CHAPTER - III

The Methodological Consideration

In the emerging understanding on the approach and practice to scientific engagement with societies such as tribes and ethnic groups in social sciences, there has been a shift of an epistemological focus from a single discipline to multi disciplines, from a positivist base to a community embedded epistemology, creating a space for the emergence of alternative methodologies commonly described as emic or indigenous, as is seen in the review of literature cited in the previous chapter. Along this understanding, ethnography as an approach, paves a way for the people’s epistemology as it attempts to understand and describe critically the emerging reality in time and place from a lived experience of the people. Such an approach is considered very relevant to study tribes and ethnic communities, especially of the northeast region. It is a scientific method which springs from the epistemological premise of the people; their worldview, narratives, cultural and historical experiences. This study is located within this methodological consideration.

1. Rationale and Perspective

The rationale and perspective of this study is informed by the lived experience of Koms in Manipur. It seeks to understand and relocate the basic questions of their history, culture and identity. As a tribal society, Koms are described broadly by a common descent narrative and cultural practices. However, being numerically a small community, they have a unique experience of life. Their lived experience is constantly shaped by change processes inherently accompanied with ‘stresses and friction’. In particular, the state processes of ethnic reorganization and territorial demarcation are a contentious political issue which has had a deep impact on their experience. Such a state activity generated a multilayered identity processes: a circumstance of shared resource in the hill region. In such context, as viewed from Kom experience, resistance to cultural and political assimilations over a period in history: pre-
colonial, British colonial and the present state are the defining political structures in the region. As a strategy, adaptations, cultural variations and alignment with the larger tribes in the hill areas have been part of their daily life for their survival as a tribal society in the state. Besides, the sparse location of the tribe in the present context of the state prevents them for any effective collective political mobilization and/or participation. As for instance, the state territorial delimitation mechanism process renders the community fragmented and weak across the region as also being further disadvantaged by geopolitical influences in which the villages are located in the present time. In fact, the state process of scheduling tribes has further created distinctive tribe boundaries between them rendering the possibility of building a shared boundary across the villages even more elusive. Considering such a circumstance, it is indicative that their culture, history and identity would remain at the margins in the present politics and history of the state.

Besides, the emerging change process has also thrown opened a wide range of questions concerning the tribes and ethnic groups in the state and in the region. In such a context, the question of identity and ethnicity is of a paramount importance. As seen in reality, there is multi layered identity process, in fact with conflicting claims. This phenomenon is increasingly affecting the individuals, society and state in the present time such that the erstwhile western ideological assumption on the disappearance of identities in the emerging global context has in fact taken a reverse trend as is seen in this case. However, it has to a researcher (also seen in literature review) become very clear that such realities have been predominantly approached from the perspective of state building process. This has in fact given rise to simultaneous processes of assertions and resistance from the ‘grounded reality’ in the multi ethnic and multi tribe context. As is seen in recent times, there has been a resurgence of the literature to describe and relocate the cultural, historical and political position of such social entities from alternative perspectives, narratives and theories embedded in the ethnic social structure across tribes and ethnic groups in the region. Towards this direction, relocating Koms within the larger politics and history of the state as tribes of Manipur is very crucial to the community.
In fact, in the context of the Manipur, northeast and also extending far towards the whole of South East Asia, communities and societies with varied political, linguistic and cultural backgrounds are politically rendered more dynamic with the coming of the state. As is seen in reality across the region, the political process of building state has witnessed several people's movement of resistance especially by the 'pre-state societies' which are generally referred to as tribes. In such a circumstance, it is clear that the societies in this region are continually negotiating for a state structures of co-existence of multi ethnic, multi culture and linguistic identities strongly rooted with the boundaries of indigency (of being one of the earliest known tribes) and territory (village/tribe land political unit) definitely asserting an alternative political structures within the state.

In such a context, Koms within Komrem group (a greater collective), viewed as a specific society with its own unique history and culture becomes a section of the larger society whose reality represents a significant part of the overall dynamic reality of identity and ethnicity which is constantly shaped by the emerging state processes at the present time. The study in fact, seeks to understand culture and politics in the state context through engagement with the reality of the tribe in relation to their lived experiences and historical narratives. Therefore, the rationale seeks to understand the embedded 'voice' (as a political strategy) of the margins in the present power politics of the state.

Over and above, within the emerging socio-political reality, it becomes important to engage with this community for understanding the multi ethnic and multicultural social reality that constantly is negotiating with the emerging state in history. In such a process, the continuum between the cultural and political becomes very vivid. As for instance, the Koms within Komrem collective have political needs and aspirations drawn from the state context. Taking basic recourse to the premise of the Constitutional provisions for 'Scheduled Tribes', they ascribed themselves being a part of the larger group of minorities (also described as 'Troubled Peripheries' in Bhoumik, 2010) seeking for a space for an alternative history and political system as tribes who have distinct culture in history within a political principle of 'self rule' or 'autonomy'. Thus, the voice of the tribes of such societies in such circumstance become a direct negotiation
with external state change process which if not taken cognizance may set a
precedence of dis-empowering process of a community in a democratic state.
This situation has been recently described as ‘Justice Denied for Tribes in
Manipur’ (Bhatia, 2010).

