WHAT IS ETHNICITY?

In recent time, ethnicity is one of the most widely discussed topics in every sphere of life. It has entered into discussion in the day to day life of the people. In academics also, the word is being discussed and widely used by scholars from the various fields of social science and humanities. One can also hear of ‘everyday ethnicities’. The uncertainty in meaning and the definition of the term is another important feature of ethnicity. The context of the society where it is being studied is one of the important points to be considered always. The term has a very recent origin and has come into existence mainly from the experience of the immigration problem in United States of America. The term ethnicity as used by historians to mean “the character or quality of an ethnic group” is of recent origin, first appearing in the 1972 supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary. A more extended definition was given in the 1973 American Heritage Dictionary. The Oxford English Dictionary mentions the noun form of the word as coined by David Riesman in 1953. However, the adjectival form ethnic is somewhat older, and the root word is ancient; in Greek ethnos means culturally backward or pagan. (Abrahams 2005:177). According to Roger D. Abrahams, “It was proposed during the 1950s by voices representing the

party of toleration and assimilation when the specter of genocide hovered over
all discussions of stereotyping." (Ibid : 177). The word was also used by the
authors Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in their most famous
book Beyond the Melting pot published in 1963. Werner Sollors has traced the
history of the word to the 1940s and 1950s but its use is relatively recent (Malpezzi
2006:2). The intellectual history of the term, “ethnicity” is relatively short: prior
to the 1970s there was little mention of it in anthropological literature and
textbooks contained no definitions of the term (Cohen 1978:380). But having
such a recent origin, the term has now become a very important topic of
discussions all over the world. Generally, issues like the influx of immigrants to
a country, migration to a place and sometimes both give rise to the feeling of
ethnicity among various ethnic group. Immigration is always a burning issue in
the United States of America. The heterogeneous population of this land and
the great ethnic diversity has given rise to the question of ethnicity. When one
looks at the History of the United States of America, the noticeable factor is the
immigration problem over the years. The huge influx of the people especially
in the mid 19th century has completely changed the social, economic and the
political situation of the country. Moreover, there was the problem of the
migration of the people to the cities. These groups despite of being away from
home could not forget their old home memories. There was the trend of
contributing into the dominant American culture. The young generations of the
immigration groups did not have such a strong attachment to their old home
cultures. Under these circumstances, the ideology of ethnicity has grown among
them. Many scholars have tried to focus attention along this line. Whatever the
origin, the term has been gaining its importance in all the societies of the world
today. After 35 years of the Book, Beyond the Melting Pot, Nathan Glazer has
expressed that the word is becoming more and more important day by day and a similar situation of immigration still prevails in America (Glazer 2000:270). The word ethnicity is directly related with the phrase ‘ethnic group’. Ethnicity is the quality of belonging to an ethnic group. However, the question of what is an ethnic group as opposed to any other kind of group is one which permits no simple answer.\(^2\) To understand ethnicity, one has to understand the phrase ethnic group. But this phrase is so blurred and unclear that it is impossible to define the term ethnicity. According to Alan Dundes, “I am not the first to complain about the fuzziness of the conceptualization of ethnicity, Isaacs (1975:30) jokingly refers to the snowman of ethnicity, whose footprints have been around us for so long but which has been so curiously difficult for academic hunters to track down.” (Dundes 1989:1). Thus, he stresses the word ‘folk’ in lieu of the term ethnic group. Let us discuss the concept of ethnic group as well as the concept folk for the purpose of understanding the concept of ethnicity in different circumstances.

**Ethnic group**

Definitions of ethnic groups in these socio-historic studies have, by and large based upon the notion that such groups could be differentiated on the basis of a common ancestry and a common culture (Stern 1977 : 8-9). Many scholars have said this common ancestry or a common culture can be assumed or may be real. The sense of belonging to an ethnic group by its members is an important characteristic to be noticed. This characteristics are very important to delineate the term ethnic group. However, nothing can be said specifically about this strong sense of the belonging of each group members. The ethnic group also has very recent use. Prior to mid 1950s, the word was rarely used in

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^2. It is said by Lincoln Allison.
anthropology and it came into use as a substitute for the word "race" and "tribe" and as a synonym for "cultural group." (Zenner 1996:393) The word is being derived from the Greek word ethnos, which can be translated as a people or a nation (Stone & Piya 2007:1457). The members definitely, talk about some sort of common things shared by all of them. In a complex society, race is generally used to refer to the subgroups. Every society defines races differently. But it is useful to call such groups as ethnic groups, which implies a sociological or cultural definition. (Jolly & Plog 1987:482) Each tries to also emphasize the point that in mixed societies physical traits are used as a label or badges to show their membership. An ethnic group is a group of humans whose membership identify with each other, through a common heritage that is real or assumed. This shared heritage may be based upon putative common ancestry, history, kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance.\textsuperscript{3} In this definition too, the word putative makes the concept more vague. The anthropologists as Clifford J. Jolly and Fred Plog have not said anything about the existence or the non existence of the physical traits, which they use to define the ethnic group (Jolly, Plog 1987:482). According to Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, “a group of people of the same race or nationality who share a common and distinct culture are called ethnics.” The word, “ethnic” can be found only in the latest subscription of the OXFORD ONLINE DICTIONARY. According to it, the adjective of the word is given as pertaining to nations not Christian or Jewish; Gentile, heathen, pagan. Another meaning is given as pertaining to race; peculiar to a race or nation; ethnological. Also, pertaining to or having common racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics, esp. designating a racial or other group within a larger system; hence (U.S. colloq), foreign, exotic. The noun of

\textsuperscript{3} Wikipedia.
the word is given as one who is not a Christian or a Jew; a Gentile, heathen, pagan. These are a group of people who set themselves apart and are set apart from other groups whom they interact or coexist in terms of some distinctive criteria as linguistic, racial or social (Smith: 1990:95). Earlier, the notion of the tribes was used mainly in anthropology to study a social group. The concept of the tribes was beginning to be replaced by, less embarrassingly colonial ethnic group and this paradigm shift within Social Anthropology came into being from the study of the tribal society to the social constructionist model of ethnic groups from the famous publication of *Ethnic groups and Boundaries* by Fredrik Barth (Jenkins 1997:17). However the presumptions were not changed. Thus, for understanding ethnic group, the description used by Fredrik Barth is indeed very important. The primary emphasis given by Barth is that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristics of organizing interaction between people (Barth 1970:10). Barth mainly define the ethnic group by considering the four characteristics as pointed out by Raoul Naroll in his publication *Ethnic unit classification, Current Anthropology* (1964). This fact has been mentioned by many other scholars. According to Fredrik Barth (Ibid : 10-11), Raoll Naroll considers an ethnic group to be a population with the following characteristics:

(a) Is largely biologically self- perpetuating
(b) Shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms.
(c) Makes up a field of communication and interaction
(d) Has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.

4. Scholars like Fredrik Barth, Stephen Stern etc.
Barth although not disagrees with the substance of these characteristics, still he says that it has made difficult for understanding the society and culture. Also, it can make us to think an ethnic group to be something which develops these characteristics in isolation and the boundary maintenance among them is easy with the above characteristics (Ibid: 11). Barth try to focus on ethnic boundaries to be very important criteria for categorizing an ethnic group. He says that sharing of a common culture to be just considered as an implication or result. He looks at an ethnic group as an cultural bearing unit, ethnic group as organizational type and finally conclude that the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff what it encloses (Ibid: 11-15). These boundaries to be emphasized must be the social boundaries and its maintenance is indeed a complex phenomenon. These ethnic boundaries may be socially constructed. Cornell accepts the importance of this ethnic boundaries but he cautions the field against giving short shift to what goes on within those boundaries-the shared cultural content of ethnicity (Sanders 2002:329).

Richard Jenkins observes:

In addition as Ronald Cohen pointed out (1978:384), while the earliest anthropological notions of ethnic groups still typically implied that such groups were isolated, primitive-atavistic, or non western, the shift of emphasis signaled by Ethnic Groups and Boundaries involved fundamental changes in anthropological perspectives from a western interest in the uncivilized peoples of the colonies and ex-colonies, to a more equitable concern with the heterogeneity of all societies (Jenkins:1997:18).

This is indeed a very interesting remark as the scholars now began to look the ethnic groups in all the plural societies all over the world. In recent time, the word is being extensively used and studied by the Scholars of the various discipline of Social Science and Humanities. The idea of the ethnic
group as given by Fredrik Barth has a wide application in the modern time and some countries have employed these criteria to distinguish the aboriginal communities. One of the most important modern definitions of the ethnic group is being given by the Sociologist Max Weber. He defined it as, “human groups (other than kinship groups) which cherish a belief in their common origins of such a kind that it provides the basis for the creation of a community” (Stone & Piya 2007:1457). According to Richard Jenkins, “An ethnic group is based on this view, on the belief shared by its members that, however distantly, they are of common descent” (1998:7-8). This definition also seems to be very distinct and which speaks of a separate community. But nothing has been said about the criteria as boundaries which were proposed by Fredrik Barth. Two criteria can be emphasized while defining the ethnic groups: cultural and the geographical elements. The first one is a social construction involving insiders and the outsiders who identifies differences in cultural beliefs and practices. The second element leads to the question of the social origins that are foreign to the host society (Sanders 2002:327). In this case, he emphasize on the point that the insiders and outsiders have no similar opinion regarding the cultural attributes which they use to distinguish. Moreover, regarding the geographical element, the native born ethnic groups are sometimes identified by the outsiders rather and the sometimes the in-group members identify themselves.

