CHAPTER – I

Background: Context, People and State in Manipur

Manipur has a unique ethnic reality, ecology, history and geopolitical context. The people, state and the politics of the state within the region are integral parts which form and sustain this unique reality. The state which was built on the erstwhile princely state in 1947 has a multi-ethnic social reality. In the present day understanding, the social structure of the state can be broadly sub-categorised into three ethnic groups: tribes, Meiteis and 'Others'. As per the Constitutional categorization, there are thirty-nine scheduled tribes who are closely identified as people of the 'hill areas'. The Meiteis, inhabiting the valley area, are the majority ethnic group of the state. There are also Meitei Muslims (known locally as panghans) who have settled in the state during the time of the Maharajas. Besides, there are a few 'others' such as business persons from other parts of the country who have become people of the state. However, in general, the tribes and Meiteis are an intrinsic part of the multi-ethnic groups inhabiting the region. This chapter situates the background context of the study focusing on understanding the intrinsic relationship that exists between hill region ecology, cultures, peoples and politics over a period in history.

1. Manipur Northeast Regional Context

a) Ecology

As a geopolitical unit, by and large, this state occupies a strategic economic and political location in the northeast region of India as it provides a vital linkage between India, the north-eastern states and the South East Asian countries for trade and commerce. As a geographical unit, this state forms a great part of a contiguous geographical stretch of the whole Himalayan range stemming from the north and north-western foothills and extending towards the
whole stretch of ranges across South Asian countries. This mountainous region is marked by the great valleys of Assam (also called Brahmaputra), Surma (Sylhet) and Mekong (Burma). Manipur lies between these three valley landscapes.

In general, the region is endowed with a rich and diverse ecological system. It is known to the world for its fertile producing agricultural lands and represents a typical biodiversity of its kind observable in the richness of forest, rivers, natural resources, wildlife, flower and fauna. The landscape is marked with many great water sources and rivers such as the Brahmaputra, Barack, Irl and many other small rivers. Besides, the land has rich and fertile cultivable lands both for Jhum (cultivation on the hill slopes through burn and slash process), terrace (on the hill slopes) and wet rice cultivation (in the valley) which are regularly sustained by the north-eastern monsoon rains. The valleys, the slopes, forests and the weather, besides yielding rich forest produce, are conducive for tea plantation. The land is also rich in mineral resources such as oil, coal, limestone and uranium. This land has nurtured human society and become a home to a multi ethnic life world. It has become the abode of the worldview of tribes, ethnic groups, nations and states. It has sustained territorial space for the existence of village units, towns and cities with autonomous cultural, political as well as socio-economic institutions of trade and barter system known across civilizations since ages. It harbours an environment of a co-existence of diverse segmented or clan-tribe based society of both 'matrilineal' and 'patrilineal' ethnic social groups who, in the pre-Christian era, were mainly interrelated through the local socio-economic and political institutions: Monarchies of the valleys and chiefs in the hill regions. Therefore, there is a perfect convergence of multi ethnic co-existence and ecological diversity as a unique feature shaping the history and politics of this region.

Since Independence, this region is commonly referred to as the 'northeast region of India' (also India's northeast), indicating its relative location in the
subcontinent of India. However, geographically it lies in the extreme northeastern part of India, located approximately between the longitude of 93° degree to 94.1° degree north and latitude of 28° degree to 24.4° degree east. It was identified as a ‘frontier tract’ bordering Bhutan, China, Burma and Bangladesh during the British administration. Today, this region has forty percent (approximately 5,200 km) of the total border area with 7.6 percent of the geographical size of the subcontinent. Owing to its frontier region location within the country, it has a geopolitical status and the state policies unique to a frontier region. The whole region, now consisting of the eight states – Arunachal, Sikkim, Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, geographically occupies a strategic political location within the Asian subcontinent. The region is often described as a single geopolitical region even today. However, if the region is considered within the specific local context, it consists of eight states. Each of these states, which have emerged in the post independence era, is a distinct geopolitical unit having its own historical context. Each state is defined by a specific context of geography, demographic and ethnic composition as well as political and administrative structures common to both state and ‘non state’ institutions. The region is connected to the mainland India through a strip of land commonly known as ‘siliguri corridor’ - only 21 to 40 km in width, with the countries of Nepal and Bangladesh lying on either side of the corridor. Besides, the region as a whole is surrounded by Tibet and Nepal in the northwest, Burma in the east, China in the north and Bangladesh in the south.

b) British Colonial Expansion into the Region

The modern history of Northeast region of India commonly begins with the advent of the British traders and the decline of local monarchs in the region. This period can be described as an extended outcome of a long drawn out and complex historical situation involving the local kings, tribal political units and
the rising monopoly of the trade and political system of Burma and China. The local feudal kings, besides reeling in their own internal feuds, were the object of the growing political and mercantile power of the Burmese king. This situation provided a rationale for the colonial expansion in the region.

Taking the ‘troubled situation’ (Bhuamik, 2010) as the pretext, in 1824, the imperial administration decided to adopt an expansionist approach with the ulterior intent of increasing their prospects of tea cultivation, a highly coveted and very lucrative article of international commerce (Mackenzie, 2005). From this vantage point, British administrators intended to establish a favourable terms for British traders in their overseas trade with China and Burma. This resulted into a protracted military confrontation with the immediate country, Burma and local political units. A formal decision was taken for British Expulsion Mission of the Burmese King from Manipur and Assam in the wake of the former growing political aggression in the region (Gangmumei, 1991). This led to the annexation of Assam, subjugation of local Kings and punitive wars against tribal chiefs of the surrounding hill countries. The capture and expansion of British Government both in terms of military, administration and trade went unabated till the borders of Tibet, China and Burma. Eventually all the kings and tribal chiefs of the region were coerced to accept the British political structure by the end of nineteenth century. This political expansion made the British trade to flourish far and wide in the region. In fact historians are of the opinion that the ‘British East India Company’ trade began in 1760s, increased since the time of Warren Hastings and Cornwallis, and multiplied since 1826, the treaty of Yandaboo (Burman in Mackenzie, 2005).

As known from the historical accounts of the British administrators, military expansion strategy was followed by a simultaneous process of territorial demarcation, ethnic reorganization and setting up of an administrative system across the region. One such initial survey was undertaken by the British officers
in their mission to find a root to Manipur via the Naga Hills in 1832. This was further followed by a proper survey of the region conducted by Alexander Mackenzie during 1866-71 (Bhaumik, 2009: 4) on the request of the then Lieutenant Governor, Sir William Grey. This survey indicates a clear map of the Northeast based on the colonial political perspective with Calcutta as the political center of the British Crown Government and Assam, the regional center. Thus, the whole region was for the first time surveyed locating Assam valley as the mainland which later became the British provincial unit. In this survey, the northeast region thus was divided into two parts; sub Himalayan range and the eastern hills. The present Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh was taken as a dividing line of the two sub-regions. Taking these two broad subdivisions, the eastern part of the map was sketched out from the vantage point of the Assam plain. According to the survey, the region lying to the south of the valley, begins with the land lying between Bori Dihing river in the northeast bounded by the snow capped mountains of the Himalayan range extending upto the water source of the Mekong valley, which is now in Burma, to Nowgong in the north-west and further extending extreme south and ending at the Bay of Bengal.