As a matter of fact, this study attempts to critically reposition the
experience of the Koms and Komrems within the state. It seeks to understand the
democratic structures of the state focusing on how it handles the space of
numerically lesser tribes, which are equally critical for the functioning of a well
meaning democratic state. Koms are one of such small distinct cultural identities
and a recognized ‘Scheduled Tribe’ in Manipur. However, at this juncture it is
important to restate that the approach of the state towards tribes and ethnic
groups as is reflected in the academic literature falls very much within the state
politics of politico administrative categorizations (categorization as also
described in Jenkins, 1997) which is still very much dependent on a colonial
construct of tribe (also stated in Xaxa, 2005). In general, categorization has been
usually carried out based on the observable characteristic features of culture
(language) and territory. It is noted that in the study that self-identification
process is a proactive endogenous community self-definition on one hand and
perception by others on the other. However, categorization process can subdue
self identification. On this count, categorizations are today being redefined
and/or questioned ‘from within’ by the people themselves. For instance, ‘Naga’
as described in Nagaland State Human Development Report, 2004) as people
who originated from Burmese word ‘Naka’, meaning people with earrings. The
British recorded it as ‘Naga’, a collective identity categorization with has
recieved wide acceptance to the consciousness of people while there are a few of
tribes categorized under ‘Kuki’ who would not accept the ‘Kuki’ categorization.
‘Kuki’ is ethnic identity referring basically to the ‘Thadou’ tribe as viewed from
Koms. In fact, the categorization of ‘old Kuki’ (Shakespeare, 1909) has been
rejected by the people themselves through a proactive self identification as
Koms and/or Komrems.

In such a dynamic process of the politics of categorization and self
ascription, cultural and historical narrative of Koms within a collective entity
called Komrems becomes a vital unit for understanding multi-ethnic social
structure in a majority-minority binary structured state. The reality of Korns as people within the state who are in constant process of negotiation with state and other ethnic groups makes a unique case of reference for understanding questions and issues arising in such context. The term 'people' refers to 'historically formed community of people possessing common, relatively stable, specific feature of culture as well as being aware of their unity and difference from other similar communities' (Bromley as cited in Kamei, 2008). Situated within this context, the basic political premise of a tribe and its constant reaffirmation and self ascription in the understanding of culture and identity within a multi-ethnic context becomes a perspective of this study.

2. Research Questions

Some of the basic research questions that have inspired the overall approach and processes of this study are:

- The cultural and historical experiences and narratives of Koms around questions of 'who they are'? Ethnic identity context and process and how/why are they negotiating their collective identity in the present socio-political context of nation-state as tribe and ethnic group within the principle of cultural co-existence?

- What is the specific identity and cultural elements of Korns? Taking into consideration the emerging kindred tribe reality, how are these elements unique? What are the essential elements of identity and culture and what is new in the change process within the socio-political context of the state?

- What are the mechanism and systems which define their cultural boundary? How/why does it see itself and is perceived as 'to-be' in relation to the other ethnic groups in the state?

- Understanding social, religious and political context and processes of Koms within the larger collective called 'Komrem'. Understanding cultural strategy of assertions for continuity and change in relation to other tribes or ethnic groups within the state. What is Komrem? How/why is it recognized as an ethnic group in the state?

- What are the concerns of Komrem people as a tribe and distinct cultural group in the present context of the state? What is the
implication of Komrem lived experience of identity and ethnicity to
democracy, global and state processes?

3. The Objective

1. To explore the history of Korns based on their perception and lived
   experience within and in relation to their cultural interaction with
   other kindred ethnic groups.
2. To understand the social structure of Korns with a specific focus on
   the lineage and traditional governance systems, and its relationship
   with the kindred tribes.
3. To understand cultural processes of Korns and its interface with
   religion and religious practices in relation to Komrem community.
4. To understand the identity of Korns and its role in defining a Komrem
   political status as collective identity within the State.
5. To understand the strategies of ethnic identity mobilization and
   challenges encountered in negotiating a political space in the context
   of the emerging external socio-political demands.

4. The Methodology

The methodological orientation of this study is informed by the lived
experience of Korns. This experience is expressed in their narratives and cultural
practices. Korns, a tribal society is understood as a cultural and political entity
which has its own experience unique to its reality in history forming an
epistemic base of this study. The specific cultural and historical experiences of
the people within the larger domain of their shared worldviews of the collective
constitute the basic foundation of the knowledge system that directs the change
process of the community in the emerging context as a collective identity or
political community. Thus, the epistemological premise of the study is collective
in nature. The lived cultural and historical experiences of the people as closely
shaped by the context and processes become the basic premise on which the
collective relates with the state and among themselves (intra and inter) in time
and place. It focuses on the organic strength of the community to act and engage
with changes through its own system of knowledge and understanding. Thus, the
community under study is referred to as an epistemological community in this study.

