the United Nations, the terms ‘minority’ and ‘indigenous’ populations have been kept strictly separate. The formulation obviously refers to the

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quantitative size of a group in any given society. Accordingly, minorities are termed as ethnic (racial), religious and linguistic minorities.

The 1957 ILO Convention 107 conceptualized the term ‘indigenous’ as the pre-European invasion social entities of the Americas, Australia and New Zealand. According to this Convention, indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems. This historical continuity may consist of the continuation, for an extended period reaching into the present, of one or more of the following factors:

(a) Occupation of ancestral lands, or at least of part of them;
(b) Common ancestry with the original occupants of these lands;
(c) Culture in general, or in specific manifestations (such as religion, living under a tribal system, membership of an indigenous community, dress, means of livelihood, life-style, etc.);

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(d) Language (whether used as the only language, as mother-tongue, as the habitual means of communication at home or in the family, or as the main, preferred, habitual, general or normal language);

(e) Residence in certain parts of the country, or in certain regions of the world;

(f) Other relevant factors.\(^9\)

The ILO Convention 107 was replaced by the International Labour Office Convention 169; 1989 concerning indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries. Article 7 (1) of the convention states that the peoples concerned shall have the right to decide their own priorities for the process of development as it affects their lives, beliefs, institutions and spiritual well-being and the land they occupy or otherwise use, and to exercise control, to the extent possible, over their own economic, social and cultural development. In addition they shall participate in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of plans and programmes for national and regional developments which may affect them directly. Clause (3) states governments shall ensure that, whenever appropriate, studies are carried out, in cooperation with the peoples concerned, to assess the social, spiritual, cultural and environmental impact on them of planned developments activities.\(^10\)

In 1982, at the initiative of the West European countries, a Working Group was set up to examine the problems of indigenous peoples. The Working Group in their endeavour to have a standard approach, for the first time defined the term ‘indigenous’ in a more broader sense. The Working Group defined ‘indigenous’ as those “non-


dominant peoples with distinct cultures in their respective states could be categorized as indigenous”.\textsuperscript{11} The first part reads:

Indigenous populations are composed of the existing descendants of the peoples who inhabit the present territory of a country wholly or partially at the time when persons of different culture or ethnic origin arrived there from other parts of the world, overcome them and, by conquest, settlement or other means, reduced them to a non-dominant or colonial situations; who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic and cultural customs and traditions than with the institutions of the country of which they now form a part, under a state structure which incorporates mainly the national, social and cultural characteristics of other segments of the population which are predominant.\textsuperscript{12}

The second part makes the position of Indian tribes clearer:

Although they have not suffered conquest or colonization, isolated or marginal groups existing in the country should also be regarded as covered by the notion of ‘indigenous populations’ for the following reasons.

a) They are descendants of groups which were in the territory of the country at the time when other groups of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived there;

\textsuperscript{11} B. K. Roy Burman, \textit{Indigenous And Tribal People: Gathering Mist and New Horizon}, op.cit, p.4.
b) Precisely because of their isolation from other segments of the country’s population they have preserved almost intact the customs and traditions of their ancestors which are similar to those characterized as indigenous;

c) They are, even if only formally, placed under a state structure which incorporates national, social and cultural characteristics alien to theirs.\(^{13}\)

The World Bank also gave a working definition of indigenous peoples. In an Operational Manual Statement introduced as part of a World Bank policy in 1982, the bank singled out “tribal peoples” as the category whose members would require special protection when they were likely to be affected by “development” projects. The bank used the term tribal people to refer to ethnic groups with stable, low-energy, sustained-yield economic systems such as hunter-gatherers, shifting or semi-permanent farmers, herders, or fishermen. These were held to exhibit in varying degrees many of the following characteristics.

(a) geographically isolated or semi-isolated;

(b) un-acculturated or only partly acculturated into the societal norms of the dominant society;

(c) non-monetized, or only partly monetized, production largely for subsistence, and independent of the national economic system;

(d) ethnically distinct from the national society;

(e) non-literate and without a written language;

\(^{13}\) ibid
(f) linguistically distinct from the wider society;

(g) identifying closely with one particular territory;

(h) having an economic lifestyle largely dependent on the specific natural environment;

(i) possessing indigenous leadership, but little or no national representation, and few, if any, political rights as individuals or collectively, partly because they do not participate in the political process; and

(j) having loose tenure over their traditional lands, which for the most part is not accepted by the dominant society nor accommodated by its courts, having weak enforcement capabilities against encroachers, even when tribal areas have been delineated.14

In 1983, the meaning of the term ‘indigenous’ was defined by the World Bank, and declared that, the term ‘indigenous’ in India means the ‘Scheduled Tribes’. The World Bank, indeed dispensed altogether with criteria based on historical continuity and colonialism, and instead takes a functional view of indigenous peoples as groups with a social and cultural identity distinct from the dominant society that makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged. This approach is very much applicable in Asia. However, India, with most Asian and African countries have asserted that there are difficulties involved in categorizing who are ‘indigenous’ in the chronological sense. Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and

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Linguistic Minorities (Adopted by the UN General Assembly; Resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992).15

This definition of equating indigenous with tribal is useful for a pragmatic approach but it does have its problems. In India, and elsewhere, tribal is an administrative term that links territorial and cultural factors in distinction to the state as a whole. Furthermore, the term in itself does not deal with the colonial factor (indeed, many people consider that the disparaging sense of the term tribal is itself an element of colonization). Twelve of the forty-five articles of the draft Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples refer to the right of indigenous peoples to assert their cultural identity and practice their traditions, including their religion, languages, and arts and the traditional right to maintain and develop their cultural structures and institutions.

Right from its inception, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations adopted a flexible, progressive approach to definition, because some information brought before it included situations, such as the tribal peoples of Bangladesh and India that could not be included in the historical context of classical colonialism. Indigenous representatives themselves have denied the need for a definition, nationally or internationally, and insist on self-definition. In 1987, the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations decided not to have formal definition of the term ‘indigenous’.

15 Ibid. Article 1 (1) states that States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories, and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity. (2) States shall adopt appropriate legislative and other measures to achieve those ends. Article 2 (1) states that persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (hereinafter referred to as persons belonging to minorities) have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.
Without any formal definition of the term ‘indigenous’, the UN declared the year 1993 as the year of the ‘indigenous peoples’.\(^{16}\)

**Colonial/Post-Colonial Categorization of Indigenous Societies**

Anthropologists have been from the very beginning engaged in the study of tribes, and it is in some sense to this study that there discipline owes to its distinctive identity.\(^{17}\) The role of anthropologists as advisers of colonial government and as specialist practitioners who apply their skills and knowledge to the solution of administrative problems seems generally to have been minimal and primarily a phenomenon of late colonialism. In the course of their engagement with the indigenous populations, anthropologists constructed other cultures and often identified the indigenous populations as primitive or savage.