This hill region is prominently marked by the Patkai hills, the Naga hills, extending towards the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills, along the north Cachar hill in the south westernly direction upto the Sylhet valley and Bangladesh. In the north-east direction, the hill range extends beginning with the Patkai hills, Naga hills bounded by the Mekong and Chindwin valley in the north, northeast and moves along the eastern ranges bounded by Chindwin in the east upto to the Chin hills and the Lushai hills. This hill range further moves towards south touching the hill tracks of the Chittagong and north of Arracan. The range is also bounded by the Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh in the extreme south. This whole range is dotted by plains and hill ranges which became the epicentres of power and politics in the region. The most important plain regions lying in the Indian side are the Assam, Silchar, Manipur and Tripura.
c) Colonial Northeast Policy and Administration

As generally known, colonial policy of the whole of northeast, in general and hill areas, in particular are designed and implemented based on the motive of trade and commerce. The British Administrators, in their effort towards the establishment of monopoly over trade and commerce introduced colonial administrative, military and fiscal policies in the region (Gangmumei, 1991). As a policy, this region was identified as a 'frontier region' in view of its strategic geopolitical location: a political boundary between the British India and Burma including the rest of South East Asian countries. Therefore, Burma's growing power in the region became an immediate historical situation for the expansion of the British paramountcy in the region. The actual expansion of the British paramountcy began with the Treaty of Yandabo, 1826. In this treaty, the British Government found a reason to expand its political control over this region to neutralise the growing mercantile monopoly of China and Burma. Scarcity of tea, its control over by China and Burma became an inherent trigger factor for political conflict, besides other trade items. Since then, Northeast region emerged as a distinct political and administrative unit of the British Government. The British power came into direct contact with the political domains of the feudal Kings and eventually allied with them and conquered them finally. Besides, the British came into direct military confrontation with hill peoples beyond the foothills of the political domain of the feudal Kings after 1926.

Initially, this region generally categorised as 'unsurveyed and unadministered' was directly under the purview of the lieutenant-governor of Bengal. However, the establishment of the 'inner line permit' in 1973 marked a beginning of the expansion of the colonial administration beyond the political domain of the valley based feudal Kings. As a policy, the hill area was categorised as a politico-administrative unit called the 'frontier' region. In 1872-73, 'inner line permit' (ILP) was introduced for the frontier districts as a measure
to check the intrusion of people into the region of the frontier tribes and establishment of a control over the tea plantation. In the words of the British administrators,

"There was a pressing necessity of bringing under more stringent control the commercial relations of our subjects with the frontier tribes living on the border of our jurisdiction". In Luckimpore specially the operations of speculators in caoutchouc had led to serious complications, not only interfering with the revenue derived by Government from the India-rubber forests in the plains beyond the line of our settled mehals, but threatening disturbances with the hill tribes beyond. The spread of tea-gardens outside our fiscal limits had already involved the government in many difficult questions with the hillmen, and on the whole the government came to the conclusion that it was necessary to take special powers and lay down special rules". (Mackenzie, 2005: 55)

No foreigner (outsiders) would be allowed to cross this "line" without a license from the government. The "inner line permit" is still in practiced presently in the states of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram.

Thus, the whole region, except for northern border regions so named "North Eastern Frontier Agency" (NEFA, present Arunachal Pradesh), was administered under the purview of the Province of Assam since 1874. As a general administrative framework, it is to be known that the British Crown's dominion in India consisted of four political arrangements (1) the Presidency areas where the Crown was supreme, (2) the Residency areas where the Crown was present through the Resident and the rulers of the realm were subservient to the Crown, (3) the Agency (tribal) areas where the agent governed in the name of the Crown but left the local self-governing institutions untouched, and (4) the excluded areas (north, east) where the representatives of the Crown were a figure head (Bijoy, 2007: 19). With specific to Northeast region (excluded areas), in
principle the colonial policy resorted to 'non-intervention' (cultural and internal affairs non-interference) but in practice, they pushed for direct military and administrative confrontation to subdue the chiefs. In fact, the northern border region called ‘North Eastern Frontier Agency’, Indo-China border was placed directly under the British Crown Government due to the political sensitivity of the border area vis-à-vis China. Therefore, in practice, the foothills of the Brahmaputra, Barack valley and Imphal valley marked the end of the regular administration.

d) Northeast Policy and Tribes (Pre and Post Independence)

Tribes and the hills areas, as distinct political units, emerged as an outcome of the political process of the expansionist political policy of the British in the region. In the northern foothills (Arunachal Pradesh area) of Brahmaputra valley, the British came to know about the various ‘fierce’ tribes who were often a threat to the local feudal political power (Gait, 2008 reprint: 371-377). Besides, the tribes in the north-eastern hill areas of the Brahmaputra valley, identified as the Naga hills, came in direct confrontation with the British political power since the fall of the local political power in the hands of the British in 1862 (Nag, 2009: 42).

In particular, the years 1826 to 1874 marked the formal commencement of the colonial policy and administration in the hill areas. As seen in the historical accounts, the British faced a fierce resistance from all the hill regions especially from the Angamis and Lushais. They were dealt with a military might. As for instance, it is known that the capture of political power in 1830 of the southern Brahmaputra valley marked the beginning of a long drawn-out political and military confrontation with Lushai and other tribes living in the region expanding across the north Khasi-Jaintia hills, the Garo hills, north Cachar hills, Lushai hills, the Chittagong hill tracts (Mackenzie, 2005 and Gait, 2008: 200).
As a matter of fact, the tribes inhabiting this region became victims of the political wars generated by colonial policy and administration along ethnic lines. Such a historical situation sowed the seeds of enmity and ethnic conflict among tribes in the region.

As regards the administration of these tribes and hill areas, since the time of Robert Reid (Governor of Assam), J.H. Hutton (British Political Correspondent) and N.E. Parry (Deputy Commissioner of Lushai hills), the British administrators felt the need for a separate administrative structure in the hill areas. However, the actual administration was accompanied by military expeditions and direct alliance with the local chiefs as they encountered an insurmountable resistance. Some of the more remembered tribal resistance movements in history are the resistance movements of Jaintia tribes (1860-62), Garos (1852-57, 1872), Lushai (1886-98), the Kukis in Manipur (1917-1919), and Nagas (1835, 1852) (as cited in Singh, 1982; Das, 1989). These resistance movements were considered as raids and uprising by the British. Tribal uprisings were considered a challenge to such policies as the takeover of natural resources, allowing the entry of contractors into tribal economic systems, imposing formal state administration, and so on. Therefore, the British launched many punitive military expeditions against the resisting tribes. The resistance were dealt with military force which was followed by the establishment of administrative units, imposition of fiscal system, pothang system, construction of linking roads and ethnographic classification of the tribes. However, the difficult terrain, independent and autonomous systems of the people in the hill became a hard task to take on. In fact, owing to the complexity as well as military and administrative cost involved, the British had to constantly shift their policy approach towards this people from establishing a direct administration to recognising the autonomous, self management structure of the people from time to time. In this process, feudal kings played crucial political role for the British scheme of politics. For example, it is known in modern history that during most
of the period of nineteenth century the British policy tried to consolidate the
control over the tribes in the borders of Burma and Cachar through the King of
Manipur. This strategy was constructed based on the theoretical understanding
that the local Monarch is the head of the state; enforcement of the direct
administrative control and ownership of the land under the headship of the king.
To such a policy, Roy Burman made a comment in the preface to Mackenzie,
(2005: 10) saying;

"Feudal rights were promoted by the British which were responsible for
the much of the subsequent upheavals. In fact the seeds of confusion
sown by the British at the time continued to yield their bitter harvests
even after the Independence".