The study is anchored broadly within a holistic approach and widens itself for an analytical description taking into consideration the emerging context and processes vis-à-vis the multi ethnic social structure processes across tribes and ethnic groups in the state. Thus, it is a study which is based on the epistemological premise of the people, oriented as an alternative methodological premise with a historical approach. Although ethnographic in approach it lends itself to a larger analytical description of the structures and cultures of the society running across the tribes, keeping within focus the emerging socio-political context of the state and region. The study is thus diachronic and contextual wherein an orientation is made on merging into the cultural and historical reality of the people under study.

a) Sources of Data

The data of this study mainly comes from the collective memory and narratives basically as expressed in the daily common cultural experiences of the Koms. Narratives and collective memory allow the researcher to have direct access to the cultural and historical experiences of the community 'out there' (viewed as on object). In fact, the community considers that their narratives are 're-storying' and 're-living'. Thus, a collective memory and narrative on both lived and shared experiences provide an epistemic access to the daily life experiences of people under this study.

The understanding of history and experiences of people described in the study is very much part of the cultural processes which is transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition, folklores, Khovelha (cultural songs), Khovellam (cultural dance) and village customary practices. The collective memory of the elders and community are a vital source of the data. This memory holds the worldview and belief systems through which they see and interpret the daily living. Such source of data is also characterized by variety of expressions and practices across villages in the region. Hence, it was important to identify data sites across the villages in such areas as southern
(Moirang area), western (Loktak Project area), Northern (Hrnongtung area) and eastern (Nongmaiching area).

In fact, cultural practices and historical experiences are very much geopolitically situated. The concept of trans-cultural boundary within the community is conditioned by the territorial demarcations of districts boundaries. Because of such geopolitical location, they are viewed as ‘buffer tribes’ within the state and ‘frontier tribes’ within the region. Besides, each village or tribe has a political distinctiveness within itself, bounded by a political system of its own. These villages spread across districts mostly located on the peripheries of the districts which also happen to be a periphery in relation to the collective ethnic groups in the State such as Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis. Therefore, one has to identify the vital geopolitical sites such as social interaction spaces and institutions both inter and intra as they provide important source of empirical data to understand a social reality of cultural co-existence.

Besides, the community especially the educated leaders have made a number of attempts to document the historical narratives, folktales, stories, khovelha, cultural elements and khovellam which can be accessed in local print forms. Such initiative indicates the process of building political consciousness, re-affirmation of their culture and history, songs and customary practices. There are also cultural programme video recordings that provide vital data on understanding formal cultural practices across villages.

The youth and the educated leaders as vanguards of the community are also very important source of data. At present, as is also seen a similar trend across northeast region, the emerging socio-political processes and changes have a direct implication on the youth and the educated leaders including the Church leaders. This section of the society is a critical element of the community in the context of changes taking place in the state. Through their exposure to education and contact with others (culture), they have become organic leaders with vision for development and progress of their community. They stand at the forefronts of the social change process of the community, important stakeholders for the present and future. As such, this study considers this section of the society as an important source of data.
b) Sampling Processes

The study being designed on a broader understanding of ethnographic approach focused primarily on the researcher's complete merging with the field and arriving at an understanding from the reality under observation. However, considering the sparse and scattered coverage of the domain, a purposive sampling technique was used in identifying source of data. The basic units of inquiry consisted of a village, social structures, cultural and historical experiences, and political process within a collective identity consciousness of Koms and Komrem people. The village community, chiefs, elders, Church leaders, politicians, youth and other educated persons were key sample units for arriving at understanding about the community.

Taking into consideration the variations of narratives emerging across different lived experience of villages in areas such as Sagang, Tonsen Tera-Mahou, Project, Hmontung, Nongmaiching, Moirang and Chandel, the study has included narratives, cultural and historical experiences of six Kom villages (including Purum). Besides, one Koireng village, one Kharam village, one Aimol village and one Chiru village has been visited and observed to understand the intra tribe social interaction context and process.

Key educated persons (at each area sites), who are known to have an in-depth experience and knowledge about Kom (Komrem) history, culture and politics were identified across the villages. These informants became key persons for the researcher to enter the villages and the community life processes. A few of them were directly in touch with the researcher from the very beginning of the inception of the thesis. The researcher had a number of personal meetings with key informants regularly which provided a vital understanding about the community and its issues.

c) Research Methods

The primary methods used in the study are community participation, observation and in-depth interview within a broader understanding of an ethnographic approach covering description and analysis from a historical
perspective. This method taken collectively focuses from a community lived experience and perspective. Besides, giving space and voice to the smallest unit in a study of a larger society, it allows the researcher to merge and dwell upon the community and arrive at a 'grounded reality' understanding as expressed in the lived experiences of the people. The method situated the researcher towards a participatory process of field engagement. He engaged with the social phenomenon in its totality as it evolves in a history and place. Such a method falls in line with the understanding of ethnography as described in Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:1);

"We see the term as referring primarily to a particular method or sets of methods. In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions - in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research".