Ethnic group is comparable with Nation but only difference is that the ethnic group is more narrowly defined than Nation (Kellas 1998:5). According to him although, ethnic group are differentiated from the nation on many groups, still in contemporary politics, they are just like quasi national kind of minority group which has not just achieved the status of a nation (Ibid:5). It is indeed an important remark although it does not seem to be true in all context and
circumstances. In many cases, the question of politics is always there in the formation and the demarcation of the ethnic groups. There can be a relationship between nations and ethnic groups which is not found in other forms of collective cultural identities. Historically, also it has been seen that a large number ethnic communities has transformed itself into nations (McLemore; Romo; Baker 2001:18). Thus, nations and the ethnic groups can be comparable terms. The ethnic groups in India have multidimensional identity as language, caste, religion, region and race. The constitution of India has categorized two distinct categories as the Scheduled caste and scheduled tribes⁵, but there are numerous ethnic groups which are outside this category based on different identity markers. There are also many groups which are struggling to get that status in India. The ethnic groups in India are large due to its huge diverse population. The claiming of being an indigenous is another important question for many of these groups. All the groups are distinct category and trying to maintain a distance from each other. In the State of Assam (India) the word tribal and ethnic group are seen to be used one instead of the other. But there are many groups who are not tribal or who has not got the constitutional status as tribal. Thus, the term ethnic group can be used for all group or the communities of the region (Boro 2007: 38). While compiling the Harvard Encyclopedia of American ethnic groups, the committee agrees that the definition of the ethnic group is flexible and pragmatic (Thern Strom 1980 : V). They have mentioned some characteristics, which also vary considerably. These are as follows:

1) Common geographic origin
2) Migratory status
3) Race
4) Language or dialect

⁵. They constitute over 24% of India's population.
5) Religious faith or faiths
6) Ties that transcend kinship, neighbourhood, and community boundaries
7) Shared traditions, values, and symbols
8) Literature, folklore and music
9) Food preferences
10) Settlement and employment patterns
11) Special interest in regard to politics in the homeland and in the United States
12) Institution that especially serve and maintain the group
13) The internal sense of distinctiveness
14) An external perception of distinctiveness.

Although the above criteria are meant for the United States of America, one can find some characteristics in categorizing the ethnic groups in different parts of the world. The criteria as the common geographic origin, community boundaries, folklore, shared traditions, religion, language etc can be indeed very important criteria. Let us also consider the definition used by Eliott Oring for discussing the ethnic groups. Eliott Oring observes:

As currently conceptualized members of an ethnic group, it is claimed, share and identify with a historically derived cultural traditions or style, which may be composed of both explicit behavioural features as well as implicit ideas, values, and attitudes. Furthermore, membership in an ethnic group is acquired primarily by descent. Finally, an ethnic group is conceived as part of a large social system rather than independent and self sufficient (Oring 1986:24).

The various Characteristics of Ethnic Groups can be that they usually control a territory. Their offspring may perpetuate their heritage. They have
ethnic institutions and the individuals need to identify clearly with the heritage and culture of the group.\(^6\)

Thus to define an ethnic group, it can be assumed that these are a distinct entity of people with some physical traits which they believe to be their own. These can be common ancestry, history, shared belief, language, race etc. Above all the question of boundary maintenance is very important. These boundaries are social boundaries and can be real or constructed. Another important factor is that the members of a group recognize themselves as different from others and others also recognize the group existing in the society.

**Folk**

Due to unclearity and limitations in understanding the concept of ethnic group, scholars like Alan Dundes have argued that the use of the word folk will help to remove some of these problems. Folk is not a term to be understood as a synonym for peasant (as it was in the nineteenth century), and also it is not limited to one stratum of the society. It should not be considered as the *vulgus in populo*, or the lower class. Nor is it the illiterate in a literate society. (Dundes 1989:11). According to Alan Dundes, “Folk can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language or religion—what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory, a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals” (Ibid: 11). So, any number of people can constitute a folk. It can be as large as possible. The group members identify themselves with some common tradition and there must be some common linking factor among them, which may be religion, language or

\(^6\) Wikipedia.
whatever. A folk can be a type of ethnic group but not only the one (Ibid: 11). The concept of folk has been changed from its earlier understanding. It is indeed very important to see that folklore can be seen among all types of the group formed, for whatever reason. It is no longer considered as the European peasant or something like illiterate in a literate society. It is also no longer thought to be as a group of the lowest stratum of the society. Let us consider some earlier connotations of the term folk identified by Åke Hultkranz (1960):

1. Folk refers to nation
2. Folk designates the lower stratum
3. Folk refers to an old fashioned segment within a complex civilization
4. Folk labels the basic culture – carrying social stratum within a complex society.
5. Folk denotes a social group connected by a common tradition and a peculiar feeling of communion, the basis of which is a common historical background.

Again, Alan Dundes has argued that in nineteenth century, folk was defined by the scholars as something illiterate, rural and of the lower society in contrast to the civilized or elite society. But he tried to clear the point that folk should not be understood as peasant, illiterate and someone with opposition to something. And he clarified the point and redefines the term (Dundes 1980: 3-19). There is no fear of the disappearance of the term folk with the advancement of the society. Folk is an independent entity and one can see members of the modern society as members of different folk groups. In folkloristic study, considering an ethnic group as folk in the modern sense seems to have great use. There were four general theories given by the past scholars regarding folk. These are the communal theory, the survivals theory, the theory of gesunkenes-
*Kulturgut* (German for debased elements of culture) and theory of individual origins and communal re-creation. The last one is probably accepted by most of the modern folklorist (Brunvand 1998:50). This theory explains that folklore is invented by the single inventor living in any level of society but that each item was repeatedly revised (or recreated) as it was transmitted by word of mouth (Ibid). However, there is obvious difficulty in using the term folk also. Ben Amos defined folklore as “artistic communication in small groups” with an intention to overcome some of the difficulties inherent in the notion of folk. The classist, racist and antimodern connotations of folk were all problematic in American context; also the word was tied to an old paradigm that understood the people as bearers, not makers of tradition (Noyes 2003:11).

In case of India, the groups have different names. There are the constitutional status for some groups as Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. Although, the term ethnic group is often used but there is not any official or standardized connotation. It is indeed better to call the groups as folk for the folkloristic study in India. Many a time the folklorist categorizes the ethnic groups as the folk groups in their studies. Thus, the word folk has great implications in lieu of the term ethnic group.

**ETHNICITY DEFINED**

Ethnicity is an ideology which is based on the sense of the ethnic identity. The ethnic identity is related to the ethnic group. Thus, ethnicity can be understood only with relationship to the ethnic groups. It is not easy to give any standardized definition of the term ethnicity. It is very situational and the context always plays the important role. It can be assumed as the feelings and the relevant actions which the group members take due to the membership in a particular ethnic group. The sense of the ethnic identity can add to the actions.
According to Elliot Oring, "Ethnic Identity, we might add, is the intellectual and emotional sense that an individual has of his relationship to the behaviors, ideas and values of an ethnic group. And by ethnicity we simply mean any speech, thought, or action based upon this sense of identity." (Oring 1986:24). It refers to that which pertains to, or belongs to, an ethnic group and the study of ethnic groups and ethnic relations. Another important thing to be considered is how one see oneself and being seen by others as a part of a group on the basis of presumed ancestry and sharing a common destiny with others on the basis of this background (Zenner 1996:393). The context in which ethnicity gained prominence in academic and critical discourse is different in different societies. The basic reasons for ethnicity in the western countries are not similar with the South Asian countries as India. The economic, political, social factors are not at all similar in different parts of the world. It is an important feature of the plural and the heterogeneous society. The term ethnicity can be considered from different angles, in order to understand the term clearly. Many scholars have dealt with the term differently. It is inherited due to one's membership in any type of group. Basically, these groups are understood as the ethnic group. It refers to that which pertains or belongs to, an ethnic group and the study of ethnic groups and ethnic relations (Zenner 1996:393). For any kind of ethnicity, it is certain that there must be some groups interacting each other in the society. The member of any group always considers the members of another group to be different from them. The in group members have to recognize themselves as something different from other. The recognition by the insiders and the outsiders is very important for developing the sense of ethnicity. With Fredrick Barth, the question of the boundary maintenance by the groups is another important aspect of ethnicity in the modern times. It is not taken to be granted that an
ethnic group is something which can be thought of a separate entity due to the cultural differences. The reason behind this has to be understood critically. Another important fact to be considered is the factors which give rise to the situation of ethnicity. Although; immigration was the major factor for developing the ideology of ethnicity in United States of America, it is not true for all other places of the world. In many societies and communities, the formation of ethnic group varies independently of migration status too (Ali 2002:594). People living in the same territory are trying to separate themselves from each other. The indigenous people are carrying out the movements for the assertion of ethnic identity. Due to the diverse and the heterogeneous nature of the society, the question of ethnicity has became a great threat to Indian society, and the opinions offered by various scholars for considering the ethnicity on the basis of economic, political, stratification really works in many countries including India. Generally, three basic causes are given for ethnicity. Nationalism, colonialism and immigration which are the factors for the formation of the ethnic group are also responsible for developing the sense of ethnicity among them. Among this, the last is the strongest in the formation of the ethnic groups (Malpezzi 2006:25). But from the above discussion, some other factors can be said for the development of ethnicity in different parts of the world. In India, economic condition is one of the important questions for ethnic assertion by the communities. Another important factor in the present time is political situations. These factors greatly accelerate the feelings of ethnicity. Migration can be another important factor for ethnicity. In a large country like India, migration of people from one part to another always gives rise to such problems. In North East India, the basic factors for ethnicity are: migration, economic, political, Demographic factor, geographical location etc. It is to be noted that all these
factors together have given rise to the question of the ethnic identity in North East India. There are three approaches which are taken for granted for understanding ethnicity. These are primordialists views, instrumentalist approaches and constructivist theories. It can be said that primordialist theories speaks ethnic identification is based on deep primordial attachments to a group or culture. Instrumentalist approaches treat ethnicity as a political instrument exploited by leaders and others in pragmatic pursuit of their own interest and the constructivist approaches emphasize the contingency and fluidity of ethnic identity, treating it as something which is made in specific social and historical context rather than as the primordial view which considered it as given (Sokolovski & Tishkov 1998:190). In the primordial approaches, sociobiology has been given ample emphasis. Ethnicity here is thought to be derived from genetic and the geographical factors. The instrumentalist has the roots in functionalism and claimed ethnicity as a political myth used by the leaders and other influential persons for their own benefits and powers. The constructivist approach is mainly based on the ideas of Fredrik Barth (cf Barth 1969). Although, all the approaches can be taken for consideration, the constructivist approach is finding to be the most important one.