Thus, the colonial policy and administration for the hill areas and tribes
evolved over a period of time. On record, the Government of India Act, 1919
(Montagu-Chemsford Reforms) for the first time allowed the Governor-general
to declare these areas as 'Backward Areas' which identified the Garo Hills,
Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, Mikir Hills, North Cachar Hills, Naga Hills, Lushai
Hills and the three Frontier tracts of Balipara, Lakhimpur and Sadiya (Bhaumik,
2009: 8). These areas were basically 'un-administered' and considered to be
inhabited by the backward tribes. Further, in 1935, these areas were re-classified
as 'excluded and partially excluded areas'. The excluded areas were identified as
the North East Frontier Tract (Arunachal Pradesh), Naga Hills Districts
(Nagaland), Lushai Hills Districts (Mizoram), and North Cachar Hills Districts
(in Assam). The Garo Hills, Mikir Hills (Karbianglong in Assam) and Khasi
Jaintia Hills (Meghalaya) were identified as a 'partially excluded areas'. The
excluded areas came under the direct control of the Governor, the British
Government and the 'partially excluded areas' came under the provincial
legislative. In fact, there was also a plan for creation of 'Crown Colony
Protectorate' consisting of the tribal regions lying between Burma and India as in
Singapore, Aden, and the Persian Gulf (Syiemlieh, 1994:24-34 and Bhaumik, 2009: 10). This idea was hatched by the Dr. J.H. Hutton (political correspondent), N.E. Parry and A. G. McCall (Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Lushai Hills respectively). The policy was vehemently advocated by Robert Reid (Governor of Assam) between the years 1939 to 1942. He was also supported by, L.S. Amery (Secretary of State), and Reginald Coupland. Mr. Coupland in his book entitled, “British Obligation; The Future of India” propagated the protectorate plan. In fact, this policy plan had a support from the Simon Commission. However, the policy eventually was abandoned due to lack of sufficient political support by the successive officials after Robert Reid. Sir Andrew Clow, successor of Reid wanted to keep the region united to strengthen trade monopoly in the region. The incoming Labour Party in Britain also disfavoured such a policy. The Burmese, especially the Chairman of the excluded areas of Burma, J.H. Mitchell, also were not in favour of the plan. However, in a crucial meeting in 10th of March 1945, it was for the first time admitted that boundaries would be drawn considering the ethnographic profile rather than geography.

At the time of the Constituent Assembly in 1946, nation state building became very evident within the principle of cultural and political assimilation. However, due to the specific political situation emerging from northeast context integration approach (political assimilation and cultural non-interference) was adopted for the northeast tribes while both cultural and political assimilation approach was adopted for the tribes of the other regions of the country (Oommen, 2011). The political leaders did not entertain any form of political move for isolation/autonomous system or secession from the proposed India (Nag, 2002). However, the Constituent Assembly constituted a sub-advisory Committee for the North-East Tribes and Schedule Areas under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordaloi, Premier of Assam Province. This Committee worked under the Indian Advisory Committee on Aboriginals and the Tribes chaired by Sardar Patel. The
Sub Committee members of the tribes and excluded areas of Northeast consisted of Rupnath Brahma (a Bodo), Rev. J.J. M. Nichols Roy (a Khasi), Aliba Imti (a Naga), and A.V. Thakkar (a Gandhian) (Bhaumik, 2009: 12-13). This committee recommended the autonomous district councils within the sixth schedule framework to the Constituent Assembly for the northeast tribal regions. In the Constituent Assembly debates the northeast subcommittee along with Jaipal Singh, heading the subcommittee of Adivasi areas of the Jharkhand region, argued for the autonomous administrative structure (Fifth and the Sixth Schedule) for tribes and tribal areas. These schedules were included in the Constitution through a critical intervention by the Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (Savyasaachi, 1998). However, the subcommittee of northeast region could not handle the emerging ethno-nationalist voices of the Nagas. This historical event marked the beginning of self determination and sovereignty in the region (Bhaumick, 2009). One of the first such movements is Naga Nationalism. Therefore, since the post Independence era, this region has witnessed various ethnic based national movements which have shaped the territorial reorganization of the region. At the time of Independence, except for Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, all the hill regions were within the Assam province as ‘excluded areas’ or ‘partially excluded areas’. Arunachal Pradesh was then named as North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) and was under the direct purview of the President of India. The Naga hill district became an intensive political environment for secessionist movement by 1950s. This movement had repelled effects on other tribes across the region which is felt even today. Although, Naga hill area was finally made state in 1963 with ‘Nagaland’ as the name of the state, the self determination movement of the Nagas got strengthened into armed struggle. In general, the North Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971 finally brought a large scale reorganization of the north-eastern region with large scale changes in the region. In fact, as it stands today, all the major tribal areas (including Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram) of the region has attained statehood with four states (Assam, Mizoram, Tripura and
Meghalaya) having sixth schedule administrative structure. However, it is observed that in the emerging state processes, the minority tribes of the region are likely to be pushed to the margins. In fact, it is observed that internal political situation in states where the tribes are in minority such as Manipur, Tripura and Assam is still a matter of great concern for the state.

2. Manipur State and People

a) Pre-Colonial Context

Manipur, particularly the valley area, has a long record of history governed by several Meitei monarchs. Based on the Chronicles of the King, the only available prehistoric record, it is known that initially the Imphal valley was inhabited by seven clans/tribes with specific chiefs (Gangmumei, 1991:1). It was during the reign of a chief called Pakhangba that the monarchical state got established. Pakhangba, a powerful chief of the Ningthouja clan (also called Meitei clan), overpowered all the other six clans and assimilated them under his jurisdiction. This historic event led to the emergence of the history of Meitei ethnic groups and the beginning of Manipur monarchy in the valley recorded to be in 33 BC (Sanajoaba, 2003). Since then, the Meitei society emerged as a distinct social group, distinct culturo political entity anchored and sustained by the feudal monarchy. Over a period of history, this political unit emerged as a powerful kingdom which was able to have great political influence over the geopolitical context of the region and reigned over a long period of history. They entrenched themselves strongly as monarchs of the land with Kangla/Imphal as their power center upto the time of the merger of Manipur as princely state into the Union of India on the twenty-first September of 1949. The remains of this historic fortress stand even today at Kangla giving a narrative to this great history.
In ancient times the Meiteis, the local inhabiting ethnic group of the plain area called their land by various nomenclature such as ‘Kangleipak’, ‘Poireipak’ and ‘meitrapak’ (Kabui, 1991: 1). Based on this record, the historians opined that the land of the valley area could have emerged as an integral part of the ecological system of Loktak Lake. The term ‘Kangleipak’, meaning Kang=dry, leipak=land, suggests that this land has over period of time emerged from the water submerged land around the Loktak lake. This lake even today stands as a landmark of this dried land called Kangleipak in the present state of Manipur.