Nevertheless, there is complication in considering the relations between anthropology and colonialism because much of the anthropological research and writing on other cultures were undertaken not by academic anthropologists but by colonial officials and missionaries, who lived and worked in the dependent territories, who were fluent in the mainstream vernaculars, and who recorded social and cultural life in their spare time. Some had acquaintance with anthropological literature either

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\(^{16}\) The 1993 International Year for the World's Indigenous People was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly to strengthen international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous communities in areas such as human rights, the environment, development, education and health. The Year was requested by indigenous organizations and is the result of their efforts to secure their cultural integrity and status into the twenty-first century. It aims above all to encourage a new relationship between States and indigenous peoples, and between the international community and indigenous peoples a new partnership based on mutual respect and understanding. (Department of Public Information, The International Year for the World's Indigenous People. 1992). [http://www.ciesin.org/docs/010-000a/Year Worlds Indig.html](http://www.ciesin.org/docs/010-000a/Year Worlds Indig.html), accessed on 09-03-2012.

through personal interest or more often formal colonial training programmes provided in universities, academies and colleges, while others did not.\(^\text{18}\)

There are often debates among the indigenous groups on the flaws and biases in colonial ethnography, but it became difficult to sideline those accounts in an attempt to understand the tribal society because of the blending of facts and fictions about the people by the colonial ruler. The colonial writings on the tribals are broadly characterized by two features: accumulation of knowledge for governance and maintaining accounts of traditional practices of the tribals.\(^\text{19}\) Besides, the construction of social space in terms of cultural inferiority/superiority is the mark of colonial politics of culture. Colonial politics of culture makes use of the prevalent valuational structure of the colonized societies in order to build up the place of the colonizer as the ruler. This is the strategy of legitimization of the colonial ruler through internal norms of the colonized society.\(^\text{20}\)

During the colonial period anthropologists were always directly or indirectly involved in the colonial project. In fact, the origins of anthropology as a distinctive form of knowledge lay in the internal and external colonies of the Europeans. They played a crucial, if ambivalent, role of the mediator between the colonial subjects and ruler. They helped to construct official ethnography for the colonial government and developed practices that sought to erase the colonial influence by claiming what they

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recorded were genuine indigenous culture. Nevertheless, anthropological knowledge became an integral part of what is now known as colonial knowledge, which in turn became the taken for granted embodiment of history, territory and society of the post-colonial state.

Anthropological practice, in its ethnographic format consisted in the classification of the peoples of the world, the attribution of specificity to the bounded populations. Anthropology originated in the colonial milieu to meet primarily the administrative problems that arose in the process of expansion and consolidation of colonialism. Therefore, for a long time, it continued to reflect the interest of the colonial empires. From its very early days, British anthropology liked to present itself as a science which could be useful in colonial governments. For an instance, in the East, the tradition was that the administrators would benefit by studying the languages and legal systems of the complex societies they administered.

An important factor for the reformulation, extension and strengthening of social identities in the colonial encounter were the standardization and textualization of languages and the introduction of school systems. This was mostly done by missionaries, who functioned as an informal extension of the colonial state in the area of cultural politics and who in turn trained locals who as a rule were more successful in the execution of the proselytizing project. Their task necessitated the establishment of educational and religious centers that provided a network in which members of

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previously often different and more localized societies now conversed in a common medium.

Therefore, ethnographic investigation proved to be a boon to the colonial administrators for collecting data on life and lore of the colonized peoples so that they could rule over them more effectively. Alfred Lyall initiated a debate on the nature of Indian society to show India as a divided entity between castes, tribes, races, region, religions, languages, food habits, and dresses thereby describing India just a geographical entity held together by the British might. Thus, the census operations, district gazetteers, ‘peoples of India’ series of publications and tribal monographs were used to show the variety within India with ethnographic support and purposefully collated write-ups were touted as scientific treatises. Throughout the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, British scholars did not distinguish between ‘tribes’ and ‘castes’ in Indian social situation. What came to be known as tribes were invariably termed as savage, barbarian, primitive, wild etc. for an instance, in the North East Frontier of India, communities were turbulent, hostile, and prone to raiding settled habitations and tea plantations.

Edward Tuit Dalton’s ‘Descriptive Ethnography of Bengal’, Herbert Risley’s ‘Castes and Tribes of Bengal’, P. R. T. Gurdon’s ‘The Khasis’, J. P. Mills’ and ‘The Lotha Nagas’ became the most authoritative sources of information as these were invariably the first written documents on institutions, practices and customs of the respective communities. These monographs had a common pattern: general description, domestic life, laws and customs, religion, folklore, miscellaneous, language and appendices. The Government of India Act, 1919 declared the North East Frontier as
‘Backward Tracts’ and kept them away under the special powers of the governors separate from the legislative purview of the province of Assam. In 1935, these backward tracts of Lakhimpur, Sadiya, Balipara frontier tracts, Naga Hills District and Lushai Hills District were termed as ‘Excluded areas’.24

In the colonial ethnography, the concern of the British administrators and scholars was to mark off tribe from caste, while the main concern in the Indian ethnography has been to show close interactions of the tribes with the larger society. The native (Indian) ethnographers charged the British ethnographers for treating the tribes as museum specimen, while Indian ethnographers are charged for bringing the tribes under the discriminative caste-ridden Hindu system. Indian sociologist G. S. Ghurye charged Verrier Elwin (British Ethnographer-cum-Administrator) for following a policy towards the tribes which he termed ‘isolationist’ and maintaining them as ‘museum species for study by the anthropologists’. The nub of Ghurye’s argument was that the Indian tribal population was part of the Hindu population. Efforts, therefore, should be made to assimilate them with the larger Hindu population. He blamed anthropologists for propagating the idea of isolating tribal people on the pretext of preserving their cultural traditions.25

This argument was denied by Elwin while continuing to plead for a slow pace of development for the tribes so that they could absorb the shock of change smoothly. It is to the credit of Elwin and Nehru that Independent India accorded special dispensation for the tribes. Nehru did not want a strong state approach, but a slow process of growth

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24 The Government of India Act of 1935 introduced special provisions for the tribal people and a list of Backward Tribes was promulgated in 1936.
that ensured participation and helped the growth of a sense of belonging among the tribals towards the nation state. The question that remained ambiguous was whether tribals could retain their identity in the process of nation making. In other words, Nehru could anticipate the threat of state intervention, without which it would not be possible to draw the tribals towards the nation.

In order to strengthen the accommodative spirit of nationalist discourse, Elwin delved into the most important issue, that of the protection of the native cultural ethos. Elwin worked towards this direction by constructing ethnographic canons of interpretation that would reflect self-critically on the nationalist discourse. These canons have historic, philosophical and political economy aspects on which Elwin developed a human science of nativism, to help understand the North East. Therefore, Nehru’s nationalism of recognition and respect for such communities was supplemented and strengthen by Elwin’s humanistic canons of ethnography. The nationalist state, however, largely remained irresponsible to the humanistic approach of Nehru-Elwin, as it tended to ensure reproduction of markers of identity within the homogenizing process, operating through its territorial and administrative functions.²⁶ Often, the nationalist and statist discourses blurred the distinct cultural and institutional boundaries in the official deliberations of the administrators.

