For a long time in Indian history the North Eastern India was a terra-incognita to the intellectuals and the academicians. Except the work of some foreign administrators and missionaries there was virtually no academic enquiry about this region. It is only recently that serious academic interest in this region and its tribal multitude is being evinced. This long course of indolence has created an intellectual vacuum and a positive handicap to the student of social science in studying any tribal society of this region, specially in relation to its role and reactions in a quickly changing social milieu. The general impression one gathers is that few tribes of North Eastern India can now be found in their pristine shape. They are either being modernised, a process started in the colonial period, or are at the critical cross-roads of tradition and modernity. In both cases the essence of tribalism is being exposed to a shaky situation. It is no doubt that tradition dies hard in a tribal society, but in the wake of modernisation the very elements on which tradition rests gradually lose their significance. The new problems, social or political, faced by the tribes of this region today are, in the final analysis, the creation of colonial policy dictated by a system of values alien to these
people. So the tribal societies as we see today are more a legacy of the colonial period than anything else. As a consequence, in studying the tribal societies, their social and political aspects, and the inter-tribal relations, one can find a distinct colonial imprint. In the colonial period the policy of isolation and protection towards the tribes was not prompted by a sense of respect to their way of life, but in reality was a tactic of divide-and-rule between the tribal and non-tribal groups and between the different tribal groups. The eventual goal of such a policy was not to allow different groups to unite together for a common cause. The nature of relationship that exists now between the tribes and non-tribes on the one hand and between the different tribal groups on the other, should be seen in the light of this colonial policy.

The colonial authority could make their policy effective by the use of force whenever necessary which is characteristic of a rational-legal authority structure. In a tribal society the basis of authority lies not in coercion or force but either on a sanctity of descent or on the consensus of the people. The long cultural persistence associated with relative isolation was regarded as a quality of the tribal society. Under such circumstances when the colonial authority imposed its rule upon them the legitimacy of the tribal society was
at stake. There was constant tug of war between the rational imposition by colonial rule and the traditional administration of the tribal authorities. It is quite natural that in such case the colonial authority got always an upper hand. Actually, the relationship of colonial authority vis-a-vis the tribal mass was never directly established. In such situation the tribal chieftainship organisations, specially those with authoritarian feature had come into direct picture. The authoritarian organisations had the power of controlling the mass and it is for this reason that the former got much special attention of the colonial authority. It would provide a shortcut way to control the tribal mass through the chiefs once the latter could be brought into comfortable terms with colonial authority.

II

The crux of the problem lies in an enquiry into the nature of reactions of the tribal communities to the impacts of alien authorities. In the case of the Thadou-Kuki tribe in Manipur, these reactions have ranged from compromise and democratic opposition to rebellion at different points of time. The organisation through which these reactions were expressed and articulated is the chieftainship organisation
of the tribe. Quite naturally therefore, the chieftainship organisation of the Thadou-Kukis deserves attention. The chieftainship organisation is the principal element of their authority structure which provides a basis of their social structure. This organisation had therefore to face and tackle all the impacts of the colonial authority. The bulk of the Thadou population always remained in the background. They would do whatever the chiefs would ask them to do. The peoples' attitude towards their chiefs was purely subjective.

Just prior to British contact the social and political conditions of the Thadou-Kukis were in a flux. As such they are migratory people. From their mythological period onward, we find that they had migrated from place to place. But this migration should not be ascribed just to a nomadic impulse. There were concrete economic and political implications behind such migration. The forces which had mobilised them from the Chin Hills of Burma to different parts of India were primarily lack of subsistence resources, adverse landman ratio in the Chin Hills, and increase of population. These factors had invariably invited feud with the Lushais of Chin Hills who had also faced similar subsistence pressure on their meagre resources in the hills. It can therefore, be said that the feuds between the Thadou-Kukis and the
Lushais were not just an expression of senseless hostility but had valid economic reasons. As a consequence of their migration an exclusive home for the Thadou-Kukis could not emerge and for a long time their habitation remained cramped and crowded. In such circumstances whenever they had to settle in a new place they had to move in a group so that they could effectively encounter any opposition from other tribes in the new place. It was after all a great question of political safety. This factor alone made it necessary that the headmen of the Thadou-Kukis should be competent leaders who could guide the people at the time of crisis. Here lies the basis of autocratic character of the Thadou-Kuki chiefs. By way of contrast, a loose type of authority structure invariably leads the community to a point of extinction or assimilation by a stronger tribe as happened with many of the Old Kukis like the Chins, Chowte, Chongthu, Hnamte, Kawang etc. who have been assimilated into the Lushai tribe.