Besides, the records of British administrators also mention that the princely state of Manipur was considered to be located within the low lying land areas, valley area, a 700 sq miles stretch of fertile agriculture land, with its epicentre at Kangla, now called Imphal, the Capital of the state. According to the records, this valley is surrounded approximately by a 8000 sq miles stretch of Hills forming a perfect fortified political space where the Manipur Monarchs established their power and domain (McCulloh, 1857: 1; Mackenzie, 1884: 149). However, the royal historical narratives, as recorded in the Chronicles, endow a far reaching territorial control of the Kings far into the hill regions surrounding the valley. This territorial claim of the king extended upto the whole of the Kaboo valley (Sanajaoba, 2003: 13 and Gangmurnei, 1991: 194). However, the Manipur Monarchs territorial claim especially in the eastern side was a contentious political issue. It gave rise to several political confrontations between Burmese (Ava) King and Manipuri King.

Nevertheless, it is historical evidence that the Kings of Manipur were one of the most significant local feudal Kings who played crucial political games that defined the politics of this state and the region. They were in an active political relationship with the other major local political feudal kings of Assam, Tripura, Silchar and other chieftains of the hill region. The Cheitharol, the chronicles of
the king, gives a vivid and systematic account of the historical encounters of these Kings.

According to the chronicles, the Monarchs endowed with power and authority had always asserted their authority over the various autonomous tribal chiefs of the surrounding hill areas and the adjoining regions of Tripura, Cachar and even Burma. However, the political relationship between the hill autonomous tribes and king was marked by co-existence. The monarchs of the valley depended on the hill tribes for defence and the tribes of the hill areas also found a mutual protection in the monarchs. The historical narratives of many tribes in the hill region indicate that a few of the chiefs of small and weak tribes got subdued. Some of them sought the monarchical refuge and protection. Most of these tribes submitted to the sovereignty of the king and had to pay tribute as a mark of the allegiance. There are also narratives of resistance of especially from the more powerful tribes and chiefs who were able to put up a strong and independent political alternative. However, in both of the cases, the autonomous political structures of the tribes remained unaltered. Therefore, in many ways, the political relationship between the King and the tribal chiefs confined basically within occasional raids and punitive expeditions between the Kings and chiefs. As mentioned in the Meitei chronicles, one of the first raids on the tribal chiefs is that of Maring in 1302AD (Iboogohal and Khelchandra, 1967: 7 as cited by Ranjit in Sanajaoba, 1988: 86).

b) British Colonial Expansion into Manipur

Manipur, being a part of the great contiguous geographical landscape of the region, is influenced by the emerging regional historical processes. In fact, this state provides a vital political and mercantile linkage between the different states of Northeast region and the rest of India with Burma, Southeast Asia and China. The British administration, recognizing this vital territorial space, went
into an active political engagement with the Monarchs even when the military and administrative processes were complicated and expensive.

It is therefore noted that the motive of all political and military adventure in Manipur was directly connected to the colonial expansion policy towards the Southeast Asia and China for trade and commerce. They had to dis-empower the Burmese and capture the trade and commerce which was then under the monopoly of Burmese King. In this pursuit, initially, they were unaware of the people inhabiting the region. In the process of the geographical conquer and administration expansion, they encountered the people. As a military strategy, it was important firstly to recognise the feudal kings. It became evident that feudal kings who were utterly weakened by the Burmese at that time could be used to build a strong local defence against the Burmese as a strategy to establish colonial paramountcy in the region.

The major political stand-off between Manipur and Burmese Kings provided an immediate rationale for the British expansion to Manipur. The first friendly alliance treaty between the Manipur King and British East India Company Government was made in 1762 during the time of Karta Bhaigyachandra (Jai Singh) (Kabui, 1991: 2 and Lal Dena, 1991: 1). However, the alliance failed due to the inclemency of the weather and land. The actual venture of the British into Manipur came in the event of the ‘Seven Years of Devastation’ (1819 to 1826) of the Manipur kingdom by the Burmese King and the control of trade system in the region. The invasion of the Burmese devastated the feudal monarchy and the people so severely, that this period is remembered as the days of ‘seven years devastation and misery’ (chahi taret khuntakpa) in the history of Manipur. Besides, the event expanded the power of the Burmese king upto Assam. The Meitei king had to flee from Manipur into Cachar country. The political situation of Manipur was thus completely under the control of the Burmese. This situation alarmed the British. It became evident to them that
Burmese expansion to Manipur and towards other areas in the north-east was directly against the colonial expansion policy towards South East Asia and China.

Therefore, as a political strategy, the British decided to strengthen the alliance with the King of Manipur, Gambhir Singh, to fight back and curtail the invading Burmese King in 1824. The fugitive King of Manipur who had then fled to Cachar country for refuge was then given military and financial support. The Burmese were finally pushed out of Manipur and beyond the Kaboo valley. This event is marked by the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826 and the reinstatement of the King, Gambhir Singh at the throne of Manipur Kingdom. The treaty of Yandaboo was signed by three parties – British India, Gambhir Singh (1815-34) and Burma. This treaty marks a historic year of the history of Manipur (Lal Dena, 1991: 9-14).

The Treaty of Yandaboo, formerly demarcated the territorial boundary between the Manipur Monarchical state and Burmese King. However, much to the disgrace of the King of Manipur, the Kaboo valley and the adjoining Chindwin valley went to Burma. In fact, it is a popular belief that this event is considered to be the saddest moments of the King that eventually cost his death. Thus, the territorial boundary of the King in the eastern side was since then fixed at the eastern hill ranges; the hill ranges between the foot of the Naga Hills in the north-west and north-east, and north end of the Chin Hills (in Burma) in the south. In the west, the state boundary line was fixed with mutual agreement between the Cachar King and Manipur King. The southern part of the territory ends at the north of Lushai hills (present Mizoram). This territorial boundary demarcation constitutes the basic foundation of the territorial boundary of the present state.
After the treaty of Yandaboo, the British occupation of Manipur Monarchy became an actual reality. This is vividly manifested in the creation of the Political Agent in 1935 (Lal Dena, 1991: 31), an administrative office of the British in Manipur. Taking advantage of the weakness of the kings, the political agent slowly became the supreme authority of the state. Thus, the kingdom came greatly under the influence of the British Government operationalised through the appointment of a British political agent. This finally culminated into the infamous Anglo-Manipur War (Khongjom Battle) in 1891 which marked virtually the end of the rule of the monarch. Tikendrajit Singh, the Manipuri hero of the Anglo-Manipur War, is fondly remembered as freedom fighter of Manipur. Since then, a weak puppet Monarch (called Raja) was appointed by the British Administrator and the land was practically ruled by them, which marked an era of the direct rule of the British in Manipur. This intervening history also witnessed an intense political conflict and resistance by the people of Manipur both in the valley and the hill regions against the British occupation of Manipur state and the policy implemented through the local weak Monarch. In fact, this period is witness to the emergence of several political resistance movements such as the First Women Agitation in 1904, socio-political movement began by Rani Gaidinliu (1930s), Kuki Rebellion (1917-19) and the Nupi Lan, (1939) (Lal Dena, 1991). These events are closely linked with the movements for expulsion of British rule, end of Monarchy and movement for responsible government and finally the establishment of democratic state both as Indian state and also as a sovereign democratic state between the years 1939 -1949 (Joykumar in Lal Dena, 1991; Joykumar, 2005). In such a historical circumstance, Hijam Irabot Singh stands out as an important freedom fighter, politician and social activist of Manipur.
c) Post Independent Manipur State