Therefore, there are some who advocated the integration of the tribal through assimilation, and some even advocated the idea of absorption into Hindu society in a disguised term of mainstream culture. However, an attempt to produce cultural

homogeneity and integration through induced assimilation would make the tribal become minority in their own land. For an instance, in the present state of Tripura, tribals have become minority in the state. The tribals that owned the entire land have been reduced to less than one third of the total population of the state. Besides, the tribals in the state are increasingly retreating to the interior, with hardly any representation in the government and administration. Nevertheless, free intermingling of cultures is beneficial so long as the borrowing are neutral, and in harmony with the cultural setting and the psychological make-up of the people. But, cultural homogeneity and integration through forceful or induced assimilation would lead to the annihilation of the existing tribal culture.

British travelogues and administrative accounts have also had their own mode of filtering information. They were not free from their self-imposed burden of civilizing the savages. This peculiar mindset was rather pronounced in the writings and other general activities of the Christian missionaries. It was a tedious task to first uproot the traditional world views and knowledge systems as something pagan and irrational, and supplant a new knowledge system and a weltanschauung to fill without creating that void. It would have been difficult to install a new weltanschauung without creating the void. Had there been an interface between a native and the new weltanschauung, it would suggest a case of cultural assimilation or exchange. Complete installation of an alien system is a case of complete transformation.27

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The colonial categorization of the tribals of North East India continues to find its way into modern national imaginations in postcolonial India. The tribals were frequently depicted as a community whose lives were threatened due to contact with dominant cultures, modernity, and developmental policies. Therefore, there arise conflicts between the tribals and the postcolonial Indian state. Such conflicts resulted in a continuance of the colonial projects of sequestering, pacifying and subjugating the natives. The colonial power saw the tribals as subjects, and the Indian state was unwilling to see them differently, as its national leaders were engaged in the process of nation building through citizenship and territorializing India’s inherited frontiers.

Colonial ethnographic writing therefore shaped a particular postcolonial political imagination about the tribes of North East India. The discourse of the other became the guiding principles for both colonial and postcolonial policy makers who formulated the developmental and security policies for the tribes. Just as colonial power emerged from constructing and deducing knowledge and forms of authority, post colonial nations altered and developed the discourse on existing knowledge stores. Post-colonialism continues to reproduce collective meanings around groups, places, and representations. Such meanings are framed in constitutional and policy regulations, which result in the construction of citizenship discourses, security issues, and the task of monitoring these institutions. Such a linear knowledge structure from colonialism to post-colonialism exists in modern institutions such as the judiciary and police forces in order to enable them to negotiate ambiguous constructions and restless categories.28

Debates on ‘Indigenous’ in India

The dominant nationalist ideology does not accept the concept of ‘indigenous people’ as relevant for India. Attempts to use this term in the Indian context have always been officially rebuffed. It has repeatedly been argued that, in India, there are linguistic and religious minorities, but no ‘indigenous people’ or ‘ethnic minorities’ which are descended from any ancient indigenous stock/races/peoples. Partly as a reaction to British imperialist propaganda, the dominant nationalist discourse is also profoundly homogenizing. Nevertheless, apart from the dominant discourse, there is the indigenous discourse that attempts to provide an alternative search for indigenous identity based on the cultural distinctness, and geographical isolation.

The position of the tribes of Assam... is somewhat analogous to the position of Red Indians in the United States... Now, what did the United States do with regard to the Red Indians? As far as I am aware, what they did was to create what are called Reservations or Boundaries within which the Red Indians lived.

B. R. Ambedkar, Constituent Assembly Debates

Ambedkar’s remarks, articulated during the Constituent Assembly debates, revealed complex issues involved in the dominant society’s and state’s conceptualization of, and reaction to ‘tribes’ in India and Indian tribes in North America. It has been, of course, predominantly the prerogative of those in power other than the tribes themselves. However, according to Virginius Xaxa, “the identity that

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was forced upon them from outside precisely to mark out differences from the dominant community has now been internalized by the people themselves. Not only has it become an important mark of social differentiation and identity assertion but also an important tool of articulation for empowerment”.

B. K. Roy Burman, who has written extensively on ‘indigenous’ is of the view that the word ‘indigenous’ is applicable to primitive tribes in India. He also thinks that the concept is applicable to a few other tribes ‘in the sense of their being relatively more committed to ecological ethics, more guided by historical-ethical sanctions in their social relations than by the coercive power of the state, more sensitive to the muse of nature than to the guiles of Mammon, more in harmony with their social self than in the case with the atomized individuals or the sophisticated societies’.

Mostly, in the central and western India, ‘Adivasis’ are termed as the tribal people. However, in many areas, ‘there are oral traditions and archaeological evidences that the present day Adivasis were preceded by other peoples’. As such, the term ‘indigenous’ becomes problematic in its usage, in the chronological sense in India.

Andre Beteille, a noted sociologist also ‘points to the theoretical and practical difficulties of distinguishing Adivasis from the castes around them, given their long histories of cultural exchange’. However, Beteille agreed that there are regions of the globe where the tribal population is the indigenous population and this can be clearly

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established by historical evidence. This is accepted in the case of the aborigines in Australia.

Virginius Xaxa, in his article, ‘Tribes as Indigenous in India’, thoroughly examined the arguments for and against the concept of indigenous in India. According to him, so long as it had not assumed a political dimension, the term “indigenous” had remained an accepted term of description and designation of certain category of people. He argued that in the colonial ethnography, the concern shown by the British administrators and scholars was to mark off tribe from caste. Hence tribes were shown to be living in complete isolation from the rest of the population and therefore without any interaction or interrelation with them. However, in contrast, the main concern in the native ethnography has been to show close interaction of the tribes with the larger society or civilization. However, compare to the tribes in other parts of India, tribes in the Northeast had been living isolated till the coming of the British colonial administration. Xaxa further argued that adoption of the concept of indigenous by the tribal peoples in India is reactive. According to him, the denial of territorial rights and privileges to tribal communities by dominant regional communities has led to increasing articulation of the idea of indigenous people by the tribal people.\(^{33}\)

In the words of Sonntag, “liberal states permit forms of group autonomy, such as self-government insists on cultural authenticity on the part of the group as a pre-condition for self-government. The liberal state, by reifying cultural authenticity in its understanding of tribes, perpetuates a culture-bound reasoning for self-government rather than conceiving of self-government as a means to redress political and economic

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\(^{33}\) Virginius Xaxa, ‘Tribes as Indigenous People of India’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, op.cit, p.3594.
inequalities”.\textsuperscript{34} In India, the conflation of cultural authenticity and justification for self-government in regard to tribes is particularly apparent. This is because defining tribes in the sub-continent is problematic. Non-cultural definitions, such as indigenousness signifying original inhabitants, are fraught with imprecision.\textsuperscript{35} Other criteria that are increasingly used by international organizations to identify indigenous peoples, such as original habitation are also murky. The cultural rights argument is an effective political weapon internally as it is evident in the recognition accorded to ‘indigenous people’ at the United Nations.