The fieldwork was conducted across selected villages and areas concentrating on entering into the narratives of the social phenomenon under study within the cultural and historical experiences of Komrem community. Participation, observation and in-depth interview with the help of semi-structured, unstructured interview schedule, thematic outlines and field notes were incorporated in the fieldwork process. Primary contacts were made with stakeholders of village and people - village elders, leaders of clans, youth, educated persons, religious leaders, political leaders and cultural experts.

Besides, due emphasis was made on thematic discussions with the help of the concept outline both with individuals and groups from time to time during the course of the research engagement. Basing on data generated from previous specific engagements, re-interview and discussions were conducted focusing on eliciting clarity and indepth understanding on specific objects of inquiry within the domain of the study. This method generated a common understanding of the social phenomena, especially the shared experiences, under study from the lived experience of Koms.
d) Fieldwork Processes and Observation

The actual fieldwork process of the study was carried out in the backdrop of the researcher's participant engagement. This engagement became background knowledge about the object of the study on which the basic questions of the thesis were identified and studied. It also situated the concepts and perspective of the study that oriented the fieldwork processes. The people and leaders were very supportive in the work. As observed, any activity towards research and documentation of their culture and history was considered as a vital part of their life in the present context. Thus, participant and objective (reflection) engagement with the community with specific focus on understanding the cultural and historical experiences became very meaningful and enriching.

The researcher also was able to have a direct access to the decision making process of the community at some critical events in the history of the community through involvement with some activities of the student union, village clubs, Church associations, tribe union and chiefs. As a matter of fact, the researcher had a prior experience of a village chief meeting and Komrem Church Association cum Union leaders meeting on the issue of ethnic conflict in the state in 2001. The researcher came to know about the political stand of the Komrems on ethnic conflict between Naga-Kukis and also Manipur territorial integrity in such meetings. He participated in the Platinum Jubilee Celebration of the Komrem Student Union Manipur in 2002. Besides, he also accessed all the proceedings of the two recent important meetings of the community namely Triennial Conference of Komrem Baptist Churches Association, Manipur (20th-24th January 2011) and Komrem Student Conference (21st-28th February 2011). In such important events, the researcher has been informed as well as taken into confidence as educated person of the community. As a matter of fact, the researcher is also an active member of the community in matters concerning youth leadership building programmes and village development initiatives.

Besides, he is also an active member of the social networking groups such as 'Tribal Power', 'PERC' (Peace Education and Research Centre), 'Krcfdelhi' (Komrem Church Fellowship Delhi Forum), 'Komrhem Khangther
Inloikhom' (Komrem youth forum) and 'WRD World' (inter tribe Northeast youth forum). Such social network sites provided an active forum for information, discussion and reflection among the educated youth on the daily issues of the communities in the state and region. In fact they are the emerging important social institutions for the youth where they actively come into contact, share and discuss various issues that concern their life and community such as career, culture, religion and politics.

As a methodological consideration, it is also important to re-state here that the period of the study witnessed critical political events in the state that had a deep impact on the community under study such as a heightened ethnic assertion processes, with diverse claims, in the aftermath of the ethnic conflict and violence that broke out between Nagas and Kukis, and Paites and Kukis (hill tribes) in 1990s. This ethnic violence was followed by a resurgence of an intense political issue on state territorial integrity movement in 2001 when Government of India declared ceasefire with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), covering all 'Naga inhabited areas'. The declaration ignited a confrontation between the Meitei society (also those in favor of Manipur integrity), state and the Nagas. This event in fact had its logical extension to the political uprising in the state at the event of the proposed Naga national leader, Mr. Thuingaleng Muivah visit of his village, Somdal in Ukhrul district (as approved by the Home Ministry) at the time of the fieldwork engagement. This political issue was further made complex as Government of Manipur declared to conduct elections of the hill area district councils after a gap of about twenty-eight years (1973-2010) based on amendment of the District Council Act, 2008. As observed during the fieldwork, the amended legislation on ADC was not accepted by majority of tribal people's organizations including All Tribal Student Union (ATSUM) and United Naga Council (UNC) which resulted into a sensitive political confrontation between tribes and state. This critical period had its culmination in the 'Mao Gate incident' on 6th May 2010 where Mr. Muivah, who was moving towards Manipur on his way to his village from Nagaland was prevented by the Manipur state police at the Moa Gate, an only entry gate to Manipur from Nagaland on National Highway No. 39. The people supporting Muivah were in peaceful march on which the police used force to suppress the people and in the process two Naga youth were shot dead. This
event was subsequently followed by an economic blockade for more than three months imposed by the Nagas on the National Highway, the only viable road connection between Manipur and the rest at that time. Since this event the UNC declared that it has severed all ties with Manipur Government and initiated a demand for ‘alternative administrative set up’ in the Naga inhabited districts in Manipur which generated a sense of ‘political unrest’ among people at the time of the fieldwork. This interim period also witnessed concomitant assertions by tribes of the hill areas on issues such as customary rights to land and resources, homeland and even a tribal state. Thus, one could observe that the community under study was going through a critical period in the history during the time of the fieldwork. In fact, the changes emerging within Komrem Church Association and Tribe Union should be understood in this historical background. As for instance, Koi reng tribe broke away from Komrem in 1998 to form their own tribe association and Union as followed by the Aimols in 2010 and Chirus in 2011.