ETHNICITY AND FREDRIK BARTH

The concept of ethnic group as given by Fredrik Barth is already discussed above. The basic conclusion derived is that instead of the cultural stuff to be considered as primary, the question of boundary is more important to understand ethnic group. The primary issue is that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and the identification by actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people, which is already discussed above. The
actors themselves have the idea of existing of the ethnic group. The most
important thing is what they believe and think about the group. As in the concept
of folk, there exists this ascription and identification by the actor for any type of
the ethnic group. The focus was more on the different processes that generates
and helps to maintain the ethnic groups. Rather than focusing on the internal
constitution and history, the focus is shifted to ethnic boundaries and boundary
maintenance (Barth 1970:10). He stresses on the limitations of making shared
culture as primary characteristic for distinguishing the ethnic group. There can
be groups which have variation in culture due to the ecological factors etc but
still they may retain the identity of a particular ethnic group. The critical feature
arise is the characteristic of self-ascription and the ascription by others. The
most important question is then what the actor thinks appropriate to difference
itself from others. They form ethnic groups in organizational sense and the
culture and identity is in not one to one relationships. Then Barth discusses the
benefit of emphasis given on the point of ascription. This clearly led us to the
question of the boundaries. The social relevant factors become more important
than the objective differences which are generated by other factors (Ibid 11-
15).Fredrik Barth and his colleagues in Ethnic group and Boundaries treated
ethnicity as a continuing ascription, which classifies a person in terms of their
most general and inclusive identity, presumptively determined by origin and
background (Barth 1969:13), as well as a form of social organization maintained
by intergroup boundary mechanism, based not on possession of a cultural
inventory but on manipulation of identities and their situational character
(Sokolovski & Tishkov 1998:192). According to Richard Jenkins, “Barth and
his collaborators ushered in an increasing awareness on the part of many
anthropologist that culture is a changing, variable and contingent property of
interpersonal transaction, rather than a reified entity, above the fray of daily life, which somehow produces behavior. As Barth has recently suggested, this point of view can be seen as anticipating the postmodern view of culture (Jenkins 1998: 12).

**FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS: ETHNICITY**

Let us consider the summary of the basic social model of ethnicity as proposed by Richard Jenkins (1998: 14):

1) *ethnicity is about cultural differentiation*. - although to reiterate the main theme of social identity (Jenkins 1996), identity is always a dialectic between similarity and difference.

2) *ethnicity is centrally concerned with culture - shared meaning* - but it is also rooted in, and to a considerable extent the outcome of, social interaction.

3) *ethnicity is no more fixed or unchanging than the culture of which it is a component or the situations in which it is produced and reproduced;*

4) *ethnicity as a social identity is collective and individual, externalized in social interaction and internalized in personal self-identification.*

He clarifies the use of the word culture in the above model. The word culture is here in a narrow sense. It is a model of the different cultures, of social differentiation based on language, religion, cosmology, symbolism, morality and ideology. (Ibid). The fourth point in the above model seems to be very important. If we consider ethnicity to be used as a social identity, it is a matter of a group or of a people or a single individual. For others, the term is used in an external sense and the sense is very internal when we call it for ourselves. The other points should also be taken for granted if we use the word
culture as said by Jenkins. Three themes as emphasized by J. Milton Yinger (1985: 165-169) throw lights on what aspects or what are the approaches to ethnicity dealt by various scholars. These are as follows:

1) the relationship of ethnicity to social stratification and discrimination—
in particular with reference internal colonialism, split labour market, and resource mobilization.

2) ethnicity as culture, illustrated by reference to studies of family and religion.

3) the connection between ethnicity and politics in developing states, in developed states, and in the armed forces and police of many societies.

Besides the above considered views, there is also something, which is called as the symbolic ethnicity. It is a term coined by Herbert Gans. It refers to ethnicity that is individualistic in nature and without real social cost for the individual. These symbolic identifications are essentially leisure time activities, rooted in nuclear family traditions reinforced by voluntary enjoyable aspects of being ethnic (Gans 424-429). According to Syed Ali, “How does the importance of ethnic identity vary within a given population? Why are some people involved in ethnic networks, while ethnicity for others is elective—what Gans (1979) calls symbolic ethnicity, which does not imply intrinsic or profound social connectedness with co-ethnics?” (2002:593). This type of ethnicity is seen among the immigrants of the European descent. It is a kind of cherishing the memory for a long time after its importance has disappeared (Zenner 1996:394).

Adrian Hastings writes:

By ethnicity, I mean the common culture whereby a group of people share the basics of life—their cloth and clothes, the style of houses, the way they relate to domestic animals and to agricultural land, the essential work which shapes the functioning
of a society and how roles are divided between men and women, the way hunting is organized, how murder and robbery are handled, the way defense is organized against threatening intruders, the way property and authority are handed on, the rituals of birth, marriage and death, the custom of courtship, the proverbs, songs, lullabies, shared history and myths, the beliefs in what follows death and in, gods or other spirits. All these are shared through a spoken language (Hastings 1999:167).

The consideration of the ethnicity by Adrian Hastings is mainly based on his survey in Britain, Europe and Africa. Some of his considerations are taken for granted in many similar societies. But nobody can deny the importance of the context while dealing with the concept of ethnicity. Hastings stress upon the existence of the sub ethnicities regarding his definition as given above. There can be variation depending upon different places as the spoken languages. Also, he tries to emphasize ethnicity to be of a thing of intermarrying societies but there can be exceptions. If ethnicity is of intermarrying society, then it leads us to the concept of a common ancestors and myth of origin or of a particular land. Also, he has not denied the question of genetic origin which may be protected by a cultural unity. Ethnicities may be due to the mobile nature of the population. The question of politics and religion was also elaborately dealt by him (See Hastings pp 167 ff). According to him, politics is part of ethnicity and religion is one of the very important aspect of ethnicity. There are the ethnicities which are known as the crypto ethnicity in talk. According to Linda Hutcheon, “When I went from being a Bortolotti to being a Hutcheon, my social and cultural interactions within a predominantly Anglo-Saxon environment changed; my ethnic identity became encrypted, silenced, unless articulated by choice—a pointed lesson in the constructedness of concepts of ethnicity” (1998:28).
In many situations, one has to hide one’s ethnicity specially in plural society. But it works equally inside the heart. Homi K. Bhaba articulates a relation through Derrida’s thoughts on ethnicity and ontology. According to him, “The anxiety of displacement that troubles national rootedness transforms ethnicity or cultural difference into an ethical relation that serves as a subtle corrective to valiant attempts to achieve representativeness and moral equivalence in the matter of minorities.” (Bhaba 1998:34). There is also volitional ethnicity. It means the ethnicity which you choose at a particular point of time. In other words, people are choosing ethnicity at various points of time. The Marxists and non Marxists scholars often see use of a common identity as a means for the mobilization of individuals for political actions or economic activity is simply one more resource. They stress on such features as segmented labour markets (Zenner 1996:395). Moreover, there are some theories of ethnicity which are more concerned with consciousness than with the material underpinnings of ethnic solidarity. One approach stress the consciousness of memory and/or common destiny held by group members. In this approach, the stress is more on the contemporary history used and in this approach ethnic entities as well as nations are constantly being invented and imagined (Ibid:395).

**ETHNICITY IN INDIAN CONTEXT**

In Indian context, the concept of ethnicity has to be considered from very different perspective. According to James Manor, “There are particular problems in analyzing ethnicity in India, the most heterogeneous and complex society on earth. Indeed, that complexity makes it harder and more risky to apply this word there than almost anywhere else” (1996:459). The trend varies from place to place in the country. The caste system, religion, language, regional
diversity, tribes, caste are some of the important criteria to be seen as the factors of ethnicity. Above all question of politics and role of the federal democracy is one of the most important factors for the existence of the ethnicity and ethnic identity in India. Narendra Subramaniam Observes:

India was considered a signal success case in the containment of conflict and the preservation of tolerance amidst considerable cultural diversity. The Dominant instrumentalist accounts attributed this success to the state’s adoption of effective mechanisms for conflict management. In this regard, the following were deemed crucial: the threat to repress secessionism; the rejection of the claims of religious groups to political rights (for example, separate electorates), justified with reference to secularism; the adoption of federalism, with state boundaries corresponding to lines of language use; and introduction of preferential quotas in education and government jobs for groups (largely castes) deemed underprivileged (Subramanian 1999:719).

Despite such policies adopted by the government, the country is being rocked by many ethnic upsurge and movements. There are movements showing trends of the religious revivalism, movements demanding more autonomy within the states, formation of new states. Separation from the country is also concern for some of the groups. The issues of the ethnic identity are many fold. India is a country known for its diversities. It is a land known as the land of unity in diversity. The best functioning of the country despite this diversity is the strength of the federal democracy. In India, multiculturalism is recognized by the Indian constitution. According to Harihar Bhattacharyya, “The Indian constitution can be said to be a multicultural document in the sense of providing for political and institutional measures for the recognition and accommodation of the country’s diversity.” (2003:151-152). India is the second country having second
largest population of the world. Linguistically, the country is very diverse. There are numerous languages and dialects. Already 22 languages are officially recognized. People of all the major religions of the world can be found here, having the Hindu population as maximum. All the communities have their own folklore, custom, tradition and culture. All have their own way of maintaining their life. In the post independence period, the demanding for separate state is a common tendency. The demand for a separate Telengana State is an example. There are ongoing movements for many more states within the territory. Many communities within a State are looking for separate autonomous rule. There are numerous ethno linguistics and ethno-religious groups in all states and within each of them there are religious and linguistic minorities (Ibid: 152). As the constitution of India supports diversities; the tendency of creating the boundaries within the communities is growing day by day. The first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, also recognized the diversity of India and advocated for the practice of these cultural diversity within the country. In his words, “The Diversity of India is tremendous, it is obvious. It lies on the surface and anybody can see it. It concerns itself with physical appearances as well as with certain mental habits and traits. Yet with all these differences, there is no mistaking the impress of India (Nehru 1946:61-62). He was concerned with this cultural plurality and always not denying of giving autonomy to numerous tribes of the country (Ibid:156). The tendency of separating one group from other, feeling of superiority by one group over the other are becoming more and more strong among the Indian population. Thus, the political question has great impact for the development of ethnicity. It is true that these political arrangements are the strong force, for ruling the country as one country. People have complexities
regarding the regional variations also. It is a common experience of the people
of the North East part of India that the people of the region are always considered
inferior by the people of the other parts of the country. The caste system of
India is also very rigid and is one of the important tools of the ethnic stratification.
Although, caste system in India is basically thought to belong to the Hindus,
but these are seen among some other religious communities as Muslims and
Christians in India. According to classical Hindu text, there are four varnas
(ranked categories): Brahmins (the priests), the Kshatriyas (the warrior caste),
Vaishyas (agriculturalist and traders), Shudras (the service providers and artisans).
There are also fifth categories known as the Dalits, Harijans. They are also
regarded as the untouchables. Besides this, there are the groups which are
considered as jatis. They are the historical products of the intermarriage among
the pure Varnas. There is large number of jatis. Another group excluded from
the main society was called as paryanja or antyaja.8 Besides these there are the
people who are called tribals and are out of the caste system. With urbanization
and development, people say that this caste system has become flexible in
India. Although Indian Federal system does not recognize caste and outlawed
it, still as majority of the people still lives in the villages in India, the caste system
is in work. Still, the mentality of differentiating the people is still very much
prevalent among the population of India. Weber sees caste as the extreme form
of ethnicity; and both caste and ethnicity as types of status formation(Ali
competition in the arena of parliamentary politics and to the effects of economic
expansion, Weber’s transformation of ethnicity to caste is proceeding in reverse
in contemporary India, where hierarchy is giving way to horizontally differentiated