There have been strong chauvinist reactions to the theoretical proposition made most consistently by Marxists that India is a multi-national state, in which many nationalities coexist. Though in the dominant nationalist discourse, cultural variations are recognized, and within limits celebrated, there is a notion of a ‘composite culture’ incorporating strands from all of India’s diverse cultures. Instead of recognizing the existence of a multiplicity or plurality of cultures corresponding to different nationalities or nascent nationality formations, a composite culture which implies a process of homogenization is theorized. But, within the mainstream ideological current, there is a tendency, which is accentuated by the rise of ‘Hindutva’ ideology propagated by the Sangh combine, to privilege elite Hindu traditions.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{36} Kamal Mitra Chenoy, ‘Militarism, Civil Society and Inter-Group Relations in North-East India’, in Kailash S. Aggarwal, ed., Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in North-East India, op.cit, pp. 62-63.
According to the current international conceptualizations, indigenous peoples tend to be governed by their own social, economic and cultural institutions. This aspect finds the conflation of cultural authenticity and self-government prevalent in India. During the Constituent Assembly debates in India in the late 1940s, the Bardoloi subcommittee gave a sensitive report on tribal hill areas of Assam. The report submitted to the Constituent Assembly, recommended autonomous district councils, an institutional mechanism whereby a degree of political and financial autonomy would provide the basis for self-government for tribes in the area, to allow for the territorial integration of the frontier region into newly independent India.

Subsequently, this report evolved into the Sixth Scheduled. The Sixth Scheduled provided an institutional mechanism, autonomous district councils, which accommodated geographical isolation. Geographical isolation usually implied cultural isolation and authenticity. Thus the sixth scheduled perceived as an institutional mechanism which enabled tribes to preserve their ethnic identity and to face the forces of assimilation squarely from their more advanced neighbors in the plains. The sixth scheduled by implication defined indigeneity, that reified the exotic as authentic—providing a cultural justification for self-government.37

The Adivasis: A Brief Overview

Adivasis is a collective name used to identify the various indigenous people of India. The term ‘Adivasis’ derives from the Hindi word ‘adi’ which means of earliest times or from the beginning and ‘vasi’ meaning inhabitant or resident, and it was

coined in the 1930s, largely a consequence of a political movement to forge a sense of identity among the various indigenous peoples of India. Officially Adivasis are termed scheduled tribes, but this is a legal and constitutional term, which differs from state to state and area to area, and therefore excludes some groups who might be considered indigenous.

Scholars may contest its sociological validity and dispute its precise meanings, genealogy and characteristics attributes. But the accretions of political and administrative usage over time have rendered the term a ‘social fact’. The term is also used by various social groups to define themselves and to stake claim to resources, both material and symbolic. The combined weight of international and national law, administrative practice, and political internalization by the people thus designated, has imparted to the term a legitimacy that is hard to ignore.

The epithet in fact was invented by political activists in the area of Chotanagpur in the 1930s, an invention motivated not so much by the idea of abolishing the concept of the tribal altogether but rather with the aim of forging a new sense of identity among different tribal peoples, a tactic which has enjoyed considerable success with the term subsequently becoming widely popularized. However, there is nothing at all indigenous about the term nor about the people which it purports to describe. Indeed, it could be argued that the concept of the Adivasi is a product of orientalism. Orientalism is not just a problem in the Western understanding of non-Western

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38 In Africa the nationalists attempted to abolish the term tribe because of its association with white racial supremacism and the divide-and-rule policies of colonial and postcolonial governments.

39 Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the orient and the occident. It is generally understood as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient. See Said, Edward W, *Orientalism: Western Conception of the Orient* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995).
societies but a phenomenon that has deeply affected Indians themselves as they have incorporated into their own understanding of Indian society the statistical, canonical, materialistic, and self-justificatory interpretations purveyed by colonial administrations.

India, over the generations has been remade in the image invented for it by the European colonialists. In this the Adivasi shares with other political movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a vital debt to colonial prejudice. However, the consequence has been legitimizing myths that establish claims to political power not in terms of kings, shrines, and the rituals of incorporation, as found in pre-modern Adivasi societies, but in terms of very modern notions of property and contract instilled by means of the titles, deeds, and description of Indian society established by the British cartographic and socio-economic surveys of the mid-nineteenth century. Through their repetitive use as instruments of control by colonial administrators, these ideas came to have powerful meaning to the subject populations that they affected. It is from these ideas, and the tempering of rights of conquest by rights of occupation in the British legal framework established in India that the origin of the concept of the original inhabitant and of the priority of their claims to landed property, a crucial constitutive development in the birth of the Adivasis40 are found.

The Adivasis are considered to be the earliest inhabitants of the sub-continent. Little is known of their history. Though they were not integrated into Hindu caste society, they were many points of contact. Their religious beliefs contain many aspects of Hinduism. However, it was not until the unifying political rule of the British from

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the late 18th century the government made substantial inroads into Adivasis society. The British rule brought government officials and money lenders into Adivasis areas, beginning the process of encroachment on Adivasis land by outsiders. As a result, there were Adivasis revolts from the mid-nineteenth century in several parts of eastern India, and this forced the administration to recognize the vulnerable position of Adivasis and pass laws to protect their lands from outsiders. These laws barred the sale of indigenous lands to non-Adivasis and provisions to restore alienated land. However, in practice most of these laws were widely disregarded and unscrupulous merchants and moneylenders found ways to circumvent them. These problems are still encountered by Adivasis today, although their opponents are large companies and state corporations.

The Adivasis constitute about 67.76 million in India. Corresponding largely, but not entirely, to the officially designated ‘Scheduled Tribes’, they are geographically dispersed and culturally diverse. Their distinct identity has many aspects: language, religion, a profound bond linking the individual to the community and to nature, minimal dependence on money and markets, a tradition of community-level self-government, and an egalitarian culture that rejects the rigid social hierarchy of the Hindu caste system. In accordance with this identification, many Adivasis organizations claim the indigenous status. However, the Indian government, despite having ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 107 on indigenous and other tribal and semi-tribal populations, denies the scheduled tribes

41 The 67.7 million people belonging to “Scheduled Tribes” in India are generally considered to be 'Adivasis', literally meaning 'indigenous people' or 'original inhabitants', though the term 'Scheduled Tribes' (STs) is not coterminal with the term 'Adivasis'. Scheduled Tribes is an administrative term used for purposes of 'administering' certain specific constitutional privileges, protection and benefits for specific sections of peoples considered historically disadvantaged and 'backward'. See C.R. Bijoy, Core Committee of the All India Coordinating Forum of Adivasis/Indigenous Peoples. http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Dalit-tribal/2003/adivasi.htm, accessed on 09-03-2012.
recognition as indigenous peoples, insisting that the entire population of India is indigenous.