The intervening historical period also witnessed various local political developments within the community as an impact of the larger ethnic assertions in the region. In one such process, the murder of a Kom village chief of Thayong Kom village in 2010 is a critical event in the history of the tribe. This event further clarified the position of the tribe as distinct political unit negotiating for a ‘peaceful co-existence’ in the state context. It allowed them to raise their voice of dissent towards exclusive politics of the larger tribes and re-affirmation of a respect for every tribe and ethnic group. This event had a fair coverage across local and national media.

Therefore, the emerging identity questions, tensions, discussion, debates and changes in the Komrem were observed as located in the larger political process emerging in the context. In fact, by the time this thesis was registered the issue of ethnic identity and politicization of ethnicity has acquired a complex dimension as expressed in multiple assertions and movements around the concept of tribe, ethnicity and nationality in the state. As such, one could see the impact of such process among people expressed in their social interaction process where identification by ethnic group affiliation became more important than citizenship. This situation is clearly described by one of the Kom youths who said, “When it comes to the issue of Naga and Kuki, I feel like cursing God
or even myself as to why I was born in Manipur. My colleagues or every guy I meet, they first used to ask me whether I belong to Naga or Kuki. So, I wish I don't know who are these so called Naga or Kuki". In such context the numerically small tribes were in tremendous political pressures which gave rise to a social phenomenon that could be described as 'identity oscillation' (also mentioned in Leach, 1953) among people in this domain under study.

The actual fieldwork process and visit of the field sites was carried out in three phases. The first phase fieldwork process was conducted during July-August in 2009, and the second phase was carried out between August to November in 2010 and the third phase was carried out from September to November 2011. The second phase was planned from May. But due to the political problem that emerged during the proposed visit of Muivah to his village and the subsequent blockade of all the links to Imphal and vice versa, the fieldwork was rescheduled for August. The first period of the fieldwork provided an initial introduction of the researcher to the Komrem people, a familiarization stage of the fieldwork process within the researcher-researched relationship. This phase marked the entry of the researcher to the field as a researcher, a participant, merging into the field reality of cultural and historical experiences as 'an insider'. The engagement generated an insightful understanding about the community besides getting hands on access to certain vital local document on matters concerning the researched. During this time, the researcher sketched out and identified the community geopolitical setting in the region and established a direct as well as indirect connection between himself and the community. The basic cultural practices and historical narratives were identified and observed. The engagement at this level focused mainly at generating the first level of understanding about the community as expressed in various historical and cultural narratives available in the folklores, khovelha, cultural dance, cultural elements, oral history of their encounter and conflicts with the other tribes. Through an engagement with field notes the theme and objects of inquiry were located and strengthened. As a result a clear line of inquiry emerged gradually. Field notes were taken and discussed and reflected upon through the help of key persons with the ultimate aim of arriving at thematic outlines for in-depth participation, observation and interview. At this stage the researcher was able to
identify data sources and narratives available at different geopolitical, cultural and historical locations of the community.

The second phase of the data collection process focused on an intensive participation, observation and interview of the community at different villages. The researcher traveled widely across the villages situated in the south, north, east and west of the state and participated in the lives of the people. In particular, he dwelt upon the village elders and had in-depth personal interviews with them. He also had discussions with certain educated leaders on themes of origin, clan lineage, identity consciousness and political process. Narratives of their history and culture existing with variation of expressions across the north and the south villages in forms such as songs and dance were captured and reviewed through the help of the field notes and the voice recorder. Some of the most important narratives on the history and culture were captured from the memory of the elders of the villages. Besides, educated leaders of the community who were actively involved at this time either on religious, social and political matters were also interviewed. This stage was also further augmented by thematic discussions with the identified educated leaders (including village, Union and Church leaders) and youth (including Student Union leaders) of the community to strengthen the understanding of narratives, cultural practice, consciousness and political mobilization, and community development and prosperity. The last phase of the data collection focused on arriving at an overarching understanding of the community: their culture and political perspective. The discussion and understanding was enhanced through a publication of Koms (Komrem) political perspective entitled, “Situating Koms (Komrem) Narrative in Manipur” (www.Kanglaonline.com, dated 19th August 2011 and www.ifp.co.in, dated 19th October, 2011) and the subsequent discussions thereafter.

On the whole, the fieldwork focused on understanding the social and political structures of the Koms with specific attention to understanding the linkages between these two elements. Hence, the domain of the fieldwork engagement consists of a composite whole engulfed within the historical and cultural process in the context of the state. Such a social phenomenon is in a constant process of change within the influence of the larger political process in the state in relation to the generic tribe movements or ethnonational movements.
such as Nagas, Kukis and Meiteis. Therefore, the reality has to be captured at various context and history in the community.