At the time of Independence, the state of Manipur, being a princely state, came under the purview of the policy of the government of India. It was recognised as princely state in 1947. This historical event marks the beginning of a democratic state. The state boundary was formerly recognized with a few voice of descent from north Manipur and south Manipur based on the premise set by the British administration. Some leaders from the north wanted to integrate with the larger Nagas contiguous regions and the some people of the south Manipur intended to integrate with Mizoram region. This dissenting voice came as an additional territorial tension to Manipur state territorial boundary dispute over Kaboo Valley in the eastern part of the boundary.

The King with his Darbar, state Assembly, was recognised as the Head of the state. In 1948, the first democratic election on adult franchise was held under the constitutional monarchy as an outcome of the people’s movement for a responsible government. However, soon after, Manipur was fully merged with India in 1949 through the formal signing of the Merger Agreement between the Indian Government and the Maharaja of Manipur at Shillong. Thus, the state was put under ‘C-category’. In 1962 it became a Union Territory. However, with the concerted effort made by the people on recognition of responsible government and statehood, the Government of India constitutionally established the Manipur state in 1972 based on North-Eastern Areas Reorganisation Act, 1971.

i) Geophysical Features

The present state of Manipur connects the western region of Assam and Cachar Hills to Burma in the east. The state is bounded by Nagaland on the North, Assam in the West and Mizoram on the South. The eastern side is bounded by an international boundary of Burma, stretching from east Mizoram
moving north upto the eastern hill tracts of the present state of Nagaland. It is one of the smallest states of India with an area of 22337 sq kilometres. The 9/10th of the total area of the state consists of the surrounding hill area. This state lies between 23.83°N to 25.68°N latitude and 93.03°E to 94.78°E longitude. Imphal (plain area) is 790 meters above the sea level (MSL).

The land has a rich ecological system and a biodiversity. Sixty seven percent of the geographical area is covered by a thick forest. The forest and land are regularly watered by the north-eastern monsoons during the months of June to September. Thus, the low lying area, Imphal valley, is naturally enriched by the surrounding hills and the forests which sustain a host of rare and endemic plant and animal life. The monsoon becomes the life source of the land, people, forest and animals. Generally, the climatic condition varies from tropical to sub-alpine depending on the altitude of hill ranges. It allows a seasonal agriculture and supports the economy of the people both in the hills and the plains.

The mountain region is a home to various kinds of flora and fauna. It sustains a beautiful and precious blooms and orchids. There are about 500 varieties of orchids which grow in Manipur of which 472 have been identified. The hill forest is usually confined to the ranges between 900-2700m above mean sea level (MSL).

Siroi Lily and Sangai (a dancing deer), rare species known in India and also in the world, are found here. Siroi lily is the only terrestrial lily grown on the hill tops of Siroi hill, Ukhrul district and also Sangai is the only species of animal found in the world. The Sangai is sustained by the floating cervid (known as Phumdi in Manipuri) of Loktake lake, the only lake in the valley. It habitats in the Kaibu Lamjou, the floating island of the Loktake Lake in Imphal. Some of the known animals which habitat this land are the Hoolock Gibbon, the Sloe Loris, the Clauded Leopard, the Spotted Linshang, Mrs. Hume's Barbacked
Pheasant, Blyths Tragopan, Burmese Pea-Fowl, and four different species of Hornbills.

The state at present has three functioning national highways that link with the rest of the country via Nagaland state (National Highway No.39) and Silchar, Assam (National Highway No.53) and Mizoram (National Highway Number 150). National Highway number 39 is called Indo-Myanmar road, an international road. It links India with Burma via Moreh. The National Highway number 150 is called Jessami-Tipaimukh Road. It connects Nagaland and Mizoram through Manipur. However, this road is yet to be developed fully. Besides, the capital is connected by airway.

i) State Economy

The Imphal valley has a rich and fertile cultivable land. The surrounding hills provide a rich water source and fertile alluvial soil for agriculture purposes. Besides, monsoon rain is regular and conducive for agriculture and farming. The people of this region practice settled agriculture. Rice is the main crop cultivated in the valley. The land is also suitable for plantations of vegetables. Although this valley is predominantly inhabited by the Meitei ethnic group, today it has become a central unit, an only urban centre, connecting and attracting all ethnic groups from both plain and the surrounding hills. In fact, Imphal today has become a fast developing city, the only city, in Manipur. It is connected with all the districts and villages in the state through roadways.

The hill area is conducive for horticulture farming, jhum and shifting cultivation. In some areas such as northern hills, terrace cultivation of rice is a common practice. However, there is a growing awareness of the hill people on adopting settled agriculture and usage of modern technology for higher yield. Some hill regions which are exposed to low lying areas are practicing settled
agriculture. Monsoon and rivers are the main source of water for all cultivations. However, in many interior villages, the presence of the state system of administration as well as development infrastructure is still very negligible. People in these villages are still dependent on traditional means of livelihood.

According to the Statistical Report of the state 2005, the overall gross state domestic product is 403440 lakhs rupees. Of this, the highest state domestic product comes from tertiary sector (52%). The primary sector contributes 28 percent and the secondary has 21 percent. The per capita income of the state is rupees 16336 only (Statistical Abstract of Manipur, 2005: 108-109).

iii) Demography, Ethnic Origin and Settlement

The present population of Manipur is estimated at 22,93,896 persons (2001 Census). The valley district has comparatively larger population than the hill districts. The valley districts such as Thoubal, Imphal East and Imphal West have population ranging from three to five lakhs. However, in the hill areas, the district population ranges from one lakh to two and half lakhs. Accordingly, the density of population in the plain area is 631 persons per square kilometre and 44 persons per square kilometre in the hill area.

Based on the understanding drawn from the existing archaeological and historical evidences, both written and oral, the people of Manipur are broadly grouped under one racial, ethnic stock. A.R. Grierson classified them under a Tibeto-Burman linguistic group (Kabui, 1991: 17). However, this stock, as seen in the present reality, over a period of history endured the ‘stresses and stretches’ of time and place, and has given way to social bifurcation and permutation. These permutations over long period of a history have generated varied distinct tribes, ethnic groups and villages. In such situation, management of the politics of change through a rigorous ethno-historical repositioning is critical to
protection, preservation and promotion of their ethnic group. The people's narratives which are expressed in the form of folklore, myths and legends, songs and dances, indigenous rituals, cultural attires, indigenous games, arts and artefacts, handlooms and handicrafts are vital part of their daily life.