Despite India’s resistance to the developing international instruments on indigenous peoples’ rights, the Indian Constitution and laws have laid down certain safeguards for the Adivasis. Under the Indian Constitutional laws, Adivasis are entitled to special provision in areas where they constitute a significant positive discrimination in education and employment, reserved seats for political representatives, and in some cases, a degree of autonomy.

‘Scheduled Tribes’ as Indigenous People of India

The ‘Scheduled Tribes’ are not coterminous with either the socially and historically accepted term ‘Adivasi’ (indigenous or original people) or tribal. However, by and large it is accepted that the Scheduled Tribes include mostly ‘indigenous peoples’ in the Indian context. This indigenousness is also recognized as distinct and different from regionalism and finds clear and distinct expression in the constitution and laws. Therefore, the term Scheduled Tribes is loosely used in this research to refer to the indigenous peoples in India. A well established criterion being followed is based on certain attributes such as: Geographical isolation, backwardness, low level of literacy and health, distinctive culture, language and religion, margin degree of contact with other cultures and people.42

42 http://labourbureau.nic.in/ Chapter 1/ accessed on 10-03-2010.
India officially does not consider any specific section of its population as ‘indigenous peoples’ which is generally understood or accepted or implied in its usage in the United Nations. Nevertheless, operationally in many of its dealings, the ‘Scheduled Tribes’ are considered as indigenous peoples. However, a clear classification of Scheduled Tribes as a homogenous social-cultural category is not possible, neither it is possible to arrive at a clear anthropological definition of a ‘tribal’ in terms of ethnicity, race, language, modes of livelihood nor social forms.

The category ‘Scheduled Tribe’ is an administrative term used for the purpose of administering certain specific constitutional privileges, protection and benefits for specific section of peoples, historically considered disadvantaged and backward. Article 366 (25) of the Indian Constitution defines Scheduled Tribes as ‘such tribes or tribal communities or parts of, or groups within such tribes, or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribe for the purposes of this Constitution’. According to Clause 1 of Article 342, the Scheduled Tribes are the tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within these tribes and tribal communities which have been declared as such by the President of India through a public notification. Therefore, the President notifies the Scheduled Tribes in relation to a particular state/union territory, and not on an all India basis, by an order after consultation with the state governments concerned. These orders can be modified.

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subsequently, to include or exclude, but only through an Act of Parliament under Clause 2 of the Article.\textsuperscript{44}

‘Tribe’ as used in anthropology, is a part of a political evolutionary process that eventually leads to state-level, or modern societies. The use of the term ‘tribe’ to describe who were different from those of the mainstream civilization has been viewed as a colonial construction. There is no doubt that the use of the category ‘tribe’ to describe people so heterogeneous from each other in respect of physical and linguistic traits, demographic size, ecological conditions of living, regions inhabited, or stages of social formation and level of acculturation and development was put forward by the colonial administration. Generally a ‘tribe’ consists of a singular cultural unit, having shared traits such as language and the absence of a definitive hierarchical political structure.

The need for such a category was necessitated both by the concern to subsume the enormous diversity existing into neat and meaningful categories for classificatory purposes as well as for administrative expediency.\textsuperscript{45} Hence although the tribe as a category and as a point of reference may be treated as a colonial construction, the image and meaning underlying the category was far from being a colonial construction. Indeed there was much resemblance between connotations of the term ‘tribe’ and the idea and image that so-called civilization has constructed of groups and communities that came to be designated as tribes during the colonial period.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44} ibid
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
In India, to the present day, tribal peoples constitute roughly 8 percent of the nation's total population, nearly 68 million people according to the 1991 census. One concentration lives in a belt along the Himalayas stretching through Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh in the west, to Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland in the Northeast. Another concentration lives in the hilly areas of central India (Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and, to a lesser extent, Andhra Pradesh); in this belt, which is bounded by the Narmada River to the north and the Godavari River to the southeast, tribal peoples occupy the slopes of the region's mountains. Other tribals, the Santals, live in Bihar and West Bengal. There are smaller numbers of tribal people in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, in western India in Gujarat and Rajasthan, and in the union territories of Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The extent to which a state's population is tribal varies considerably. In the northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland, upward of 90 percent of the population is tribal. However, in the remaining northeast states of Assam, Manipur, Sikkim, and Tripura, tribal peoples form between 20 and 30 percent of the population. The largest tribes are found in central India, although the tribal population there accounts for only around 10 percent of the region's total population. Major concentrations of tribal people live in Maharashtra, Orissa, and West Bengal. In the south, about 1 percent of the populations of Kerala and Tamil Nadu are tribal, whereas about 6 percent in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are members of tribes.
Apart from the use of strictly legal criteria, however, the problem of determining which groups and individuals are tribal is both subtle and complex. These gyrations of census data serve to underline the complex relationship between caste and tribe. Although, in theory, these terms represent different ways of life and ideal types, in reality they stand for a continuum of social groups. In areas of substantial contact between tribes and castes, social and cultural pressures have often tended to move tribes in the direction of becoming castes over a period of years. Tribal peoples with ambitions for social advancement in Indian society at large have tried to gain the classification of caste for their tribes; such efforts conform to the ancient Indian traditions of caste mobility. A number of traits have customarily been seen as establishing tribal rather than caste identity. These include language, social organization, religious affiliation, economic patterns, geographic location, and self-identification. Recognized tribes typically live in hilly regions somewhat remote from caste settlements; they generally speak a language recognized as tribal.

47 It is worth mentioning here that the caste is a social group, while the tribe is a territorial group. Max Weber writes in social structures, that when Indian tribe loses its territorial significance it assumes the form of an Indian caste. The tribe occupies a well defined area, while the members of a caste may be scattered all over the country. The caste claims a common descent from a mythical ancestor, while the tribe sometimes traces its origin from some animals which may be treated as its totem. The title of caste implies that all the members follow the same occupation. But the title of a tribe does not indicate a common occupation. The caste was originated in ancient Hindu society, with a view to division of labor on the basis of profession and occupation. The tribe came about because of the evolution of community feeling in a group inhabiting a definite geographical area. See Sourav Pyakurel, ‘The Difference Between Caste and Tribe’, in http://www.publishyourarticles.org/eng/articles/the-difference-between-caste-and-tribe.html, accessed on 10-03-2012.
Contrasting castes, which are part of a complex and interrelated local economic exchange system, tribes tend to form self-sufficient economic units. For most tribal people, land-use rights traditionally derive simply from tribal membership. Tribal society tends to be egalitarian, its leadership being based on ties of kinship and personality rather than on hereditary status. Tribes typically consist of segmentary lineages whose extended families provide the basis for social organization and control. Unlike caste religion, which recognizes the hegemony of Brahman priests, tribal religion recognizes no authority outside the tribe.