8. Wikipedia.
This is also a very true fact in India. The other issues as language, way of lifestyle, regional development, regionalism, dress, and other expressions of culture are equally working in the land of India. One has to consider the process of sanskritization, as popularized by M.N Srinivas for understanding the further cause of ethnicity in India. Sanskritization is a process by which the people from lower caste seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant caste. There was large scale transformation of the people specially the tribal people of the different regions by this process to the upper caste. The process worked differently in different parts of the India. As for example, the Neo-Vaishnavism religion preached by great saint scholar Sankardeva in Assam, made large tribal population of the region to accept the religion. They all took it as means to move upward in the society and to enjoy equal status in the society. This also resulted in large scale of assimilation. There are many myth and legends also of assigning lower status assigning to particular caste and community. Those also reflect attempts of the lower caste to attain higher and more exalted positions (Datta 1998:80). But after long years of their conversion, these groups are realizing whether they get the deserved status in the true sense. They realized that the distinction is still there after getting the so called status. Thus, among such groups there is now the tendency to move back to the original roots. The process of revivalism is very much working in different parts of India which is one of the important factor for the growing ethnicity. In the present circumstances, nobody can deny the impact of the westernization in India. It is a process whereby societies come under or adopt western culture in such matters as industry, technology, law, politics, economics, life style, diet, language, alphabet, religion, philosophy,

9. A famous sociologists and scholar of India.
values. India already has a long history of the British rule. English is recognized as one of the official language of the country. The impact of western culture is so great in India at present that the young generations are easily attracted towards it. For many, westernization is the window to modern lifestyle. The basic question is of the feeling of the separateness. The people who have more access to the western culture are considering themselves to be something separate from other section of the society. There is a distinct tendency among this group of people to maintain a boundary. Here, raises the question of power, class, wealth which is contributing towards the feeling of another sense of ethnicity.

Moreover, India is a country where there is a clear distinction between the classes. At least three distinct classes exist in this country. Rich, middle and the poor classes. This is also a matter of great barrier among the different classes. One can see the ethnicities based on Split Labour Market theory in India. Thus, nobody can deny the economic factor regarding the development of ethnicity in India. Moreover, from the historical time India has the problem of immigration. There can be seen a huge scale of migration from one state to another, from villages to the cities. The migration into the cities and from other parts is mainly concern with unemployment. The term local and unlocal is very much used in common parlance inside the territory of India. The concepts of local and unlocal are not equivalent to the concept of native and the foreigner. This is common tendency of the people of one part to consider others as unlocal despite being the citizen of the same country. It is important to look at some of the points given by James Manor (1996 : 461-462), which he called cross cutting ethnic identities in order to understand ethnicity in India. These are:

1) Identities grounded in religion

2) Identities grounded in language
3) ‘Tribal’ identities among adivasis or ‘scheduled tribes’

4) “Tribal identities” among people in Himalayan or remote north-eastern states.

5) ‘Aryan’ and Dravidian identities.

In multi-ethnic situations, ethnicity can be defined as articulation of in-group activities, behaviours, consciousness and cultural communications vis-a-vis the out-groups (Sen 2004:29). James Manor (1996:470) has focussed on three important points for the management of ethnicity in India. These seem to be quite true. The points are given below:

1. Accommodationist management to prevent ethnic consciousness from becoming too intense and destructive to national unity and the democratic process.

2. Polarizing management, to intensify ethnic consciousness to the point where ‘ethnic transformation’ occurs.

3. Manipulative management to stimulate ethnic awareness for short term political advantage.

In brief, the first point is about political bargaining, the second stress on the Hindu right and third is associated with the short term gains(Ibid :470). It is indeed true that the growing tendencies of ethnicity in India is tactfully managed by various political strategies. Otherwise, it would not have been possible for the country to remain as one country under such diverse conditions.

PRESENT SCENARIO OF ETHNICITY IN ASSAM

Assam is located in the North Eastern corner of India. Since the ancient time, Assam had links with Aryan civilization and culture since ancient times. The land was also known as Kamarupa and Pragjyotisha and found mention in
ancient literatures as epic and puranas (Datta 1994:3). Assam is a homeland of numerous groups of people, who speak different languages, have diverse socio-cultural traditions. One of the major problems of the ethnic uprisings in the state of Assam in recent time is immigration. In Assam since 1979, one can see civil disobedience campaigns, government instability, and some of the worse ethnic violence in post independence India including the killing of 3,000 people during the February 1983 elections (Baruah 1986:1184). Although these different groups of people migrated into the state in past history, the state had indeed peaceful existence in the past. This region has experienced huge scale of migration in the past. It can be said that the history of the northeastern part of India has been a history of migration (Goswami 2007:3). Ethnic groups from different directions entered Assam in different epochs in history. The Mongoloid ethnic groups entered Assam from northern, eastern and south eastern directions and the Caucasoid came from west. Staying for centuries together, there took place great exchange of socio-cultural and biological traits. There are tribal groups as mongoloid and the non tribal. But most important ethnic aspiration in the state is presently of the tribal identity. Most of the non tribal are demanding the tribal status because of the specific provisions to the tribes in the constitution (Das 2002 : 14). And the others who are already enjoying the tribal status, are looking for more autonomy according to the provisions of the constitution. The question of political benefits is greatly associated with the question of the so called identity movements of Assam. Once there was the process of the detribalization which took place long ago among the population of Assam. The process was spontaneous and voluntary. But then the process was reversed which can be called as the retribalization. One can see the situation from two different angles. One is cultural revivalism and the other is the political aspiration
The process of the detribalization, which in short can be understood as taking the culture and traditions of the caste Hindus in Assam, is very strong among some communities in Assam. There are communities who have completely left its language in the process. A great role was played by the Neo-Vaishnavite religion preached by great saint scholar Sri Sankardeva of Assam. Many communities which are considered indigenous people have played a great role in the Assamese nationality formation. The region has also faced the problem of heavy influx of people from other parts of India in the recent times. This is creating feeling of insecurity among the people.

This ethnic movement and demands have paralyzed the normal situation of the society. These movements are having their logical goals. But due to lack of proper strategy and policy of the government, one cannot see any proper solution for these problems. This is also a matter of great concern for the state. These types of situations are separating the populations of the State from one another in the true sense. The ethnic movements are rising day by day. Many new ethnic groups are demanding political power. Many more are demanding for Scheduled Tribe status and many are demanding separate state if more autonomy is being not given. One can also see the support of many terrorist organization behind the ethnic movements of many groups (Boro 2007:45). Ethnic conflict is one of the important features of the region. Ethnic clashes and bloodshed are often experienced in Assam. Many ethnic clashes were seen in the Bodo Movements of Assam. These clashes were sometimes with the other ethnic groups and sometimes between the two groups of the same group. Some critics have also said about the ethnic cleansing behind these ethnic clashes. Again, when the Bodo literary organization was struggling for the development

10. This is an ideology for the formation of a greater Assamese Society.
of the Bodo Language, they had to face many obstacles. They were insulted, neglected and even beaten by the government and the other Assamese nationalists (Ibid: 42-43). The situation is still worse till date. There were regular clashes and disturbances in the Karbi-Anglong district of Assam. There are movements for the states of Bodoland and Kamatapur. The situation of ethnic identity has been giving rise to a disorder and chaotic situation in the normal life of state. Hundreds of examples can be cited about these incidents from Assam. Assam Bandh (Assam Closed) has become almost a regular feature. This destroys the normal life and is also a matter of great economic lost to the State. The demonstration and movements leads to violence in many cases. The city of Guwahati of Assam witnessed one of the most barbaric incident in the streets when a procession led by a student organization, call “All Assam Adivasi student organization” was proceeding towards the Secretariat, in Dispur, the capital of Assam on 24th November, 2007. The procession was organized in order to demand the Scheduled Tribe status for the community during the Assembly session. The huge procession of about five thousand people across the state met with violent clashes with the local resident of the city. As the procession was moving peacefully, police attacked the protestors and later the local residents joined it. Brutal violence was unleashed over the members and about 50 were killed [although government do not agree]. Many got seriously injured. The crowd ran barsek. In the midst of the attack, women participant were targeted and dragged on the road, molested and beaten up. One tribal girl of about 18 years of age, was stripped naked, molested and chased naked on the street.11 The most interesting part of the procession for a folklorist is that the some members of the community were dressing in their traditional dresses.

and carrying bows and arrows in order to show their old traditional way of life. These groups are not trying not to get separated from the country. The sense of nationalism is very much there among them. One can see that with the development of regionalism in the region, there came the problem of insurgencies also. Scholars like Homen Borgohain has said that regionalism and insurgencies in Assam started at the same period and got strengthened also at the same time. Many organizations which are banned by the Government of India are putting demands for a separate country. In the beginning all this organizations were formed with the basic objective of the development of the state by working against the injustice faced from the central government. People of the region often expressed that the region is being neglected by the central government in power. The State also experienced all types of agitations carried out by various student organizations and other democratic organizations. The State is less developed as compared to some other States of India and unemployment problem has become a matter of great concern in recent times. The migration of people to the cities also has created the situation of ethnicity in the urban areas. The impact of modernization, westernizations which has started lately in the region is another cause for growing ethnicity in Assam.

