ABSTRACT

This thesis engages in a descriptive analysis of identity and ethnicity of Koms (Komrem) in the context of Manipur. Ethnicity is understood as a lived reality of Koms in the state context. This reality is referred to by the people as the Khurpui experience usually communicated through their narratives: cultural songs and stories. These narratives define their 'way of life'. They embody the basic cultural ethos: worldview, common descent and cultural practices that reproduce the Kom identity and society.

Manipur, the context of the study, is one of the eight states of the 'northeast region' which has a unique lived ethnic reality. It has several communities (tribes, Meiteis, Panghans and others) broadly located within two politico administrative units: 'valley general administration area' and 'hill area'. The hill area is a specific geopolitical unit of segmented culture-political societies called tribes. The valley area is mainly inhabited by Meiteis. Such a lived reality indicates that citizenship and cultural identities are not congruent. In particular, the state is best defined as a multi-nation or multi ethnic in the making. It is observed that state policy and practice (colonial and post colonial) has generated the rise of dominant ethnic groups enjoying greater power over the other smaller communities. The state reorganization process of ethnic groups deeply affected the social structure of the region. Viewed from this context, identity politics is an integral part of the state process.

Methodological Approach

The study uses an ethnographic approach and lends itself to a larger descriptive analysis of socio-culture and political processes taking into consideration a historical context. Narrative, cultural and historical experiences of the people as a collective constitute the core epistemological base of the study. It gives an articulation to a narrative of tribe often denied in mainstream studies and politics. The study is thus diachronic and contextual wherein an orientation is made to arrive at an
understanding by merging into the lived cultural and historical experiences of people.

The fieldwork processes and observation spanned across one and half year (2009-2011). As an attempt to holistically cover the community narratives and experiences, specified village areas such as Sagang, Tonsen Tera-Mahou, Loktak Project, Hmongtung, Nongmaiching and Moirang were included in the fieldwork. It covered six Kom villages (including two Purum villages). Besides, key persons and units of the village communities across one Koireng village, one Kharam village, one Aimol village and one Chiru village were covered to understand intra collective consciousness and mobilization process of the composite group.

In-depth interview both at the level of the individual and groups, with thematic conceptual maps and interview guides, and participant observation were used as primary methods of data collection. After an initial field exposure, key persons of the community were identified. Some of them were in contact and discussion with the researcher throughout the period of the study engagement. These informants became key persons for the researcher to enter villages and community life processes. The socio political context of the state was keenly observed through the media and personal discussions with the educated persons, politicians, and leaders of the community. Focused discussion with the elders and leaders was finally arrived at through an online publication of a paper entitled, “Situating Koms (Komrem) Narrative in Manipur”, a political perspective (Kanglaonline dated 19th August, 2011 and Imphal Free Press dated 19th October, 2011).

Khurpui Experience and Perspective

This thesis locates the cultural and historical narrative of Koms (Komrem) as one of the earliest tribes in Manipur valley having its family descent from indigenous people of northeast in general. They have a rich cultural heritage which has its root to the Khurpui origin. Their historical narrative, relives Kom clan origin theory commonly sung as 'Kan hongsuk e Khurpui a khan' (we came from the Cave). In particular, socio-cultural structure of Koms is defined by their lived worldview, beliefs, social organization, collective customary rites, ceremonies and practices,
collective ownership of land and resources, and a village polity founded on chief and village authority.

Koms as a society being part of the larger ethnic group of the region are intrinsically embedded social structure of the state. The pre-colonial intercommunity social relationship between Koms, Moirang people and other tribes in the foothill regions is still relived among Kom villages especially around Moirang areas. It constitutes a vital part of their cultural and historical experiences. They affirm a coexistence of segmented heterogeneous social system deeply shaped by an ecological context over a period of history. For instance, plain area has evolved to be a feudal political centre with its agricultural land advantage. On the other hand, hill area has nurtured a co-existent independent villages or tribe political units. Economically, hill area depends mainly on jhum cultivation. However, the hill geopolitical context has also protected them from becoming subservient political entities. In practice, hill area supports a mutually segmented village based or chief based political units, culturally and politically independent and economically self-sufficient.

Identity and ethnicity as viewed from the lived experience of Koms (Komrem) is an integral part of the context and processes of a state. It is described as an essential socio-cultural element of the tribe and/or collective. However, the core element, understood in its relation with the larger society and being persistently influenced by the state context (external environment), is observed in a process of change with accompanied 'stresses and strains'. For instance, in the circumstance leading to the emergence of the state, Koms had gone through various historically defined external structural change processes which have determined their lived experience. At the initial stage, the emergence of people's consciousness and a collective mobilization marked a critical historical event in the community. As a common socio-political phenomenon seen among all tribes in the region, Koms also became conscious about their 'political space' within the state context and processes (colonial and post Independence). In fact, Christianity, education and exposure among them became the basic driving force of change in their society. They initiated a process of political
consciousness and socio-cultural reorganization as a collective named 'Komrem', a composite group consisting of Aimo, Purum, Chiru, Kom, Kharam and Koireng (referred as kindred tribes). Komrem was basically a socio-religious collective. However, religious change, education, development and growth of political consciousness came simultaneously. In fact, pioneer Christian leaders were instrumental in the institutionalization of Komrem collective. 'Kom (Komrem) literature Committee' (1926) and 'Student conference' (1927) were the initial social institutions of the Komrem collective. Such initiatives got nurtured and re-enforced during the World War periods and subsequently enlarged taking a shape of trans-cultural boundary across villages in the post Independence period. In fact, the pioneers such as Teba Karong and Longkhobel Karong, as volunteers for Labour Corpse during the First World War, were directly influenced by nation-state formation processes in the west. Such experiences were further enlightened by other prominent local leaders such as M.S. Sompa and Shongkholen Serto especially in the post independence era. However, institutionalization of the Komrem Baptist Church Association, Komrem Union and Student Union came in 1950s. These institutions became prominent agencies for social change among Koms (Komrem). In fact, Gangmumei Kamei, a renowned historian of Manipur, in the 'Foreword' to Boinu Serto (2009) rightly observed:

"The Koms are a remarkable tribal community of Manipur. Proud of their rich cultural heritage, but exposed to the British colonial rule and democratic process of India and influenced by Christian faith, the Koms are looking forward towards modernization."