The idea of ‘indigenous people’ is an issue of considerable contention in India. The use of the term ‘tribe’ or defining ‘tribe’ seems to have more complication than the term ‘indigenous’, because defining ‘tribe’ has conceptual as well as empirical problems in India. Such conceptual and empirical problems inherent in the use of the term ‘tribe’ could to some extent be overcome by the use the term ‘indigenous’.48 Generally, the term ‘indigenous’ or its equivalent has been used in anthropology to describe groups called tribes. However, in recent years, its usage has been broadened beyond the discipline of anthropology with the international agencies increasingly and extensively making use of the term and concept in their deliberations and discussions. It gained wide currency after 1993 with the declaration of the year 1993 as the international year of indigenous people.

48 Virginius Xaxa, Tribes as Indigenous People of India, op.cit, p.3590.
Constitutional and Legal Provisions

The Constitution of India, which came into existence on 26 January 1950, prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15) and it provides the right to equality (Article 14), to freedom of religion (Articles 25-28) and to culture and education (Articles 29-30). STs are supposedly addressed by as many as 209 Articles and 2 special schedules of the Constitution - Articles and special schedules which are protective and paternalistic.49

The constitutional provisions have in certain respects sealed the boundaries between tribe and non-tribe, and given to the tribal identity a kind of definiteness it lacked in the past.50 In the early years of post-independent India, the dominating tone of deliberation among scholars, administrators, social workers and politicians on the tribal question has been to facilitate their integration with the larger society. The state policies and attitudes towards tribes could be understood from the kind of provisions laid down for tribes in the Indian Constitution. The special provision for tribes among other things included the provision of statutory recognition, proportionate representation in legislatures, right to use their own language for education and other purposes, the right to profess the faith of one’s choice or freedom of faith and development-economic and social according to their own abilities. The Constitution also has clauses that enabled the state to make a provision for reservations of jobs and appointments in favour of tribal communities. Alongside such provisions, the directive principles of the

Constitution required that the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections in society, including tribals be specially promoted.

The constitution of India introduced affirmative discrimination\(^{51}\) by following a policy of reservation or quotas for tribals in education, employment and electoral purposes. Further, it introduced an inner line permit system for tribal states of the North-East in order to preserve the distinct cultural and social life of tribes from intrusion. Most importantly, the permit system allowed people from other non-tribal communities to settle temporarily for certain purposes and it did not allow them the right to purchase land in those areas.

The provisions in regard to reservations in education, employment, political representation and the administration of the tribal areas as well as the provisions laid down in the directive principles of the Constitution aim at bringing tribes closer to the larger Indian society. At the same time, the Constitution has provisions which aim not only at protecting and safeguarding their language, culture and tradition but also to promote them. In this sense, the aim of the Indian Constitution towards tribes is one of integration than that of assimilation.

Articles 330 and 332 of the Indian Constitution provide for reserved seats in the House of People in Parliament and also in the state or legislative assemblies.\(^{52}\) It reads, ‘seats shall be reserved in the house of people for- (a) the Scheduled Caste, (b) the

\(^{51}\) In the United States, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 introduced the principles of affirmative action into the political, judicial and administrative spheres of American society. The U.S. affirmative action became very efficient and effective in promoting the welfare of the Blacks and other weaker sections in the society. In India there is no national enforcement mechanism for the reservation system, even though there is a Ministry for Social Justice in the Central Government. See Ashwini Deshpande, ‘Affirmative Action in India and the United States’, in *Equity & Development: World Development Report 2006*, Background Papers, pp. 12-13.

Scheduled Tribe except the Scheduled Tribes in the autonomous districts of Assam. Reservation of seats for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, except the Scheduled Tribes in the tribal areas of Assam, in Nagaland and in Meghalaya, in the Legislative Assembly of every State.’ Article 16 (4) provides, ‘for the reservation of appointments or posts in favor of any backward class of citizens (sic) which, in the opinion of the State, are not adequately represented in the services under the state.’ Furthermore, Article 15 (4) provides for the reservation of seats in educational institutions for Scheduled Tribes. The rationale behind these provisions is that unless those at the bottom are given some preferential treatment, equality within society will be unattainable.

Article 244 (1) of the Indian Constitution provides for a Fifth Schedule, which can be applied to any state other than those in North East India. Under the Fifth Schedule53, the Governors of the concerned states have been given extensive powers, and may prevent or amend any law enacted by parliament of the state assembly that could harm the tribal interest. The Governors can also inform state government’s administration of the area by ascertaining the views of a Tribal Advisory Council. A Tribal Advisory Council is to be constituted in each state having scheduled areas, and should consist of no more than 20 members, of which up to 15 should be the representatives of the schedule tribes in the state legislative assembly. Eight states with scheduled areas, including Tamil Nadu and West Bengal have established Tribal Advisory Council

53 Ibid., pp. 216-217.
Article 244 (2) of the Indian Constitution provides the Sixth Schedule. It applies to the following tribal areas: Assam-Kharbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills; Meghalaya-Garo Hills district, Jantia Hills district, Khasi Hills district; Mizoram-Chakma district, Lai district, Mara district; Tripura-Tripura tribal areas district. The Sixth scheduled provides for an Autonomous District Council (ADC) with executive, judicial and legislative powers, ‘consisting of not more than thirty members of whom not more than four persons shall be nominated by the Governor and the rest shall be elected on the basis of adult suffrage. Furthermore, ‘if there are different Scheduled Tribes in an autonomous district, the Governor may by public notification divide the area or areas inhabited by them into Autonomous Regions and have regional councils.

Article 371 (A) provides special provisions for the state of Nagaland. No Act of Parliament in respect of-(a) religious or social practices of the Nagas, (b) Naga customary law and procedure, (c) administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law, (d) ownership and transfer of land and its resources, shall apply to the State of Nagaland. Intended as a positive measure, it is increasingly seen as merely fulfilling certain constitutional formalities, failing to serve the interests of the Scheduled Tribes.

In relation to the protection of religion, there is no specific protection for Schedule Tribe religions in the Constitution or in the statutory law. Nevertheless, the Constitution contains several provisions on the freedom of religion in general. Article 25 of the Constitution of India guarantees freedom of conscience and the right to freely

54 Ibid.
profess, practice and propagate any religion. Article 26 ensures the right to manage religious institutions, religious affairs, subject to public order, morality health. Official policy of the government of India implicitly recognizes Schedule Tribe religions as distinct from those of the mainstream population, though it does not provide them with the same status or recognition given to the mainstream religion. The exemption of Schedule Tribe from Hindu personal law is one instance of recognizing religious difference. Besides, the census of India records Schedule Tribe religion under ‘Other Religions and Persuasions’.