The ethnic origin and settlement is mainly inferred from lived culture, language, customary laws and practices, chieftaincy and self governance system. As a practice, language feature is a predominant factor for self identification, ascription and classification.

As regards ethnic origin of Meiteis, it is commonly believed that people of the valley had lived here as specific cultural group since 33AD. They also fall within the linguistic group of 'Kuki-Chin-Mizo', a sub group of the Tibeto Burman race. In the later periods of the history, the Muslim (Panghans) and Bishnipriyas have emerged as societies residing in the valley area. As recorded in the Cheitharols, the plain people of Manipur are more commonly identified with seven clans. The ethnonym, Meitei, historically refers to the Ningthouja clan-dynasty founded by Nonga Leiren Pakhangba. He was the chief of the Meitei clan and through his power the whole ethnic group of these seven clans got absorbed into the Meitei clan. There are also legends of the tribes, particularly the Thangkhuls and other Naga narratives that suggest the origin of the Meiteis from the hills (Hudson, 1911). However, the Meitei society underwent a major transformation with the conversion of Meitei Kings into Vaishanvism. The first king who got converted was Charairongba in April 1704. On his conversion, Charairongba adopted a Hindu name Pritambar Singh (Kabui, 1991: 237). However, the Brahmanization of Meitei King began with the eldest son of Charairongba, Gareeb Niwaz (also called Kayaamba). The Brahmanization process was initiated with the ordination of the Gareeb Niwaz as the descendent of Arjun, the third of the Pandava brothers of Mahabharata. Gareeb Niwaz declared Hinduism the state religion.
The hill areas are associated with people with various cultures having independent village political units of chiefs. They are usually referred as tribes (a colonial construct). The origin narratives of such tribes give emphasis to their indigenous nature, connectedness to land and culture. As a case in reference, historians such as Gangmumei assumes that Naga tribes (collectively referring to tribes inhabiting the hill ranges of northern, eastern and western Manipur) settled in the present habitat during the early centuries of the Christian era or even centuries before Christ (Kabui, 1991: 23). However, these conclusions have been drawn mainly based on narratives and stories of the oral history of the people. Nevertheless, the regional historical studies, also applicable to Manipur state in specific, suggest that the various ethnic groups inhabiting this region are part of the great Mongolian family commonly believed to be originally residing in Western part of China. Historians commonly construct the origin of the people of the north east region as expressed; "Different branches of the great Sino-Tibetan speaking people from the Yang Tse-Kiang and Hwang-Ho River areas were pushed down south and were probably 200BC onwards and some of these tribal groups infiltrated into India mostly along the western part of Brahmaputra" (Nag, 1998: 35). It has been also assumed that the people might have moved in three waves: Tibeto-Burman, Mongkhmer and Siamese Chinese (as cited in Gangte, 2005). Therefore, indigenous nature of the people in this area cannot be understood as an aucthothones. However, in the recent context these cultural groups have come under several external political and socio-economic pressures. This situation has precipitated an environment for people's construction of their history, culture and identity as a political mobilization process.

Scheduled Tribes of Manipur: Constitutionally, the hill people are categorised as 'Scheduled Tribes', a politico-administrative term. This category is operationalised according to the Constitution article 342. Therefore, they come under the constitutional provisions provided for the scheduled tribes as general
in India. At present there are thirty three scheduled tribes in Manipur recognised under the Constitution of India, as listed in Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report (2009: 53);

Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Kacha Naga, Koirao, Koiyeng, Kom, Lamgang, Mao, Maram, Maring, Any Mizo (Lushai) tribes, Monsang, Moyon, Paite, Purum, Ralte, Sema, Simte, Suhte, Tangkhul, Thadou, Vaiphui, Zou, Poumai Naga, Tarao, Kharam, Any Kuki tribes (the last four categories were added in 2003 Government notification). In the latest amendment of the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 as introduced to the Parliament by the Minister of Tribal Affairs, December 2011, Inpui, Liangmai, Rongmei, Thangal, Zeme and Mate had been recognised as the Scheduled Tribes of Manipur.

In 1981, the Government of Manipur, based on the list of the recognised tribes under the Constitution, came out with a clarification booklet on scheduling of tribes in Manipur, as stated below;

"According to the Constitution of India, there are 29 recognised tribes in Manipur....All the tribes can be divided into Naga group of tribes, and the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group of tribes with some smaller tribes intermediate between these groups as some transformation is in the process. Traditional chieftainship is not similar among all the tribes.... Among the Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups tribes, chieftainship is hereditary, but it is not always so among the Naga tribes. The tribesmen among the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group in Manipur (total 8 tribes) can converge with one another in respective dialects unlike the Naga group of tribes (total 6 tribes). Linguistic difference is much among the Naga than among the tribes of Chin-Kuki-Mizo group......Intermediate between the two
groups of Naga and Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups of tribes linguistically nearer to the latter than the former are numerically smaller tribes. As such they are also known as Old Kuki in anthropological literature.” (Government of Manipur, 1981 as cited in Zehol, 98: 4-5).

In this clarification, the list of the ethnic groups and tribes of the hill people of Manipur state were identified and regrouped into:

1. The Naga Group of Tribes:
   i) Kabui (Rongmei and Puimei), ii) Kacha Naga (Liangmei and Zemei), collectively known as Zeliangrong, iii) Mao, iv) Maram, v) Tangkhul, and vi) Maring

2. The Chin-Kuki-Mizo group of Tribes:
   i) Gangte, ii) Himar, iii) Lushai (Mizo), iv) Thadou (Kuki), v) Vaiphei, vi) Zou, vii) Paite, viii) Simte

3. The Intermediary Groups:

4. The Non-local Tribes:
   i) Angami, ii) Ralte, iii) Sema, iv) Sukte

3. Administration of Hill Areas of Manipur

a) British Colonial Policy and Tribes

The hill area of Manipur, a predominantly the habitat of the hill tribes, forms a contiguous part of the hill areas of the northeast region both ethnically and geographically. Like any other tribes in the region, the tribes of Manipur hill region became objects of colonial policy and administration. They were basically
independent village republics described by a clan-village chieftaincy system. They governed themselves with their own customs and laws.