**WHAT IS FOLKLORE?**

For a layman, the day to day expressions of folk, which are orally transmitted and handed down from one generation to other, are folklore. For them, the origin of folklore is definitely in the remote village and past. All the folktales, myth, legend, lullabies etc which we heard from our grandparents are folklore. It is indeed true but the word folklore is used in a much broad sense.

12. He said it in the Mukhamukhi programme of a T.V. channel (News Live).
The term folklore was suggested by William J Thoms, an English antiquarian. On August 22, 1846, the word ‘Folklore’ was used for the first time in print in a letter written by William J Thoms to the Athenaeum. (Emrich 1946:355). Thoms coined the term to replace the word popular antiquities. Thoms himself agreed that before the coining of the term, lots of scholarly work has been done in folklore. The German brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm commenced publishing influential volumes of oral folk narratives and interpretations of Germanic mythology and the word they used to denote the subject was volkskunde (Dorson 1972:1). Besides this, the works of the Grimm brothers, particularly of J. Grimm, whose ‘Household tales’ appeared in 1812, is used as an evidence of the growth and development of folklore studies by the Western folklorists. This fact was accepted by Thoms himself. There were scholarly collections of folklore made both in the west and in Asia, particularly in India (Handoo 2000:5-6). The Golden Bough of Sir James George Frazer, the Katha charit sagar, Panchatantra are the well known collections of folklore indeed. After, the term has been coined, it lead to the establishment of a separate discipline, but its boundaries with other disciplines as literature and anthropology is always a controversial fact (Ibid:7). There is no clear cut distinction between folklore and various other related disciplines. Sometimes, it seems that data treated by folklorist and the scholars from some other area are almost same. In many countries, it seems that interdisciplinary approaches are more suitable to study folklore materials. Although, it is very difficult to say what data falls under folklore and what not, there must be some accepted criteria for any study. During its formative stage, romantic nationalism also gives impetus to the discipline of folklore. Because this cultural movement led to the collection and literary imitation of traditional art forms (Harvilahti 1997:737). The term folklore is
also understood in very different meanings in different parts of the world. It has been defined in various ways. William Thoms has coined the term but did not say anything about its definition. But it is true he has something in his mind when he coined the term.

Jonathan Roper writes:

The context in which he coined the word was in the course of one of his three appeals to correspondents to collect ‘the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc of the olden time (Thoms 1846). In this appeal, Thoms also shows himself in the role of language pursuit in proposing his neo-arcaism, a ‘good Saxon compound’, in place of the existing ‘Popular Antiquities’ which had been a mere anglicization of the French equivalent (Roper 2008:61-62).

More concisely, Thoms called it as the ‘lore of the people’ (Brunvand 1996 : 285). The word folklore originally means tradition, ancient customs and surviving festivals, old deities and dateless ballads, archaic myths, legends and fables and timeless tales and proverbs. Folklore also implies irrationalities as beliefs in ghosts and demons, fairies and goblins, sprites and spirits, credence in omens, amulets and talismans(Ben-Amos 2005:10). Thus, the attributes of folklore were traditionalism, irrationality and rurality, anonymity, communality, universality, primacy and oral circulation became consolidated in the idea of folklore. But the things are changing and there are many attempts in the modern times to study the urban folklore (Ibid : 10-15). There is problem in even using single connotations for the word Folklore in different parts of the world. . It is also to be noted that the regional and the connotations for the word folklore also differs. As for example in India, Loko Sahitya, Loko Sanskriti, Loko vrata and various other words are used to mean folklore. According to Claus and Korom, “In India, to take another culture, janapada, as we have already
mentioned, is an artificial term made up by folklorist to serve as a translation of the English compound, folk-lore” (Claus; Korom 1991: 25). For regional variation it is commonly called Loka- Sanskriti in the state of Assam. So, numerous interpretations can be found with the connotations and the fields of folklore in the diverse country like India. For arriving at a general definition of folklore, Jan Harold Brunvand (1998), the five qualities associated by folklorist to true folklore are as follows:

1) Its content its oral (usually verbal), or custom-related, or material.
2) It is traditional in form and transmission
3) It exists in different versions
4) It is usually anonymous
5) It tends to become formularized

Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones observes:

The word folklore denotes expressive forms, processes, and behaviours: 1) that we customarily learn, teach, and utilize or display during face to face interactions, and (2) that we judge to be traditional, a) because they are based on known precedents or models, b) because they serve as evidence of continuities and consistencies through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief and feeling (Georges & Jones 1985:1).

In a Book, Folkloristic: An Introduction Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones deals with the issues as ‘Folklore as Historical Artifact, as describable and transmissible entity, as culture and as behaviour’ and finally concluded that folklore is rather all of the above. One must combine the concepts inherent in each of the four perspectives to answer the question as ‘What is folklore’ (Georges, Jones 1995:317). B. B. Kumar (1993) mentions that in a book The Handbook of Folklore, Sir George Laurence Gomme, divided Folklore into four categories.
1) Traditional narratives: Folk-tales, hero tales, ballads and songs, place-legends

2) Traditional customs: Local customs, Festival customs, ceremonial customs, games.

3) Superstitions and beliefs: Witchcraft, astrology, superstitions, practices and fancies

4) Folk-speech: Popular sayings, popular nomenclature, proverbs, jungle rhymes, riddles.

There are 21 definitions of folklore as given in the Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and legend, vol one. This fact proves the diversity of the word folklore in use. One cannot find a single standard definition of the term. Let us consider a few of them for a general understanding of the term.

According to Jonas Balys, “Folklore comprises traditional creations of peoples, primitive and civilized. These are achieved by using sounds and words in metric forms and prose and include also folk beliefs and superstitions, customs and performances, dances and plays. Moreover, folklore is not a science about a folk, but the traditional folk science and folk-poetry” (Leach 1949:398). In Anthropological usage, the term folklore has come to mean myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, verse and a variety of other forms of artistic expressions whose medium is the spoken word. Thus, folklore can be defined as the verbal art (Ibid : 398). According to Theodor H. Gaster, “Folklore is that part of a people’s culture which is preserved, consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs and practices, customs and observances of general currency; in myths, legends, and tales of common acceptance; and in arts and crafts which express the temper and genius of a group rather than of an individual. Because it is a
repository of popular traditions and an integral element of the popular ‘climate’, folklore serves as a constant source and frame of reference for more formal literature and art; but it is distinct there from in that it is essentially of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Ibid :399). As defined by B.A. Botkin, everything is folklore in a purely oral culture (Ibid :398). According to Archer Taylor, folklore consists of materials that are handed on traditionally from generation to generation without a reliable ascription to an inventor or author (Ibid :402). There are other definitions in the said Dictionary and regarding it Kenneth Goldstein suggested, “Despite variance of opinion, there is a certain core of materials which all definitions recognize as belonging to folklore” (Brunvand 1996:286). These definitions describe the diverse way of the understanding of the word folklore. But following all the definitions one can analyze some common factors which fall in each of the definitions. As for instance, Folklore seems to be mainly in Oral tradition. But scholars like Alan Dundes have argued whether everything in oral tradition can be considered as folklore (Dundes 1965:1). According to him, there are many items of folklore which are exclusively communicated in written form. There is also folklore associated with the body movements. The word folklore is composed of two words folk and lore. ‘Lore” can be understood as knowledge gained through study and experience. This can be also traditional knowledge or belief. The problem is with the understanding of the word folk. Traditionally folk means vulgus in populo, the lowest layers of modern society as they developed in the immediate post feudal period. It includes the rural people - agriculturalist, merchants, craftsman, small entrepreneurs, and have-nots – living in little communities in the countryside, the inhabitants of farmsteads, village townships and small towns (Dégh & Moss 1970:217). Thus, folk was understood as
someone away from the cities and industries. According to Dundes, if we understand folk to be something as peasant or rural groups, then it will mean that the city dwellers have no folklore. According to Alan Dundes, "It is possible, however to define both folk and lore in such a way than even the beginner can understand what folklore is. The term ‘folk’ can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is -it could be common occupation, language or religion-but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own" (Dundes 1965:2). This is one of the most widely accepted idea of folk in the modern days. The smallest group must consist of at least two people and the large can be as large as a nation. The most other definitions given by the other scholars have emphasized the lore of the people more, but not the folk. According to Joseph Jacobs, "The folk is simply a name for our ignorance: we do not know to whom a proverb, a tale, a custom, a myth owes its origin, so we say it originated among folk" (2005:55). He also emphasized folk as a fraud, a delusion, a myth. He is right in expressing his difficulty in locating the word folk. But in modern context, Alan Dundes definition is somehow removing the problem of understanding folk to some extent. For contemporary folklorist, a folk is a group of people united permanently or temporarily by shared common experiences, attitudes, interest, skills, ideas, knowledge, and aims (Dégh & Moss 1970:218-219). Thus, in today’s context, the focus is on any type of group of people, not only specific category of people as it was taken for granted earlier.