In 2001, this category included 0.6% of the population. However, there remains a mismatch between this implicit recognition and actual administrative practice.

In legal terms, the North Eastern states have a distinct status both in constitutional as well as statutory terms. The following table shows the specific legal structures or administrative structures that apply in different parts of the North Eastern states.

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<th>States</th>
<th>Special Constitutional Provisions</th>
<th>Administrative Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arunachal Pradesh</td>
<td>Article 371H</td>
<td>No Autonomous Councils, the state has adopted the Panchayati raj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>VI Schedule Read with Article</td>
<td>Three Autonomous Councils: Karbi-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Territory</th>
<th>Relevant Article</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>Article 371C</td>
<td>The Manipur Hill Village Authority Act 1956, &amp; Manipur Hill areas District Council Act 1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>Sixth Schedule</td>
<td>Three Autonomous Councils: Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, &amp; Garo Hills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>Sixth Schedule Read with Article 371G</td>
<td>Three Autonomous Councils: Pawi, Lakher, &amp; Chakma, and other areas without the Autonomous Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaland</td>
<td>Article 371A</td>
<td>No Autonomous District Councils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripura</td>
<td>Sixth Schedule</td>
<td>Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council, Khumulwang</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rationale for Cultural Authenticity: North-East India**

The Scheduled Tribes who live in the regions surrounding Jharkhand hail predominantly from Hindu caste communities. The languages which they speak are Sanskrit origin, i.e. Bangla in West Bengal, Hindi in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, and Oriya in Orissa. Most scheduled tribes are at least bilingual. Rural scheduled tribes are bilingual in the spoken form, while others who had some schooling are also able to write using the script of the state language. Because of the political and commercial dominance of the state language in which they live, tribals are compelled to adopt the state language script. Dominant Bengali, Hindi or Oriya speaking communities on the
other hand, remain largely monolingual, being skilled in only the official state language.

The Blue Mountain region covers the densely forested complex of southern hills of the Western Ghats, with Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu forming the component states. The major scheduled tribes communities are Hasalaru, Marati and Naikda in Karnataka; Irular, Kurichchan, Kuruman, Marati and Paniyan in Kerala; and Irular, Kumuman, Malayali and Sholaga in Tamil Nadu.

The states in the North East are a geographical anomaly connected to the rest of India by a narrow geopolitical corridor between Assam and West Bengal; this geographical isolation is certainly one factor that has prevented integration of the North East into the colonial state and later the Indian nation. The North-East region in India has the highest concentration of diverse schedule tribe communities and other ethnic groups. This reflects its location at the meeting point between South Asia, South-East and East Asia. Many of these peoples have their kin in adjoining countries. The scheduled tribes populations are divided between the seven states-Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The main scheduled tribes of North-East India are from the hills: Abors, Apatanis, Garos, Jantias, Karbis, Khasis, Kukis, Lakhers, Mizos, Nagas, Nishis, Reangs, and Sherdukpans; and from the plains: Boros, Misings, Rabhas, Sonowals and Tiwas, etc. Except for the Khasis, who belong to the Mon-Khmer group, almost all the scheduled tribes of the region belong to the Tibeto-Burman family.

The Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution, in many ways, is an exercise in defining the new Indian nation-state through cultural inclusion and exclusion. There are those who argued for inclusion through assimilation, to do away with the colonial practices of excluded and scheduled areas, exolicizing difference, and prohibiting dominant Hindu dissemination to tribal areas. Others, such as Ambedkar, argued against assimilation and sought for respect of cultural difference. They argued that self-government, through autonomous councils, would ensure preservation and protection of tribal cultures.

Implicit in the distinction between the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, between assimilation and autonomy, was the assessment of the cultural authenticity of the tribes in question. The tribes included in the Sixth Schedule were more exotic, less assimilable and hence, more authentic, than tribes included in the Fifth Schedule. For an instance, the practice of head-hunting was an authentic cultural practice and not one associated with the dominant (Hindu) culture. The more exotic, and thereby more authentic, one’s cultural practices or dress were, the more likely one would qualify for Sixth Schedule status. In short, those who qualified for Sixth Schedule status, were culturally ‘far out’.

Return of the Natives: Emerging Indigenous Religious Identities

The cultural politics of the tribes of North East India resists the onslaught of nationalist or statist politics of cultural homogenization by way of self-representation.

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60 ibid
and maintenance of traditional community institutions. Recent movements like the Donyi-Polo, and Heraka, stands as a resistance to such processes of Hinduization or Christianization. The participation of Hmars and Lushais in traditional festivities like butu khuong lawm, chalpou kut, mim kut or chapchar kut, and Zeliangrons celebrating the gaan-ngai/hega n’gi brings back a renewed sense of tribal identity. Even though religious converts do not participate in rituals associated with such cultural festivals, they are organized every year. The celebration takes a secular character in most occasions going beyond the religious chores. This internal secularization is also part of cultural positioning of the tribes in a self conscious acceptance of something better.

Self-representation of the native culture and community produces a shift from hermeneutic enclosure of the community within a specific textual mode to an interaction with colonialism, leaving open the possibility of writing themselves by divesting the foreign elements. The attempt to translate the indigenous culture within the whole of colonial or dominant culture is reversed in indigenous self-representation, as it not only lays claim on the specific historical and cultural resources but also presents an irreducible interior. Indigenous ethnography stands apart from the mode of appropriation in colonial ethnography. It stands outside the paradigm of ethnographic representation and thereby allows the past cultural resources to come to the foreground. It produces a narrative of presentation and not re-presentation.62

In the recent years, religious reform movements became a recurring theme in some of the ethnic minorities in North-East India for the revitalization of their

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62 Ibid., p.97.
indigenous culture. There is a realization among the elite and religious leaders to preserve their identity & culture and to organize their religion to meet the onslaught of their religion & culture made by dominant religious groups. In most of the indigenous movement around the globe, the right to self-determination, political autonomy, and control of natural resources forms an important aspect. But, forging of religious and cultural identity based on indigenous tradition forms an important aspect of the indigenous movements in North East India. This movement is expressed in the formation of cultural and literary societies, recording of myths, legends or in other words, recovery of their past, traditions and history. Following are the nature of the indigenous religious reform movements in North-East India:

1) The phenomenon of reform and revitalization is an introspective response to meet the threat and the challenge of the alien religion, particularly Christianity towards the indigenous culture, religion and identity.

2) The revitalization is carried out by the establishment of the community or tribal level religious authorities to organize the religion which was traditionally organized by the village level authority and functionaries.

3) The indigenous religions which do not have traditional names are given a name with a well explained theology and philosophy. The nameless religions have become name specific religions with a distinct identity.

4) The tribal religion believes in the existence and worship of a Supreme God. The revitalized religions have turned towards monotheism, though traditionally they are polytheistic. Obnoxious religious taboos and practices are either abolished or reformed. They give emphasis to the salvation of the soul after death.
souls are believed to have gone to the land of the dead and to Heaven. They do not go to hell or lake of fire as propounded by Christianity. Their code of social and moral conduct will make the follower of an indigenous man, a bearer of truth and righteousness.