It is also known that the political system of tribes of hill area is different from the valley people. The tribes have always resisted the power of the feudal kings of the plain (Shangkham, 1990: 111-113). As a practice, since the first contact, British had to take a policy of indirect control as a policy practice common to all the hill regions in the area. However, in the hill region of Manipur, the Monarch of Manipur played a vital role in subduing the hill people under his political domain. As a strategy, the British administrators aligned with the local kings in their political adventures against the hill people in the region. This strategy marked the beginning of the politics between the hills and the plains. The difference between the plain and the hill people therefore was politicised through a strategy of an alliance with local feudal Kings. This strategy forms the foundation of the present cultural demarcation between the hills and valleys. In fact, the state in the colonial period has three important political units namely the political agent, the Monarch and the tribal chiefs (Gangmumei, 1991). The jurisdiction of the Monarch was confined to the valley people with a political control from the political agent. The tribes, who were basically under their own chiefs, were brought indirectly under the administrative jurisdiction of the political agent. In principle the policy intended to preserve and protect the political system of tribes. The basic features of the administration were based on the cultural non interference where the tribes were left to govern themselves according to their own customs and tradition. However, the tribal chiefs became important agents of the colonial administrative process. A colonial system of administration, fiscal, military, trade and commerce were imposed on the chiefs and tribes. They introduced 'pothang' system (provision of food and lodging for the military, construction of roads etc.), house tax and military service (labour corpse during the First World War and the Second World War) (Gangmumei, 1991 and Lal Dena, 1991). Land or
village registration system was also initiated during J. Shakespear, a political agent. The whole administrative system was run through a bureaucratic structure. The clerks, commonly known as Lambus became the principle agents of the implementation of the colonial fiscal, pothang and village registration system and processes in the hill areas directly under the jurisdiction of the political agent. In fact, the Lambus became the sole rulers of the tribes over a period of time.

Eventually, the whole hill region of Manipur was surveyed and administered keeping in mind a predominantly concentrated ethnic groups existing in different parts of the hill region such as Tangkhuls in the east (Ukhrul), Angamis in the north (Senapati), Rongmeis (Tamenglong) in the west and Churachandpur in the south. They were also identified and classified into five different socio-political categories (Shangkham, 1990: 117). To a great extend, the present hill districts have been structured based on framework given by the colonial administrators.

Therefore, in general, historical evidences indicate that British played the ethnic politics to subdue and administer the people in the hill. The whole region was reorganized on ethnic lines. Basically, the northern part, eastern and the western part of the tribes were defined as 'Nagas' (basically an Assamese ascription of people in the eastern hill region of Assam valley) and the tribes inhabiting the southern region were called 'Kukis' (a Bengali terminology referring to people inhabiting the adjoining hills).

The pressure of the colonial state ethnic reorganization and territorial demarcation processes coming into the happy dwellings of the tribes, villages and ethnic groups generated new social and political reality resulting into ethnic identity consciousness and resistance as means of survival. An intense expansion politics exerted on the people created a political arena of tribal wars in which the
numerically smaller tribes and villages got uprooted, made to be slaves or absorbed into the larger tribes and clans. This created a process of ethnic based territorial reorganization. The emergence of the Lushai hills, Naga Hills and Chin Hills (in Burma) are such the outcomes. It generated a situation of expulsion and migration of the some smaller tribes, who were not able to assert their political space, from their original habitats. Moving for a safer place, taking refuge under the political domain of the British Empire, the king or stronger ethnic groups became a reality of many tribes and villages. Therefore, the present politics of ethnic identity and consciousness is an inherent element of the politics introduced during colonial and post colonial state processes.

As a specific example, the colonial politics of resettlement of tribes in the Manipur foothills is worth mentioning. The tribes (usually known as Kukis by the colonial administrator) who became victims of the creation of the political boundaries between Burma and Manipur, Manipur and Lushai hill were settled in the foothills of the valley (now Sadar Hills) during the time of the Political Agent, Maxwell McCulloh (1844-1867). As a strategy, this area was defined as a 'buffer zone', 'line of control' between the valley people and the northern tribes (Nagas). Thus, an ethnic based political space was super imposed in the area. Such a strategy became the genesis of the historical enmity between the Naga tribes and the Kuki tribes, a political space of ethnic consciousness and tension.

However, the coming of the British Government also initiated the progressive history of social and political change in the region, a beginning of the history of modern period among the tribes and ethnic groups. The British system introduced Christianity and modern education among the people. Therefore, on one side there was a concerted process of politics of administration, fragmentation of the villages, regions, tribes and ethnic groups as product within the British state formation, on the other hand, there was also a process of structural change of culture, tribal society and ethnic boundaries. This
process, in fact, became a precursor to the beginning of the constructivist history of ethnic identities and change among all tribes as commonly witnessed today.

b) Post Colonial Hill Area Policy and Administration

The hill areas of Manipur, being within a princely state, do not come under the purview of the fifth and the sixth schedules. However, it is basically administered based on the statutory Acts such as Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act, 1956 and Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971. Besides, the Constitution of India makes a special provision for the ‘Hill Areas’ of Manipur stating as;

Article: 371(C,1) Notwithstanding in this Constitution, the President may, by order made with respect to the state of Manipur, provide for the constitution and functions of a Committee of the Legislative Assembly of the state consisting of members of that Assembly elected from the hill Areas of that State, for the modifications to be make in the rules of business of the Government and in the rules of procedure of the Legislative Assembly of the State and for any special responsibility of the Governor in order to secure the proper functioning of such Committee.

2) The Governor shall annually, or whenever so required by the President, make a report to the President regarding the administration of the Hill Areas in the state of Manipur and the executive power of the Union shall extend to the giving of directions to the state as to the administration of the said areas.

Explanation: In this article, the expression ‘hill Areas’ means such areas as the President may, by order, declare to be Hill Areas.”
In the present context, the political structure of the state can be broadly classified into two namely i) general administration system area and ii) 'hill areas', a specific administrative system for the tribes recognising customary rights and tribal governance system. The plain area namely Imphal East, Imphal West, Bishempur, and Thoubal districts, is covered under general administration with two tier panchayati raj system. In the hill areas, the Manipur (Hill Areas) Act, 1971 instituted six autonomous district councils (ADC) namely i) Manipur north ADC now Senapati ADC, ii) Sadar Hills ADC, iii) Manipur East ADC now Ukhrul ADC, iv) Tengnoupal ADC now Chandel ADC, v) Manipur South ADC now Churachandpur ADC and vi) Manipur West ADC now Tamenglong ADC. However, there are only five districts covering the hill areas such as Senapati, Tamenglong, Ukhrul, Churachandpur and Chandel.

Presently, there is an intense demand for up-gradation of Jiribam and Sadar Hills ADC into full fledged districts. Besides, there are also other districthood demand emerging in the hill areas such as Tongjei Marin, Phungyar, and Tengnoupal. It is observed that the latest political challenge confronting Manipur is the issue of districthood demand and the conflict of interest emerging between creations of new districts based on administrative convenience and ethnicity.

The state has an assembly of sixty members. Forty seats are for the general, twenty for the scheduled tribes and one seat for the scheduled caste. It has also two Members of Parliament, one for the Inner Manipur and one for the Outer Manipur. The Assembly appoints the Hill Area Committee (HAC), consisting mainly of the elected tribal MLAs. HAC is directly responsible to the administration and governance of the hill areas.

The hill council was first elected in 1972, through a council legislation of 1971. However, the council functioned only till 1980s due to the sixth schedule.
demand movement among the tribes. Since then, the tribes have been demanding for a six schedule status in the state. In 2001 an effort was made to amend the Manipur Hill Council Act to include the tribes demand of 'autonomy'. However, this amendment was further re-amended in 2008. After a gap of 20 years, the election of the district council under the amended Act 2008 was conducted in 2010 with lots of opposition from the tribal civil societies. As observed in hill areas, many of the civil societies among tribes such as United Naga Council and All Manipur Tribal Union still consider that Manipur (Hill Areas) Act, 2008 (amended) does not guarantee justice to tribes. This is indicated in the emerging mutually conflicting political movements initiated towards a 'greater autonomy' for tribes along sixth schedule, separate administrative structure and even creation of tribal state etc.