Autocratic chieftainship organisation which arose out of political necessity in the inter-state migration of the tribe, in due course of time was exposed to certain side effects when autocracy became fully routinised in Thadou-Kuki society. People began to be fed up with such rulers and
started deserting such chiefs and establish new villages under another headman. It is to be noted that these dissident groups were in no sense any-the-less admirers of autocracy but the institution of chieftainship in these communities remained a deeprooted conviction. For the dissident leaders the chieftainship status remained a much cherished goal, despite, although these leaders became only the territorial chiefs. Desertion of autocratic chiefs led to local migration. Local migration and village chieftainship (territorial chieftainship) went hand in hand in due course and added a new legitimacy to the latter. As a result local migrations became very common in Thadou-Kuki society. Any person who had ambition for the chieftainship status, and having certain amount of popularity and personal qualities, could easily became chiefs of new villages. Local migration therefore had brought about a structural variable within the chieftainship organisation.

III

The British intervention in the affairs of the Thadou-Kukis begun in the mid-nineteenth century at the time of their settlement in the hills of Manipur. Behind the settlement the colonial motive was clear, namely, to use the Thadou-Kukis as a buffer between the Lushais and the Nagas who were
carrying on sporadic attacks on the administered tracts of the British rulers. From the point of view of the Thadou-Kukis there was the great economic necessity for a secure land for cultivation and habitation. On these two points they had badly suffered from other tribes. By this settlement they got an official relief and safety which was the utmost need of the hour. In the meantime those of the Thadou-Kuki race who had infiltrated into many of the Naga inhabited areas of Manipur also had developed a kind of animosity towards the Nagas in the same manner as against the Lushais. Now when the British authority gave the Thadou-Kukis a settled area, they took the full advantage of it to revive their age old animosity towards the Nagas and the Lushais. The traditional enmity was rationalised as a political tool set against these two tribes. In the colonial period, inter-tribe feud should be viewed therefore, not so much as an expression of traditional enmity between different tribal groups as one of politically inspired action on the part of the rulers. Yet to the Thadou-Kuki society the British role at that time was regarded as that of a saviour. The chief-centred Thadou-Kuki society provided an effective instrument to the British in directing the community effectively against the other tribes.
The British authority gave the chiefs two benefits for that purpose: 1. Their chieftainship organisation was barely touched upon and the chieftains enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy in their village administration and 2. The chieftains were given periodic payments. Both these factors had further augmented the power of the chiefs. The colonials freed the Thadou-Kukis from domination of stronger tribes but that did not mean that they were enjoying anything approaching political independence. Actually they were under constant surveillance and intimidation in the shape of reprisal in case they did not behave as dictated by their British masters. In the final analysis therefore, it was a negation of the role of a saviour. Rather, the periodic payments made over to the chiefs had logically made the independence enjoyed by the chiefs questionable. In fact the chiefs had to act as agents of the British both in relation to their community and other communities. In this period of British rule we do not find any group among the Thadou-Kukis which had condemned this role of the chiefs.

IV

In the later course of colonial intervention, the Thadou-Kuki chiefs exhibited a reaction which took the form of an armed revolt, as against the exploitation of their
manpower resources and against taking undue privilege from the tribal community. This had endangered the economic and political bases of the chieftainship organisation. This war was therefore, mainly a war of the chiefs against the British. Like many other tribal revolts in various parts of the country, this revolt too, was restorative in nature, having no clear vision of societal alternative. It was highly emotionally charged with ethnic considerations, a remote and isolated tribal revolt. This revolt could not be so coordinated as to gain sympathy and support of other neighbouring tribal groups although all the neighbouring tribes were suffering more or less under the same material condition of the British rule. Rather the neighbouring tribal groups namely the Angami Nagas and the Kabui Nagas, instead of extending support and sympathy to this revolt preferred to remain in the good books of the British and live peacefully in the British territory. This had again helped renewal of the age-old animosity between the Nagas and the Thadou-Kukis.

Since the cause of the revolt remained exclusively confined to the Thadou chieftains, the Naga groups found no axe to grind in this revolt of the Thadou Kuki chiefs. Quite logically, therefore, the movement failed miserably. The chiefs had to collectively retract from their plebeian stand and plead for mercy and considerations. It is understandable that it was
not possible for an isolated tribal war with its hit-and-run tactics to stand against the British force for a long time. The point in observation here is not the defeat but the postwar attitude of the Thadou-chiefs. The specific words of seeking mercy from the jail logically went against the very moral standpoints for which the tribal organisation stood. The whole thing in the final analysis became anachronistic and debars a single conclusion that the rebellion was thoroughly anti-British or thoroughly restorative.

Another dimension of the Thadou-Kuki rebellion was the lack of mass base in it. The actual participation of the mass in this revolt depended upon the chiefs. It has been rightly pointed out by Gautam Bhadra that it was "mainly the chiefs who decided whether the village would join the rebellion or not." In such a situation the creative participation of the Thadou-Kuki mass for the creation of a new society was not observable and probably they could not realise the real content and implication of the revolt. The strength of the chieftainship organisation and the traditional structure of power had created a myth around the credibility of its institution. So when, the leading chiefs would send red chilly and half-burnt firewood to another village chief, as a symbol of

summoning to the war, the later had joined it with the mass following, instantly. For the same reason therefore, the chieftainship organisation could successfully bring the mass to side with conservatism, which otherwise could prove a great progressive force in the history of freedom movement in India.