5) They believe in the continuous communion between God and men. So they strengthen the traditional channel of communication between God and man.

6) The leadership of the movement comes from the highly educated elite of the community who use culture and literature as their instrument of propagation.

7) They seek and get the international or national level recognition as a distinct religion form organizations, like the International Association for Religious Freedom, Oxford and the United Religion Initiative, San Francisco.

Among the Nyishis of Arunachal Pradesh, the revival of faith in Donyi-Polo, an indigenous religion practically began from the early part of 1990’s. The increasing trend of Christian converts among the people and the subsequent erosion of the indigenous customs and practices have created concern for the people who practiced indigenous religion. Indifferent attitude on the part of the people towards their aged-old culture and tradition thereby imminent possibility of losing it has also necessitated the urgency of reviving and promoting the indigenous system. Organizations such as Tani Jagriti, Arunachal Pradesh Priests Association which was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh Nyobu Welfare Association and Nyishi Culture Society sprang up in these years whose main motive was to preserve and promote the indigenous customs and traditions of the community.

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However, the formation of ‘Nyshi Indigenous Faith and Culture Society’ was a landmark, as this society became a formal forum for discussion of the indigenous religion in a broader perspective. Mention must be made that the Adis were the first to formalize the Donyi-Polo faith and propagated it through ‘Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang’. Many of these organizations organize regular prayer meeting in fixed places like those of church and temple. Branches are established in many places, even in remote areas. This has brought a massive enthusiasm and response from across the sections of the society. In order to channelize the movement for preservation, promotion and propagation of indigenous belief system and culture throughout the state of Arunachal Pradesh, ‘Indigenous Faith and Culture Society of Arunachal Pradesh’ was formed in December 1999. This society is a conglomeration of all faiths and cultures, which are indigenous in nature. The basic aim of this society is to forge a united movement for cultural and religious revival among the people. For this purpose, this society organizes seminars, symposia, debates, public meetings and mass gathering.

The Zeliangrong movement or popularly known as the “Heraka Cult” is also a socio-religious movement attempted for the preservation of their ‘indigenous’ religion and culture. The initial objective of the movement was to defend and preserve the indigenous religious beliefs of the Zeliangrong people against the Hindu neighbors and

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64 The Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang was formed on 31 December, 1986 under the guidance of Talom Rukbo, Secretary of Adi Cultural & Literary Society. During his capacity, Talom Rukbo published several tracts on Adi folklore, religion and culture. He also visited many villages with a group of performing artists, explaining the masses about the threat faced by the Adi culture and religion from the alien religions, and exhorted them to preserve their traditional religion and culture. Under the Kebang, Donyi-Polo had emerged as a well formulated and well organized religion.

the advancing of Christianity which came in the wake of colonial administration. This socio-religious reform was initiated by Haipou Jadonang, a Naga revolutionary in the early twentieth century. Heraka literally means ‘pure’ in Zeme. It is a reformed Zeliangrong religion which believes in the supreme God Tingwang/Tingkao Ragwang (God of Heaven) and does not believe in the worship of spirits or smaller deities. It believes in religious monotheism. This movement gained its momentum in Assam and Nagaland.

In Manipur, Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) is a Zeliangrong indigenous religion. Though it is a reformed religion, it did not have a common religious authority, organization, common name, and religious literature or hymn books for long time. It was only by 1993 that the ‘Zeliangrong Custom and Religious Protection Committee of Manipur’ was convened to discuss the Zeliangrong religion. This meeting expressed a great need for the formation of a common authority of the Zeliangrong religion to preserve, study, systematize and propagate its beliefs, custom and tradition. After one year of intensive mass campaign, the historic conference was convened on 14-16 April, 1994. This conference resolved to establish the apex religious authority known as ‘Ra-chapriak Phom’ (Zeliangrong Religious Council) with a constitution. This conference also agreed on the declaration of the name of the Zeliangrong indigenous religion as “Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak”. This indigenous religious reform movement became influential in Zeliangrong society in recent years in reviving its indigenous religion and

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67 Ibid., p. 278.
culture despite of religious and cultural proselytization from other dominant religious groups.

The influence of dominant culture and religion on minority community is a general phenomenon in every society. But the difference is only in degree, and the extent of influences varies from one society to another. Apart from Christianity and Hinduism, there is no other religious community which is evidently engaged in the work of proselytization in North East India. As a result, there is a polarization of the two dominant religious groups, each accusing and blaming one another of destroying and endangering the indigenous faith and belief system in the region. In case of Christianity, there is direct conversion and the converts generally cease to perform the traditional rituals, sacrifices, faith and practices. In this way, they are identifiable and have separate religious identity. On the other hand, Hindus does not go for direct conversion but tacitly influences the people to assimilate their religious belief to the Hindu fold. Whatever the case may be, both these religions are alien to the indigenous people of North East India.

Though, Christianity began its world civilizing mission long before, it is only by the early years of the 19th century that the missionary enterprise had enveloped much of the globe and had brought Christian values, traditions, assumptions, and teachings to hundreds of indigenous groups. Most of the efforts were typically directed at densely populated areas, including slave-holding regions of Central and South America, China and Africa. Most often, in this enterprise, there was a symbiotic relationship between the empirical governments and the Churches in their endeavor to reach the indigenous peoples in distant regions.
However, in the case of North East India, colonial British did not encourage the work of Christian missionaries in the tribal areas. The British in fact, wanted the tribals to retain their traditional religious and cultural traditions. However, from 1831 and continuously by 1841, the mission work was carried out by the missionaries in the region. The Christian missionaries, including Catholics and Protestants were the pioneers in the work of education, extending social services like medical care. Among the Protestants, the Baptist missionaries are prominent in the region, apart from Revival Church and Pentecostal Church. Their work of proselytization brought about massive changes in the social and religious spheres. This is evident in the abolition of many traditional practices and changes in their traditional polity.

Besides, Hinduism being a dominant religious community in India undoubtedly influenced almost every minority religious communities directly or indirectly. It made some impacts on the tribals but failed to leave any lasting impact due to the conservative nature of Hinduism.68 However, Hinduism is also engaged in the work of proselytization in North East India. Hindu organizations such as Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda Missions, Sharda Missions and Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas are worth mentioning. Like Christian missionaries, they also extended their valuable services in the field of education and health care. However, there are also other organizations with their committed agents and workers whose task is to impose or assimilate Hindu elements into the indigenous faith and belief system of the people in the region. Some of these organizations include Rastrya Syamsevak Sangh, Vishva Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Arunachal Vikas Parishad, Banwasi Kalyan Ashram,

Nari Kalyan Kendra, Durga Vahini, Mahesh Jogi Ashram, Brahmma Kumari Vishwavidhyalay, and Shanti Kunj Ashram.\textsuperscript{69}