4. Ethnic Experiences and Emerging Identity Politics

The ethnic experiences emerging from Manipur is closely linked to the historical events leading to a transition of the people and area into nation-state. In present day people's understanding, ethnic experiences are an integral part of the day-today life experiences. They are the essential socio cultural processes that sustain them as people; their language, culture, territorial and political unit. The valley area ethnic experience is predominantly influenced by Meitei culture. The hill area is described by social interaction of variegated cultures who came to be ascribed as tribes in the colonial period. Meiteis and tribes are also fairly distinguished in terms of religious experiences. Both the communities are associated with their own indigenous religious practices and rituals. Besides, religious conversion of Meiteis into Hinduism and the tribes into Christianity has intensified differences of religious experiences among them.

As observed in reality, diverse ethnic experiences over a period in the state has become contentious political issue challenging the very foundation of
the state. As a case in point, it is important to mention that the historical event of the signing of the Merger Agreement between Maharaja of Manipur and the Indian Union at Shillong in 1949 becomes a critical event to understand the emerging politics of identity and ethnicity shaping people's experience. This event generated a political reaction expressed in people's movements for self determination among the Meiteis. The establishment of United Liberation Front (UNLF) in 1964 (Bareh, 2004), a separatist organization is one such extreme case of political reaction.

With specific to hill tribes, identity consciousness and movements got initiated through the leadership of mission educated youths of the community. As persons of the community who first received modern education and Christianity, they became active agents of change among the people. They were greatly inspired by the prevalent political environment; nation-state formation processes of the war periods and colonial politics in the region. As a point of reference, it is worth mentioning that Naga Club, 1918 became the first modern political institution for identity assertion and resistance. The Naga Club formally submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929 for excluding the Nagas from the prospective political processes towards formation of India. The formation of the Naga Hills District Tribal Council, Naga National Council (1946), formation of Nagaland state (1963), signing of the Shillong Accord (1975) and the emergence of the Naga Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaac-Muivah), NSCN (IM), 1980 and Naga Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN, K), 1988 are some of the important political outcomes of Naga movement history.

As observed, the Naga movement has been greatly instrumental in creating and sustaining the Naga identity consciousness across many tribes in the region. Besides, the leaders have been able to take the movement to a political negotiation both at the national and international levels. Such a process has
strengthened the process of Naga identity consciousness. However, this movement has also raised various other political issues in the region. For example, the present ongoing negotiation between NSCN (IM) leadership and Indian Government for a solution to Naga political problem (Bhaumik, 2009: 2) is a point in case. In this negotiation, 'integration of Naga inhabited areas'; creation of independent nation called 'Nagalim' is a critical issue. It pertains to integrating of Naga inhabited areas under one political unit. However, this proposal has become a political issue confronting Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and north-western part of Burma. The issue infringes directly on the territorial integrity of these present states. In fact, it has become one of the most contentious political issues in the northeast, in general and Manipur, in particular.

Besides, as a simultaneous outcome of the political process of Naga political movement, various disparate tribal identity movements have also come up with alternative political organizations and consciousness building strategy in the state. These processes have become dominant political reality that constantly define the ethnic experiences where identity movements initiated by the larger tribes such as Nagas, Mizos, Meiteis and Kukis are seen to play influencing role on the smaller tribes.

As per observation on southern hill region, Manipur is also a witness to identity assertion and movement having its historical connection to the colonial period. The region is situated under larger geopolitical purview of southern region of Northeast, upto the Chittagong and Arracan hill tracks, present Chin state (Burma) and Cachar hills. The area came under an intensive political confrontation generated due to the colonial policy. The contentious political boundary processes focusing around the political centers of Mizoram, Tripura, Assam, Manipur and even Burma have had deep impact in this area. The creation of specific political boundaries in this area generated inters/intra tribe
wars, war for control over villages, resources and power over each other. Raids, punitive expeditions, head hunting and migration of people were some important political outcomes observed in this area. Such a historical experience has created political heterogeneity among tribes of a kind in the region inspite of their cultural and linguistic affinity.

At present, the southern hill district tribes are situated in a unique ethnic location; Nagas (in the north, east and west), Meiteis on the foothills and Mizos in the south. This area went through a severe ethnic violence in 1994-1996. Since then, there is a strong ethnic re-centering process towards being a Naga, Kuki or Zomi rendering a situation where the smaller tribes are pushed to the periphery or are coerced to align with the bigger ethnic group.

Besides, it is also important to indicate that there is also some structural difference between the Kuki, Naga and other tribes of Manipur with regards to chieftaincy system among. In practice, the Kuki chieftaincy system is closer to being a feudal in nature. The chief has a greater power over his people and the resources of the village as compared to other tribes. In fact, the coming of the Kuki tribes in the foothill areas created much tension with villages concerning village chieftaincy system, collective ownership and customary rights. In practice, most of the tribes (including Nagas) found in the state are defined by a democratic village polity. The chiefs are basically selected or nominated taking into consideration seniority, clan or capability criteria. The chief with his council runs the affairs of the village within the principle of collective ownership, customary rights, laws and practices.

Therefore, in general, it can be stated that the present ethnic context of Manipur is sensitive. As a case in reference, the uprising on the territorial integrity (2001) is a critical event which deeply affects the present experience of the people. In particular, the issue of territorial integrity of the state has emerged
as the most important issue of Manipur today. This is indicated by the growing sentiment among people against identity movements that would infringe on the territorial integrity of the state. Besides, there are several emerging political issues confronting the people and state such as:

- Districthood Demand (ethnic base district delimitation or administrative convenience)
- Demand for alternative administrative structure by the Nagas
- Tribal state demand
- Sixth Schedule Demand
- Rise of Insurgency (Secessionist Movements)
- Armed Forces Special Powers Act Manipur (1958)
- Human Rights
- Corruption
- HIV/AIDS

Conclusion

The overarching context and processes of the state spanning across colonial and post independence periods, ecology and politics are an inherent part of the present day ethnic experiences among people. As of today, this experience is constantly shaped by a specific context where various tribes or ethnic groups assert their culture and identity in the state and region. Many a times, such assertions are mutually exclusive. In fact, identity consciousness and organization process is an emerging common social phenomenon seen across all tribes in the state. As observed, this situation gives rise to a process of alignment across certain smaller tribes as a political strategy for their empowerment. The social phenomenon of 'identity oscillation' as observed by the earlier social anthropologists is seen to express in some form in such a context. However, as a common experience, it is seen that the tribes inhabiting the foothills of the valley assert their identity and ethnicity as means to negotiate a political space as
people in the state. They assert themselves as tribes of Manipur. Their culture, language, tradition and customary laws, village authority and chieftaincy governance system, right to land and resources are some of the critical elements considered important to their survival, empowerment and development.