There is also another word ‘folclife’ that is also frequently used. According to Richard M. Dorson, "The supporters of folklife studies claim that folklorist are too narrowly preoccupied with verbal forms and neglect the tangible products
of folk artisans. They maintain that folklife embraces the whole panorama of traditional culture, including oral folklore. Conversely, the champions of folklore stoutly maintain that their includes traditional arts and crafts (Dorson 1972:2). It is indeed a fact that in the recent times no folklorist treats only oral folklore as the folklore. Richard M. Dorson has categorized folklore and folklife studies into four broad categories. These are Oral literature, material culture, social folk custom and performing arts (Ibid:2-7). For beginners, a definition consisting of an itemized list of the forms of folklore must be very useful to understand the term (Dundes 1965:3). Let us make a list of items in nutshell. This list is of course not inclusive but just an effort to summarize some items which falls under folklore following Alan Dundes and Richard M. Dorson. All forms of oral literature as myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, folksongs, rhymes, charms blessings, riddles, chants, charms, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue twisters, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, greeting, leave-taking formulas. The other genres as folk costume, folk dance, folk drama (and mime), folk art, folk belief (or superstition), folk medicine, folk instrumental music, folk song, folk speech, folk smilies, folk metaphors, names (e.g. nick names and place names). Folk poetry which includes oral epics, autograph book verse, epitaphs, latrinalia, limericks, ball bouncing rhymes, jump ropes rhymes, finger and toe rhymes, other rhymes, nursery rhymes. It also includes games, gestures, symbols, prayers, practical jokes, folk etymologies, food recipes, quilt and embroidery designs, house, barn, fence types, street vendor’s cries, traditional conventional sounds used to summon animals or to give those commands. There are mnemonic devices, envelope sealers, and the traditional comments made after body emissions. Festivals and special days as birth days etc. (Dundes 1965:3). We can also include the items of the physical folklife, also known as material culture. These may include way
of making homes by the traditional oriented societies, food preparations, designing tools etc. In social folk customs as family and community observances, the rites of passage can be folklore. One can also include all other customs. Moreover, the genres of the folk performing arts as traditional music, dance and drama are the items of folklore (Dorson 1972:2-5). Considering the above materials, one has to be also conscious that folklore nowadays does not mean these things from only rural, primitive context. Folklore is rather everywhere. It should not of only past and very traditional. According to Jan Harold Brunvand, “The greatest divergence in the 20th century from the original concept of Thorns and his times concerning folklore has been to remove the emphasis on the rural and the past in order to include now as well the “lore” of the modern, the urban, and the technologically advanced times (1996:286). Folklore means a body of materials, to the science which it studies these materials, and to the art which applies these materials and scientific conclusions about them to practical ends (Boggs 2005:3). Although, the discipline of folklore as an academic discipline is very recent in origin, it is one of the emerging fields of study in the world. Max Müller (1823-1900) also took interest in comparative mythology and folklore (Dundes 1999:31). At present, besides the university Departments; there are independent folklore institutions all over the world, which carry out research, teaching and other academic programmes. By last decade of the nineteenth century, national folklore societies had been formed in Europe and United states. To name a few, the Finnish Literary Society was found as early as 1831, American Folklore Society was officially formed on January 4, 1888, the English folklore society formed in 1878, are the pioneers one (Dundes 1980:1-2). These organizations are still working with more elaborate programme in the area of Folklore. In Europe, most countries have folklore as recognized university discipline; except England where it has not reached an academic status. The
academic status of folklore is still bad in England. But in United States, folklore in 1960s got foothold in several universities (Dorson 1972:5). In India also the folklore has emerged as an independent department in many universities, especially of South India and North East India. In many other universities, folklore studies are being pursued together with other related departments. There are many independent organizations all over the world working in the field of folklore. Thus, folklore is gaining its position all over the world in a short span of time as an independent discipline.

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND FOLKLORE**

Folklore always reinforces and consolidates the idea of ethnicity. It is a source of inspiration to strengthen the idea of ethnicity. In any ethnic or identity discourses, one can see the use and role of folklore.

Linda Dégh observes:

> It is obvious that the problem of ethnicity in its multiple manifestations is so complex that the study of the phenomenon demands multidisciplinary cooperation between the humanities and the social sciences. The folkloristic approach; that is the intensive, fieldwork - based study of a people's interrelated social, intellectual, and material aspects of culture in their ethnic context, is one means of approaching the problem (Dégh 1978:34).

Study of folklore can certainly reveals many facts about ethnicity. The study of ethnic folklore and folklore of ethnicity indeed very useful. Many studies shows that the relationship between ‘Ethnicity and Folklore” is connected with the process of acculturation and assimilation. According to Stephen Stern, “By far, most folklore studies on ethnicity focus on the changes which groups and their lore undergo as a result of culture contact” (1977:12). These two processes
are however never clearly distinguished by the folklorist. Let us try to have a basic idea of the two processes from the A.L. Kroeber's classic description of these processes:

Acculturation comprises those changes produced in a culture by the influence of another culture which result in an increased similarity of the two. The resultant assimilation may proceed so far as the extinction of one culture by absorption in the other, or other factors may intervene to counterbalance the assimilation and keep the cultures separate. When we consider two cultures bombarding each other with hundreds or thousands of diffusing traits, and appraise the results of such interaction we commonly called it acculturation...... acculturation is what happens to cultures [Italics mine] (Stern 1977:12-13).

Many folklorist especially Linda Dégh have deal a lot with the impact of the acculturation and assimilation. Dégh on the base of the European models 'folk cultural' ethnographic research, calls for inter ethnic cultural studies that will analyze in detail the nature of the assimilation process as it affects groups in contiguous and intermittent contact (Ibid:13). This type of situation is true all over the world. India is not an exception to it. These processes were active in other parts of India earlier but in Assam, it has been noticed till date. It is certain that, all over India, by the process of acculturation, integration, assimilation etc in different ages, different tribal groups entered into the large Aryan Hindu order. In different parts of India, such processes have stopped long before. But in Assam, these processes are working till recent time (Datta 2001:10). Thus, ethnic folklore is one of the emerging areas in the country. An extensive use of folklore is seen in the ethnic identity movements of various groups of the country. The picture is very interesting indeed in the State of Assam (See above for the ethnic situation in Assam). The people of North-east india often constructs
migration stories. These stories are often drawn from folklore materials. The use of folklore is extensive for a group identity from historic past. The region witnessed a great reservoir of folklore. Folklore is a part of day to day expressions of the people.

Prof. Birendranath Datta says:

This is a region where tradition had held its sway till very recent times. But unusually heavy influx of people from outside the region has of late disturbed the demographic and cultural balance of the region. Spread of education coupled with the waves of development and modernization has also played its part in changing the region's cultural contours. There have been problems of identity crisis tending to give rise to various kinds of movements aimed at self assertion. Not only has there been a new concern with folklore but there has even revivalist tendencies also (Datta 1994:2).

In the prevailing socio-ethnic situations, there seems to be a great concern for their culture and folklore. The constitution of India also recognized 'culture' to be one of the criteria for giving the status of Scheduled tribe and scheduled caste in India. This has also reinforced the groups to revive their folklore in order to accelerate these movements. Among the Bodo community, right from the beginning of their movement of self assertion folklore is being used as a mode of glorifying a distinct history and traditions (Sharma 2001 : 5). Having a distinct folklore is a matter of group unity and it accelerates the sense of ethnicity. The role of community leaders especially Scholars and politicians are immense in this regard. In any ethnic demonstration and conferences, one can see the extensive use of their folklore materials. They present various dances, songs and other traditional items on these occasions. The symbolic use of folklore items can be seen in flags and banners. People prefer to come in traditional
dress and costumes. Modern Mass Medias are also seen to be popularizing the ethnic folklore items of any community. There can be souvenirs and leaflets carrying write ups on folklore. In this region this experiences are very recent in origin. No doubt there is also invention of traditions among many communities. The traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quiet recent in origin and sometimes invented (Hobsbawm 1994:1). It is the strong sense of ethnicity and identity, that has given rise to this type of use of folklore in this part of India. In case of many of these communities, the process of acculturation and assimilation was so strong that they live many of its age old customs and There are the reactions of the groups, which are threatened with loss of identity. They are searching for their roots which they have generally discovered in their folk traditions. Thus, there has been a reemergence of folklore but in a completely different set up. Some selected folklore items have been identified as symbol of identity, which are delinked from their original ritualistic and functional base (Datta 1994: 35). In the process of their identity formation, they have to revive these folklores. According to Soumen Sen, "on the one hand ethnic groups are stable, their basic cultural components remaining unaltered over a long period of time and on the other hand, they are dynamic, changing systems, absorbing new formations (2004:29). He called it as the dialectical process involved in ethnicity, when one talk of the historical spaces. But following Linda Dégh, it can be said that ethnic conditions of the population differs only according to their different rates of acculturation (Dégh 1978:33). This is holds true at least in case of the multi-ethnic composition of the state of Assam. The most important areas which comprise in ethnicity and folklore are discussed below:
Identity and Folklore

According to Alan Dundes, "There is an important connection between the concept of identity and folklore" (1989:7). He brings the word music, dances and heroes from Spicer and mention the emphasis of the word custom by Max Weber in his definition of the ethnic group. Also, argues the word tradition used by George De Vos in his succinct definition of an ethnic group. He says that all the words as used by Spicer, Max Weber and George De Vos falls under folklore. It is an experienced fact all over the world that folklore is an important thing for any type of identity. By any type, it means that identity can be of individual, of a group. Moreover, in modern parlance; the group can be of any type. There can be also different types of identities in different contexts. It is very much common at least in a country like India to express any sort of identity by speaking of its different folklore materials beside the other factors. Many a times, the other people identified the people of the different regions by speaking something from their culture. But the identity emphasized here is of group identity. People of any group often talks of their folklore materials to consolidate the idea of identity. Following Alan Dundes and Jan Brunvand, Richard Bauman observes:

Folklore is a function of shared identity. One may look first for the group, as Dundes does- people who share at least one common factor-and be confident that it will have some traditions which it calls its own; or one may operate on Brunvand’s premise that the first test of a folk group is the existence of shared folklore. Either way, the assumption is that the sharing of identity features within a group is what paves the way for the presence of a body of shared folklore (Bauman 1971:32).

But Richard Bauman then try to emphasize on another type of identity called the Differential identity, and establish its relationship with the society. He
moves away from identity to be something of only esoteric and in-group activities. According to him, “As long as folklore is conceptualized as a self-contained realm of cultural products abstractly connected with some homogeneous body of people identified as folk and participating in it collectively, the use of folklore in situations involving differential identity will be obscured from view” (Bauman 1971:32). Among all the groups of North-East India, folklore as shared identity features is true. But folklore in the situations of the differential identity is also very common. Whatever be the type of the folk group, they have a rich folklore. For a simple example, most communities of the North-East India often traced the origin of the group to some mythological figure. This oral tradition is so strong that each and every group member recognize the fact. It is like one of the most important identity for many groups in North-East India. Like this, one can enlist hundreds of folklore materials shared by the different groups for the matter of identity. One of the important attributes of any ethnic group is folklore. Moreover, the term ethnicity can be alternatively used for the cultural identity (Sen 2004:54). On many occasions, the folklore materials get shared. In the present circumstances, it is indeed true that in North-Eastern States, the case of ethnicity can be really considered and understood on the basis of this differential identity. Also, the shared identity gave more and more ethnic consciousness, which is adding as a catalyst factor for increasing the trend of ethnicity. Thus, folklore acts as a symbol of identity for different ethnic groups. In the process, it strengthen the sense of ethnicity.