In the proceeding fieldwork engagement on accessing the reality of the community through community memory, experiences and narratives of the people, the researcher came to realize that there are various narratives of the people such as Khurpui narrative (origin theory), clan genealogy, the worldview, their cultural practices and their lived experience over period of history and place. They were mainly lived through oral stories, songs, dance of the community, folklores, customs and traditions and collective memory of the people at the village sites. The researcher observed that such cultural expressions are marked with some variations across the geopolitical context of the villages. As a matter of fact, the people generally refer to two types of narratives namely narratives of the south (Dapram) and narratives of the north (Sakram). Such a variation in expression of narratives is a common characteristic feature of a segmented society such as tribes. This variation in fact also gets expression in the language (dialects) across villages. It is a characteristic feature of an oral culture embedded within the process of cultural transmission and practice. However, there are a few documentations (in local language) of narratives in small booklet publications, which were used as important means for verification and comparative understanding of the narratives accessed from the elders and community memory.

It was also observed that there are various levels in which the individuals of the community experience and perceive the emerging changes as Koms. As for instance, with regard to the cultural elements it was easy to identify the credible elders in the villages who are known by the people. The village people are usually bonded on common worldview and lived experiences in a village and tribe context. However, if one goes out of the context of a Kom village, one comes into the realm of the present reality as vividly experienced and expressed in the daily lives of the people, youth, educated and community leaders. The researcher encountered with such varied experiences and perceptions of the community at these places. He observed that even among the educated there was variation of experiences and understanding as influenced by the individual’s political orientations and consciousness underscoring 'shared boundaries and
contested terrains' within the community in the present context. For instance, the experience and perception of the youth with progressive ideas are very much different from the regular Church going youth. But in general every youth goes through a process of consciousness about his or her identity and usually raises multiple questions about his/her culture and identity in the present time.

Over and above, as a methodological consideration, the fieldwork process approached Koms as a tribal society in a political unit of a village set up within the state. An attempt was made to understand the distinct social structure as expressed at the various villages. The secondary documents available also clearly indicate the geopolitical context of the variety of cultural processes, the histories of the past, cultural and traditional knowledge. However, it was realized that entry into the sphere of their worldviews, norms and belief systems was mainly possible through collective memory of the elders of the village. This understanding was arrived based on the researcher's prior subjective experience and reflection as being a person of the community. However, the researcher with a limited knowledge and experience about them did an in-depth review of the various narratives about the world view and the history still very vividly existing in the collective memory of the village elders across the areas known to the Koms as Moirang area (old kingdom), the Project (the present villages near the Loktak Hydel project), the Hmongtung area (northern part of the area now coming in the Ichum and Saikur area) and the Nongmaiching area.

Many of the educated individuals of the community who are employed are also easily available in Imphal city. Some of them in fact have lands in the city and are settled. Besides, a majority of the youth are found in the city for education. However, fieldwork in the village gives a real picture about the reality of the tribes. All the villages are connected to the city through private local bus lying within the range of twenty to forty kilometers from the city, Imphal. Although, the distance of the villages from Imphal is comparatively less, however, (on an average) it would take at least two to three hours to reach the villages by local bus. The village buses come to the city by morning around 9am and would leave for the villages by evening around 2pm. In fact, cycles and two-wheelers are alternatives providing faster and better means of conveyance of the villagers for those who are able to afford them.
Imphal is the only city in the state with few small towns. Some of the small towns accessible to Koms are Moirang Bazar, Bishempur Bazar, Kangpokpi, Ningthoukhong, Churachandpur and Chandel. Therefore, all administrative, economic, medical, education and political activities are concentrated in Imphal city. The common villagers come to the city mainly for economic activities. In fact, in recent times all political activities of the Komrems have been re-centered in Imphal, also called greater Imphal. The Komrem Secretariat of KRBCA (Komrem Baptist Church Association), Grace Academy School and a Church have been established for the community in Imphal. There is a ‘Komrem Land colony’ (known as KR Land) established near the Palace Gate in Imphal where the Kornrem Union office is situated. Lately, some localities of tribes have also come up in Imphal area such as Koireng colony, Tarung, Nagaram and Laimanai. Besides, many employees working in the government sector are settled temporarily at the Government quarter at Langol Game Village. As such, Imphal has become a central place for all major activities of the people.

Besides the constraints on fieldwork arising due to the volatile political situation of the state which are expressed in frequent bands and blockades, it was a great challenge for the researcher to engage with the society with multi identity processes. In fact, at present, every tribe in the state and region is conscious about its culture and politics in the state. The educated leaders and the youth are constantly involved in identity construction and mobilization process. Research and documentation about their tribes are closely monitored by the tribes concerned so that their perspective and political processes are not fragmented by research activities. The researcher therefore had to take formal permissions from the authority concerned to engage with the community. Besides, it is made clear that the data and knowledge generated in the process would be used only for the benefit of the community politically and culturally.