As influenced by the context, the identity process among Koms (Komrem) has taken a full circle of defining and re-defining. In fact, the interface between religion, culture and politics within the society usually in holistic terms gave way to number of organizational problems and issues (dynamics of defining and redefining) along binary notions of 'tradition versus Christianity' and 'unity versus diversity within'. In recent times, the collective has been redefined mainly centred around Koms (Komrem). In a sense, it is opined that Komrem collective has given birth to other
independent social organization processes along kindred tribes. This trend also is indicative of a general trend coming in the intercommunity interaction process within the state society in the present context very much conditioned by ethnic politics played along dominant ethnic groups such as Nagas, Kukis and Meiteis. The emerging process along identity and ethnicity in fact has been strongly influenced by the mutually conflicting imagined nation theories in the region affecting inter and intra social interaction and self identification which often has been described as 'identity oscillation'. In such a context there are broadly two political issues confronting Koms in Manipur as described below.

Firstly, viewed from the lived reality of Koms (Komrem), exclusivist ethnic politics in the hill area is predominantly played by two dominant ethnic groups: Nagas and Kukis. Both are colonial constructs which over a period have become ideological constructs of nation and nationality. Ethnicity viewed from a 'nation theory' is naturally secessionist in nature usually supported by armed struggle as a strategy. Nagalim (Nagas), Zalengam (Kukis) and Manipuri (sovereignty of erstwhile princely state) are cases in point. In the context of Manipur, the political demand for Nagas as a collective comes as 'integration of southern Naga inhabited area into Nagalim nation which is against 'territorial integrity of Manipur' and national sovereignty. On the other side, political assertion of Kukis and Zomis (referred at times as 'non Nagas') comes as a demand for a homeland. It could be both autonomy and self determination in nature such as a demand for statehood, district-hood, tribal state and Zalengam (secessionist). Therefore, the political demands of tribes are mutually exclusive and in all probability likely to infringe on territorial integrity of Manipur and also with sovereignty issues in the case of secessionist assertion. The 'homeland' and 'ancestral land' consciousness and mobilization have become contentious political issues. The Nagas claiming to be the earlier settlers of the region consider Kukis as recent settlers, refugees. While Kukis consider that the concept of 'autochthones' tribes and 'refugee' do not apply in this region. According to their theory, all people in this region are indigenous tribes which have evolved into distinct ethnic political units over a period of history along the contiguous hill range.
(Northeast). The nation territorial construct is considered as a product of recent history. Besides, these two parallel nationality movements are ideologically rooted in 'divide and rule' policy (a colonial construct) particularly in the Manipur context. The eruption of ethnic violence in 1990s was direct fallout of the ethnic politics played along this line with the support of armed groups of the respective ethnic groups. Korns (Komrem) in this context constantly asserted their alternative political space as being one of the earliest tribes of the region in Manipur. They resist cultural relativism and propagate a dignified mutual co-existence. They denounce ethnic violence, secessionist ethnic process and stand as tribes of Manipur. In such an ethnic conflict situation they ascribed themselves as 'neutral' tribe, a non-party to violence.

Secondly, viewed from the state context, there are thirty-nine (scheduled tribes) in the hill area. In general, hill area is under statutory administrative structure based on article 371 C and District Council Act, 1971 (amended in 2008). However, tribes in Hill area are negotiating with the state to implement the Constitutional administrative structure also known as 'Sixth Schedule'. However, it is observed that the state is in the process of bringing uniform land legislation. This according to tribes would infringe on their constitutional rights on collective ownership of land and customary practices. Hence, state's inability to come up with an acceptable common policy and administrative structure for hill areas is constantly creating political tension between state and hill area. At present District Council Act, 1971 (amended 2008) with resistance from tribal civil societies such as United Naga Council (UNC) and All Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) is in function after a gap of twenty years. This political issue has also raised question on the nature of representation of only twenty tribal MLAs to the state legislative assembly of sixty members. Besides, in recent times, there has been a growing district-hood demand in the state in the hill areas. In general, such a political demand has a high tendency of being ethnicised (Naga versus Kukis, or Tribes versus Meiteis). In such a context, Koms (Komrem) as minority tribes of Manipur are often pushed to the periphery. However, they take recourse to their culture and identity to negotiate a political space for co-existence, social harmony, peace and development. They declare their resistance against district
delimitation process on the basis of 'community, religion or language' and put forward a proposal of reorganization of districts along administrative convenience taking into consideration constitutional safeguards for scheduled tribes.

Finally, the lived experience of Koms (Komrem) reflects a vital role of state in providing a common structural frame; democratic and constitutional, for the ethnic social reality in Manipur. The state should protect tribes, recognize their constitutional rights and governance structure, and work towards welfare, development and progress as a whole. But in general there is a growing mutually exclusivist ethnicity process very much fanned by insurgent groups which is in direct confrontation with a social ethnos of co-existence, social harmony, peace and development. In fact, such an emerging trend indicates that the state is still in the making if not a failed one.