**Ethnic Folklore**

Generally, ethnic folklore means the folklore belonging to a particular group. Although, in more common sense, these are the folklore materials of a particular ethnic group, which seems to be more appropriate. According to
Eliot Oring, "In a nutshell, we shall designate as 'ethnic folklore.' folklore which plays a part in the definition of ethnic groups, which comments upon or governs the interactions between different ethnic groups, or which contributes to the sense of an ethnic identity, or which constitutes and contributes to any ethnically based action" (1990:33). It is indeed true that folklore is one of the very important criteria to judge an ethnic group. Being a member of an ethnic group means he knows the various folklore materials of that particular community. At least all members are aware of its folklore materials. The identification and the definition with ethnic groups are often based on folklore. It can be said to small extent that to participate in and identify with an ethnic group is to know and to be able to use its folklore (Ibid: 35). In any part of the world, the ethnic groups are often found to be very proud of speaking about their ethnic folklore. It serves as a matter of the unity and integrity for the group.

According to Margaret K. Brady writes:

Traditional expressive behavior of ethnic groups as they migrate, resettle, and interact with other groups. In the late 20th century in the United States, the term 'ethnic' is usually applied to foreign nationality or immigrant groups and is often extended to refer to American Indians, African Americans, and other racial groups, and sometimes to specific religious groups, irrespective of their national background (Brady 1996:226-227).

The ethnic groups of Assam are rather different in nature, as already discussed above. But ethnic folklore is now generally defined in terms of its role in the creation, maintenance, and negotiation of cultural boundaries between groups. It often involves display of a range of shared cultural traditions, or folklore (Ibid : 227). All the groups of northeast India are seemed to be very much concerned about their folklore items in recent time. The ethnic groups of Assam always speak highly about their myth, legends, folktales and other genres
of folklore. These are natural tendencies. It has become stronger due to the prevailing socio-economic, political situations of the region. In United States of America, study of the ethnic folklore began from the inception of the American folklore society. Like Europe, the first focus was on the survivalist folklore. But later folklore collection also focus on the degree of assimilation and on acculturation (Brady 1996:227). The similar change has been noticed in the study of the folklore materials of the Northeast India. As for instance, Prof. Birendranath Datta has given a detail analysis of folklore of North East India reflecting through contact and togetherness (Datta 1994:14-16). Datta describes a good deal of examples of the folklore materials which speaks of commonness and the process of acculturation in the northeastern region of India. People came to United States for a variety of reasons, to find land to farm, to get education or better job, to earn money, to practice their religion freely, or to escape famine or war, just to name a few. Others came by force. All these have made the land a melting pot. According to Linda Dégh, “European ethnology, or folklore, originated in the political struggles of various minority population groups for ethnic recognition through certain culturally distinctive features, even though they were politically affiliated with large empires” (Dégh 1978:34). And a very similar trend has been in the third world today, but the political background of the third world nations are not same as in Europe (Ibid:34). These type of situations prevail in Assam in recent times. The region is a melting pot of many ethnic groups. Ethnic festival, ethnic dress, ethnic food, ethnic markets catch the eye of the people. The ethnic products are meant for economic purposes as well to express the group distinctiveness. In many cases the original items have been distorted to a great extent. The ethnic items are available in fairs and festivals. Festivals and food are important items of ethnic folklore. Food, to

13. Wikipedia.
which the folklorist has given recent attention, is one of the very important
genres of the ethnic folklore. Every community has a great weakness and love
for its traditional food. Thus, a great sense of ethnicity is associated with the
food (See Abraham 2005: 181-182). Food has become an important item of
ethnicity in Assam. New food habits have developed specially among the peoples
living in the cities. There are also the practical hazards of getting the traditional
things and for preparation. The situation differs from people to people. There
are the influence of food from other parts of India and foreign countries. The
middle class and the rich are more attracted towards those food items. Nobody
can deny the influence of western food habits among these people. In some
particular occasions, one can see the attraction of these people towards the
ethnic food items. They go to restaurants to taste this food items on such
occasions. The demand of the ethnic food is very much during the time of any
festival in Assam. One can get such food items from markets or one can visit
some ethnic food festival on such occasions. The traditional food items are
available in markets. People in urban areas buy those to meet the demand
during the festivals. These are used to offer to guests and also for themselves.
The trend is more among the city dwellers. Another important area of ethnic
folklore is the ethnic dress. The dresses of all communities are found in the
markets. People often buy these items to wear in special occasions. The mill
made products has replaced the home made products. The mill made traditional
towel of the Assamese community known as gāmuchā is available in the market.
The celebration of festivals has also undergone a great change in the Assamese
society. The celebration of Bihu, the greatest Assamese festival has changed.
The songs and dances are performed in the stages as cultural functions. The
record Bihu songs and CD, VCD are gaining more popularity. The oral tradition
is another important area of ethnic folklore in Assam, this is one of the most
important area by which all the groups expressed its separateness and maintain its group identity. In Assam, the nature of the oral folklore materials are very interesting. The influence of one language over the folklore materials of the other is very much. Living together for many years, there are many communities who have not retain its language and adopted some other. The oral traditions are very important to see the distinctiveness of any group. The use of oral genres is extensive in the identity movements. For example, the use of this oral tradition can be seen a lot in the Bodo movement, which is one of the strong movements in the state of Assam. One can see this strong use of folklore materials including folk narratives in the developments of nationalism, sub-nationalism, regionalism and ethnicity in different parts of India as North East (Datta 1998: 82-83). He has given examples from British period, where the oral narratives are used by tribal population in their solidarity movement in Assam. The use of oral genres in stereotyping has great significance in the region. Origin stories, migration stories and many other aspects of communities are in oral traditions till date. The material culture and performing arts are also equally important as ethnic folklore. The handicraft items have great value for a group. People often buy them from the markets due to love and ethnic attachments. The bamboo products have very important role in the life of the Assamese people. These products are also available in the market. The performing arts play a very important role for community members. These performances are seen to be performed in stages. An example would be the traditional cherao (Bamboo dance) of Mizo ethnic community of Mizoram which is more popularly performed on stage rather than the traditional arena in recent time. It can be said to be equally true in case of Deodhoni dance and Bagaromba dance of Bodo community of Assam. Despite of the changes, these performances are very important for these ethnic groups. The word folklore of ethnicity is also used
often while talking about the relationship between ethnicity and folklore. Memories of old world experiences and the trauma of immigration may fade with the distance from the old world, the passage of time, migration within the United States, marriage with members of other communities, and entry into other spheres of American life are the causes of folklore of ethnicity in America. Families with more consistencies in terms of national origin also participate in and identifying with more than one community and more than one cultural sphere (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1986:43). One can also view the folklore of ethnicity in terms of multiple cultural repertoires and cultural code switching. These can be also characterized as syncretic and cultural code switching (Ibid:43).

In a different context of the state northeast India, one can see these factors for giving rise to the folklore of ethnicity, which are indeed the part of the ethnic folklore of the communities. From time immemorial, in the North eastern States of India, one can see tribal and the non-tribal, the sanskritized and the non sanskritized, highly ‘refined’ and seemingly ‘refined’ are in a position of juxtaposition. One can see interesting and significant reflections of all the contacts in the rich folklore material of the region (Datta 1994:26). In Assam, one can see all the groups are living together from time immemorial. Exchanges and cultural contacts are natural. The festivals, ceremonies, fairs; markets are the places where these can be seen. Intermarriages also took place many a times. The influence of language of one community over the other takes place. Most of the folklore materials express these commonness and togetherness. In such a multiple cultural setting, it is evident that folklore of ethnicity is a common feature of the region. Stereotypes are very common among various groups. Let us consider the role of the ethnic jokes, which is often told and circulated among the people of Assam about the different tribal communities of the region. According to Kishore Bhattacharjee, “There are plenty of jokes about the tribes
in Assam. In upper Assam, jokes about the Mishings (Miri) and the Nagas are widely prevalent. In lower Assam, there are similar jokes about the Kacharis (presently known as the Boros). At present, in the urban areas both types of jokes are told, as people from different areas live in those places. (Bhattacharjee 2009:297). He classified the types of these jokes according to the nature of the communities expressed as ‘The simple people’, ‘The foolish people and their deeds’, ‘Some are clever and unscrupulous”14 Let us cite a joke from the third category from our own experience about the Mishing community of Assam.

‘The Mishing community is often regarded as one of the clever community of the region. But at the same time these jokes express their foolishness and simplicity.

The joke is as follows:

Once upon a time, a caste Hindu Assamese man gave his horse to look after by a Mishing man. The Mishing people generally live near the river and people gives the animals to look after. Because one can find lots of grasses in the Mishing inhabited areas. The Mishing used the animals for ploughing the lands of some winter cultivation or in some other works. But often the Mishings are said to be made more works by the animals. As a matter of enquiry, the Assamese gentle man went to the Mishing village after six months. The Mishing cultivator said that the animal had already passed away due to some disease. The Assamese gentleman did not believe his story and made further enquiry about the dead body of the animal. Then the Mishing said that he could show him the remaining part of the dead body. Then the Mishing took the Assamese to a field and pointed out to a skeleton of an animal from a distance. The Assamese observes properly and argued with the Mishing that the skeleton

14. Jokes are an important criteria of ethnic- stereotyping in India.
The Mishing man laughed and said that, the animal died due to the coming out of the horns.\textsuperscript{15}

The story can be found in different variants in the State of Assam. Like this one can find a large number of other ethnic jokes saying by one community against the other. Depending social and geographical set up of North East India one can find numerous other folklore of ethnicity. There are numerous other stereotypes about the people of other States of communities. There can be stereotypes about the food habits. The jokes about the people of Punjab known as \textit{Punjabi} and people of Bihar known as \textit{Bihari} are very popular. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, “The experience of culture contact throws aspects of each into high relief, creating what may be called the cultural foregrounding effect, as one inevitably compares one’s own ways with those of others, noting similarities and differences” (1986:43-44). In a multicultural setting of North East India these is true and can be experienced in day to day life. The people of North East India are still traditional as compared to many other parts of the country. The folklore is very lively among the various communities of the region till date. The people are conscious of folklore from the long historic past. Ethnicity is an ideology which is giving a new dimension to the folklore materials of the region.