5. The Scope and Relevance

In general, this study gives direction towards understanding the dynamic ethnic reality in the state context. It provides one perspective to understanding
the intrinsic linkages between the state process and the emergence of the multiple ethnic, identity consciousness and mobilization processes in the region. The present dynamic reality of identity, tribe and ethnicity is very much the product of the emerging socio political processes as seen in the context of the northeast. In fact, as seen in reality, there is a constant process of interaction, confrontations and tensions between the concomitant boundaries of state and the multi ethnic social structures having relatively an inclusive social fabric in a principle of co-existence. The specific area of focus referred in the study is the hill areas (tribal areas) of the northeast, in general and Manipur, in particular. This area as a policy has been categorised as 'excluded area': un-surveyed and una-dministered. In such context, the state is basically described as an overarching political structure of 'culturally embedded' (as described in Biswas, 2000) pre-state societies who have distinct history, culture and specific political system. Such a reality and context, although very different from the western context of modern state, constantly generates an inherent discussion about how such realities in this context constantly negotiate for a context specific democratic state structure and vice versa.

The study situates identity and ethnicity processes in the specific context of Manipur, a state culturally diverse and politically very intense, in 'northeast' region of India. The existence of multiplicity of ethnic identity articulations in the state and its dynamic processes is far more unique and complex as a social and political phenomenon in the whole of the region. For instance, the situation of ethnic processes in the state such as Nagalim, Kukiland and tribal state have far reaching implication across the states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal, Assam and even Myanmar. In fact, dynamic process of identity and ethnicity generated in the socio political processes of Nagas, Kukis, tribes and Meiteis is an intertwined structural reality which has its genealogical root in Manipur. Therefore, the local ethnic reality in the state constitutes a microcosm of ethnic reality in the region, in general.

The study also further highlights an understanding about culture, politics and tribal society within state and region from the perspective of a numerically less significant and yet culturally, and politically distinct entities which many a time has not been perceived as significant, consciously or unconsciously within
the current policy, politics and academic engagement. In this context 'distinctiveness of culture' takes precedence over 'size' and 'status' in ethnic group identification (as also observed in Phadnis, 1989). The political process of the state are largely influenced by the perspective of numerically larger and politically well anchored ethnic groups in the state. Therefore, smaller entities are often ethnically disadvantaged (also identified in Oommen, 1990) and thus likely to be appropriated by dominant group politics in the context of a democratic system.

Primarily, this study has a direct implication on Koms (Komrems) in Manipur. It provides a pioneering academic discussion to understand the multi layered cultural identities in the state based on the lived experience of Koms, a culture-political entity. Koms as study unit represents the indigenous tribes of Manipur who occupy an important geopolitical space as scheduled tribes in the social structure of the state and the region. The term 'indigenous' in this context is understood 'in the normative sense to cover people who feel rooted in their surroundings, entertain a custodial sense about their territory and resources, are bound together primarily through moral bindings and entertain a sense of reciprocity and mutuality reinforced by egalitarian ethos' (as described in Burman, 2001). In their context, the political negotiation processes for a space of their social and political structure within larger social structure of the state becomes not only a mere pro-active self identification but a resistance to forceful categorization, or co-option by the larger identities. As has been observed in earlier studies (Kabui, 1985 and Kamkhenthang, 1988), the reality of the numerically small tribes such as Anals and Paites in multi ethnic state goes through various identity processes of self ascriptions and categorization also referred as 'infra-nationalism' and 'proto-nationalism'. In such a context, Koms as a 'Komrem people' become a generic tribe unit of study which situates the understanding of the state and society from the perspective and experiential reality of the smallest section of a society in the state and region. Given the context, therefore, an objective inquiry and understanding of the process of identity and ethnicity of Koms and Komrem people creates a critical academic space in the multiethnic socio-political reality of Manipur State.
Moreover, the study also strongly relocates and affirms the present reality of the Koms as Komrems; their identity, community and social organization process. This repositioning is primarily constructed from a common cultural and historical experience of Koms and Komrem people including erstwhile kindred tribes such as Koireng, Aimol, Purum, Kharam, Kom and Chiru taking into consideration the changes taking place within the community. However, in the pursuit of reaffirming the Koms and Komrem peoplehood, change process within the community is taken as a historical fact. Nevertheless, Komrem is a generic tribe name and mother organization where Koms as Komrems still stand by this community ascription and is recognized by other ethnic groups in the state.

Besides, Komrem, as a political community, is positioned here within the understanding of a shared cultural and historical experience as described in segmented and village based social structure consisting of kindred tribes. Over a period of history, such village segmented system has given rise to distinct village units and tribes. The newer development in the community has its root in the change process in the state. As a matter of fact, the community leaders in the initial stage of the state were unable to perceive themselves beyond state provisions of welfare, protection and development for scheduled tribes. Therefore, scheduling themselves was considered means for community upliftment through access to various government welfare services such as reservation for education and job opportunities.

In specifics, the study locates the experience of Koms within the historical context spanning across the pre-Colonial to post independence state context. The British contact is a critical period in the study. In particular, the emergence of the nation states (including India), coming of education and Christianity in the northeast region inspired and groomed local leaders towards socio religious and political mobilization and organization along their cultural identity. This process over a period became an ethnic based people's movement and got institutionalized through modern institution of religion and tribe union in the 1950s. However, change within the community came with the emergence of multiple people identity, generic ethnic assertions. One of such movements is the Naga national movement which dates back to the formation of Naga Club in
1918. Besides, the Mizoram and Meitei national movements have historical roots since this time. The emergence of the Manipur state, Nagaland and Mizoram in this process is very crucial to the community.

Therefore, the overall scope of study encompasses understanding and describing a single cultural group, Korns, from a viewpoint of historical approach to application of conceptualization on identities and ethnicity in a multi ethnic context with emphasis on a linkage between ethnography and political process - from 'tribe to ethnicity'. It is a micro study focusing on basic unit of a section of the society and throws insights and understanding of the ethnic life world in state and northeast region of India.

6. Challenges and Limitations

This study, in specifics, is limited to the people who share Kom and Komrem collective consciousness, a generic tribe mobilization of the present time in the state. Although, the study has been conducted within a broader understanding of ethnographic description and analysis, it is still primarily bounded within the limits of a cultural and territorial boundary of the tribe under study. Hence, the limitation of this study is a logical outcome of the very nature of the domain under focus within the changes taking place in the community. In fact, the study locates itself basically on the Kom and Purum, subtribes who still share a common socio-religious and socio political social organization as people. Thus, the thesis recognizes changes taking place in the recent times among them as progressive. In fact, as viewed from Koms, 'Komrem is a mother social and religious organization'. At the same time, the tensions and fears generated by change process within the community usually described by many as 'disintegration of Komrem community' has been understood analytically within a historical process. However, in the present circumstance especially at the time of the study, it is politically very sensitive to discuss about the interface between the Koms and other kindred tribes who have moved on to form their own religious and political organizations taking into consideration the emergence of distinct identity and ethnicity mobilization process among them in the state. Thus, the shared cultural and historical experiences of the kindred tribes are today in a process of renewed interpretation and construction as commonly
anchored by the emerging leaders of Koms setting a new trend in narratives of tribes along cultural practices and historical experiences in the state.

7. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured considering the themes of inquiry of the study. The first chapter gives a descriptive analysis of the context of the study focusing on the dynamic multi-ethnic reality within the context from a historical perspective. Identity dynamics within a change process is described with a clear focus on the emergence of specific or local identity and ethnicity processes, assertions and resistance in the region. As such, the chapter locates ethnic processes as a product of the larger political, social and economic processes which directly shapes the identities, social structure, community institutions and state. Within a modern historical context, the colonial era and the sub-sequential emergence of the state in the region marked the immediate past which initiated a modern history and politics of the ethnic identity as pre-state societies vis-a-vis nation state processes. Such historical process generated diverse social impacts on the tribes as they come into direct relation with the external change processes in the context. The second chapter situates the basic concepts, approaches and perspectives from a methodological point of view. The concept of tribe, identity and ethnicity which definitely are exogenous concepts have been reviewed in an attempt to situate contexts, methods and perspective in the larger political and ideological underpinnings which govern them. Therefore, the chapter situates the concepts and builds a conceptual frame of understanding identity, tribe and ethnicity vis-à-vis the perspective and concepts within the context.

The third chapter engages with the methodology of the study. Located within the broader understanding of ethnography, the chapter situates the rationale and the basic methodological considerations of the study. Taking the worldview, beliefs, culture and history of the people as an ontological premise, the community experiences and knowledge system become a primary epistemological premise of the study. Thus, it is an alternative methodology which focuses on the lived experience expressed in people’s narratives and cultural practices.
The fourth chapter engages with Koms: people's narratives and cultural practices as a lived history. Taking an ethnographic approach it dwells into the worldview, cultures and history of the people and relocates itself in relation to social interaction processes in an ethnic life world context of the state. It highlights the ethnographic narratives of the people and moves further covering description and analysis within a historical approach. The fifth chapter elucidates the contemporary Kom experience and the emerging Komrem political needs and aspirations in the state context. The community mobilization and reorganizations processes within Komrem collective are described within the larger context of the socio political changes taking place in the state and region. On the whole, the chapter highlights an understanding of relationship between culture, identity and political processes as viewed from Koms (Komrem) experience.

The concluding chapter encapsulates an overall descriptive analysis of the thesis keeping the Khurpui (Kom) experience as the central theme. Khurpui experience in this chapter refers to the lived experience of Koms. This lived experience has a context, and the two are viewed as mutually influencing each other. Further, in the understanding of the khurpui experience within the state context, an emphasis is made on understanding culture and politics viewed from the perspective of the Khurpui experience. In general the chapter gives insight into state circumstances and the emergence of political needs, aspiration and mobilization processes among tribal areas and societies in the present context.