\textbf{THE CASE OF THE THENGAL KACHARIS OF ASSAM}

In the state of Assam, north east India, the sense of ethnicity is consolidating its ground due to the various autonomy movement carried out by various ethnic communities. As already discussed, the state where a great mixture of heterogeneous population was leaving for hundreds of years has

\textsuperscript{15} It is heard from Luit Senapati, Majuli, Assam.
witnessed a number of ethnic movements in the recent time. The identity movement of the Thengal Kacharis is very recent in origin, started in the last decade of the 20th century (See chapter-II for the identity movement). A distinct sense of ethnicity and identity has given rise to the movement. It is increasing day by day. A group which has been living in Assam from time immemorial with the identity of greater Assamese has developed this sense of separateness due to various economic, political, social reasons. There was a great threat to their identity and existence in Assam. The most important challenge for the community is to include the name of the community in the list of scheduled tribe of the constitution of India. Many facts prove that the name of the community can be found earlier, till 1976 in government list of Scheduled Tribe and caste of Assam, India. However, either due to some conspiracy or mistake, the name of the community has been missing from that time (Borah 2006:1). There was a great planning to finish the community by many tribal leaders and organization of Assam. Under such circumstances, the community has to form an organization called, 'All Assam Thengal Kachari organization' to get its constitutional status and for all round development of the community. To unite the scattered Thengal Kacharis all over Assam was another basic objective of the organization that was formed on 25th November, 1990. Another organization known as the 'All Assam Thengal Kachari Student Union' was formed in the year 1997 with similar objective (see chapter two for the details of these two organizations).

Dr Jyotika Bora observes:

In the present time, under different circumstances and situations, the tribe Thengal Kacharis has to face many questions. On the one hand, there is the picture of the degradation of their society and on the other hand there is the valuable question of the
country and their people. Who do not have written history till now, whose name have not been included in the constitutional list of scheduled tribe in the 20th century, so with what such a community will give its identity and with what they will develop their culture (Bora 1992: 29).

As the Thengal Kacharis use to get the constitutional benefits, there were instances in the Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh of Assam, where the many Thengal Kacharis were forced to write Sonowal Kachari. Many Thengal Kacharis write as Sonowal Kachari in the hope of getting the certificate of scheduled tribe (Borah 2006:2). The greatest threat to their identity is that although the other sub groups of Kachari get the constitutional status independently as Boro, Sonowal etc, the Thengal Kacharis are getting the benefit only as Kachari community. It is also a fact that the average economic, social and political conditions of the community is not at all good. Thus, a community who became assimilated to the greater Assamese society had to finally start an ethnic movement for the protection of their own rights. The Thengal Kacharis are Assamese by blood and soul. As discussed earlier, the contribution of the community towards the greater Assamese society is immense. The community has adopted the Assamese life and culture to such extent that they are not retaining its own language. They speak Assamese as their first language. The impact of Neo-Vaishnavism religion was very great among the community. Their culture has become a part and parcel of the Assamese culture. Thus, under such circumstances, it was not at all easy for the community to revive their traditions and culture. In Assam, the autonomy movements have made the ethnic communities to get separate from the greater Assamese identity and to come out with their assets of tradition to assert their separate identity (Boro 2006: 88). This fact has been very true for the Thengal Kacharis. Lately, the
Thengal Kacharis also started their autonomy movement. The Thengal Kacharis are very peaceful by nature. In the history of Assam there are very few communities whose identity and autonomy movement is as peaceful as this community. The Thengal Kacharis had to demand a separate autonomous council as it was a threat to their identity and existence (see chapter two for the details). Within a very short span of time the community got its autonomous council, which was one of the great political achievement for the community. The “Thengal Kachari Autonomous council” bill was passed on 12th August, 2005. As already discussed in chapter –II of the thesis. When this Autonomous Council bill was passed, then only the existence of the community came to be known among many people of Assam. Earlier, many people and even many scholars considered the community to be Sonowal Kacharis, another ethnic group of Kachari tribe. The news of the formation of “Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council” was a bolt from the blue for many people. There is a line quoted below from the India’s national magazine, *Frontline*:

> The passage of the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council Bill, 2005, in the Assam Assembly on August 12, a mere two days after an agreement was reached on the formation of such a council with a body known as the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council Demand committee, which itself had come into being less than five months before, and the appointment soon thereafter of a 11- member Interim Executive Council of the autonomous council pending the assent to the Bill by the Governor of Assam, make a new and unique phase in the ongoing ‘ethnic / nationalistic’ assertions in the State (Prabhakara 2005 : 1)

Thus, the Thengal Kachari Autonomous council has raised many questions among the people. The existence of this council and its proper functioning in near future is also another question of great importance for the
community. These are part of their ethnicity discourse. The Thengal Kacharis of Assam have to fight for their rights under different circumstances. The threat to their existence and identity has induced a great sense of ethnicity among them. At the same time, the movements have made them aware of their distinct culture, which is very important for getting the Scheduled Tribe status of the government of India. The Thengal Kachari is among the few communities of Assam which have only the cultural identity. As mentioned, the community has not retained its language. The community and even the professional academicians of the region have never collected and documented the rich folklore material of the community till recent time. After the inception of the identity movement, the educated section of the community and the leaders of the “All Assam Thengal Kachari organization” are paying utmost importance for the preservation and documentation of this material. The ‘All Assam Thengal Kachari student union’ and the newly formed “Thengal Kachari Autonomous council”, “All Assam Thengal Kachari Women Organization”, also have the objective of preservation and documentation of their rich cultural history and folklore. However, the task is not at an easy one. The community has been assimilated to such extent, that it is difficult to distinguish their folklore material from the Assamese community. However, a section of the community members have maintained some of its distinct traditional culture. Folklore is a great source of inspiration for the community. Whatever, the history of the community is known, it is a mixture of historical and mythical tradition. Folklore is being extensively used in the reconstruction of the rich glorious past of the community. The community members glorify their descent as the offspring of the mythical hero as Ghatutkash, the son of Bhima. From the above discussion, it is clear that the Identity assertion of the Thengal Kacharis of Assam is unique and
recent. Hence, the process of revivalism of their folklore material is also recent. It has to be admitted that the community has the agenda of reviving and preserving their age old traditions and customs. *Thengal Darpan*, the only biennial souvenir of the Thengal Kacharis inspires the community members to write articles related to the community. One can find many articles on the folklore material of the community in the souvenir. There are many articles which expresses the importance of folklore for the community in the recent time. Besides, in the biennial conferences of the "All Assam Thengal Kachari organization" one can see the presentations of the folklore material of the community. In the processions, one can see the exhibition of the different aspects of folklore. In the gathering and meetings, one can see the presentations of songs and dances besides other items of ethnic folklore items of the community. There are newly composed songs, which expresses the Thengal identity. The leaflets published on the occasions have the agenda of the preservation of the folklore materials. The speeches of the leaders of the community have the message of the importance of the folklore materials for the identity purpose. These strategies induced a distinct sense of ethnicity among the community members who attends the conferences from the different part of Assam. In recent time, there are documentations and revival of many festivals of the community for the identity purpose. There one can heard the speeches of leaders, which expresses great concern over the importance of folklore. The Thengal Organizations have urged upon the government to take steps for the preservation of their folklore items. In one speech of the Panitula Sabah festival of the community, there can be heard speeches as the purpose of celebrating the festival in such a way is that the government of India is asking for a distinct culture.\(^\text{16}\) Recently, in March 2009, the community started the celebration of a

\(^{16}\) A C.D. collected from Dhaldhalia, North Lakhimpur, Assam.
festival called as the Torachira Bihu and declared it as the national festival of the community. According to Bipul Kachari, president of “All Assam Thengal Kachari Student Union”,

“Preservation of traditional culture is one of the basic objective of the organization. In different times, they are discussing the issues with government and the council. Moreover, they are trying to organize seminars to find out their distinct cultures in different districts and villages of Assam. This type of seminar has been already organized in Lakhimpur district for the preservation of their culture. All the three organizations are trying to preserve and revive their culture. They are planning to organize cultural meet in near future. They have some distinct customs and traditions. They are also planning to revive many festivals which they left to celebrate”.

He further expressed that the ethnic consciousness has come for the preservation of their culture after the formation of the “All Assam Thengal Kachari Organization”. In this regard, he mentioned few community members, whose initiative has led to the start of their preservation of their culture. He said assimilation to be main cause for lost of their culture and traditions. Many other members of all this organizations expressed the importance of traditional culture for the future existence of the group. In recent time, the preservation and importance of folklore has gained a great popularity among the members.

There are documentation, workshops and presentations of a dance called as Kula burhi nritya in different functions to assert a distinct identity. This dance has became an important symbol of identity for the group. The dance is being presented in their conferences and meetings also. There are tendencies of the preservation of various material culture of the community for the identity purpose. There is documentation of the traditional marriage ceremony of the

community. In oral traditions, there can be seen the use of various myths, legends, folksongs to glorify the past. The use of the customs and traditions and the oral traditions will be discussed in details in the following two chapters of the thesis. Thus, a great relationship between ethnicity and folklore can be established among the Thengal Kacharis of Assam. As informed by Banti Saikia, vice president of, “All Assam Thengal Kachari Women Organization” they are trying to reintroduce their ethnic dress. 18 Many members to whom this researcher has taught agreed that the ethnic consciousness came among them after the formation of the “All Assam Thengal Kachari Organization” The ethnic consciousness though started lately has made them to revive their lost culture and traditions. The community is concerned now for the preservation of their culture for the future existence. As discussed, the use of folklore due to ethnicity is also political in India and the Thengal Kacharis are not an exception to it. The ethnic identity movement has aroused their consciousness and each and every member has understood the importance of folklore. Thus, there are the revivalistic tendencies of many folklore items of the community in recent time.

18. This was informed by Banti Saikia of Tlibar, Jorhat, Assam.