The net result was that despite much sufferings and bloodshed, the movement remained confined only to a particular community and failed to coordinate its cause with the other anti-British movement in other communities in order to contribute to the national movement against colonialism.

V

While subh was the state of affairs with the Thadou-Kuki chieftainship organisation in its relationship with the British authority, in the transitional period to Independence and in the post-Independence period, the Thadou-Kuki chieftainship organisation exhibited two features:

First, an articulate elite group was emerging from within the chieftainship system. The new organisation through which this elite group organised its activities was the Kuki National Assembly. It has been observed that the power-base of this elite group was essentially deeprooted in tradition though it had the objective of tapping the new political
opportunity let open by the British departure from India and the simultaneous adoption of a democratic constitution by the independent government. At this hour the Thadou-Kuki chieftainship organisation became the zealous protector of their tradition while at the same time choosing a modern political platform to voice their demands. In fact the utilisation of traditional power-base in this new elite organisation gave the latter an easier, effective and a less costly means of self-assertion without which it would have been very difficult for them to organise a new elite group. Secondly, the chieftainship organisation, despite its above contradiction, had to be defended against democratic opposition from the neighbouring tribes. In such a socio-political matrix it was quite natural that the behaviour of the chieftainship organisation oscillated from a pure ethnic consideration to an amorphous pan-tribal identity. That is why they had used the term 'Kuki' National Assembly only to get the support of other cognate tribes in their movements and it was the name given for identity being used by the elites who were aspiring for power and prestige. But in reality this elite organisation was dominated and influenced by local power structure.

At the time of transfer of power in 1947, a constitution making committee was formed in Manipur to frame the Hill Peoples' (Administration) Regulation. The Kuki National Assembly
was naturally rearing an ambition to find a representation in the said committee. But it found it quite frustrating when it was not at all consulted in choosing a Kuki nominee. To confound the matter further the Tangkhul Nagas and the Kabui Nagas were given special considerations in the committee. This had increased the relative deprivation of the Kuki National Assembly. As such it was nothing but a step to divide-and-rule which would deprive them from making a common platform to shape the destiny of the hill people. In this situation, as the only way to give vent to their frustration, the Kuki National Assembly threatened not to be bound by the Hill Peoples' (Administration) Regulation and gave a threat to secede from the Manipur State Darbar. In fact this threat of secession persisted as a standing strategy in their subsequent territorial politics too. But it appears that it was never a very hard and fast stand like the extremist Nagas and the Mizos. It remained only a political bargaining point from where they would start to relax their stand. Actually, the Thadou-Kukis were bound to relax their stand because they could never be able to mobilise the support of others of the same race living in parts of North Eastern India other than Manipur and could never be able to engineer a cause like that of greater Mizoram or greater Nagaland. Lack of a compact homeland and inter-tribal animosity have always made their
cause weak. All the pride of the Kuki National Assembly concentrated on limited ethnic outlook at this period of transfer of power. So when an Interim Council of Manipur Government was formed, again the Kuki National Assembly was frustrated. It rejected the two contenders for the Kuki ministership in the Interim Council of Minister, Mr. Teba Kilong and Mr. Tiankham, on the ground that they represented only smaller Kuki groups and as such did not represent the whole Kuki race. Teba Kilong was the president of the Khulmi National Union and he also labelled a charge against the Kuki National Assembly that it was dominated by the Thadou-Kukis only. Actually, none of these groups had led any large number of population and focusing a greater unity was never their point. Rather these groups were much ambitious of asserting themselves in the emerging political scene. Quite naturally therefore, beyond such mutual recriminations, one can see the role played by seer power politics.

In the Thadou-Kuki Society the new elites did not represent their people in the democratic sense. They were self-appointed leaders who drew their authority from the traditional chieftainship system. So the question of mass following did not arise in their case. The Kuki National Assembly and the Kuki Chiefs' Zonal Council were predomi-
nently their instruments to advance their parochial interest. No wonder therefore, that shortly after Independence not only the Nagas but also the other Kuki groups like Hmar, Paite, Zou, Gangte etc., left this organisation and found their own political platforms.

To determine the political destiny of the Kukis, the Kuki National Assembly took the path of territorial politics. In the first few months of India's independence there was again a subtle threat of aligning this territorial movement with the movement of the Nagas for a free Naga State. But very soon the Kuki National Assembly retracted from this position and never made it an open public issue as the Naga Nationalist did. Their demand rather became a moderate one asking for a Kuki state within the Union of India. The issue of territorial politics was at this time conditioned by two necessities; to protect their land and their cultural identity apart from the Nagas, their immediate neighbour, and to act as a barrier to the infiltration of the dominant valley culture. But the demand for a state was subsequently toned down to the demand for a separate revenue district. The steady reduction of their political demands and flexibility of their political stand from time to time remained characteristic of this elite group. The flexibility of their demands also leaves much room of misunderstanding about the real content of their demands and movements. Practically reductionism and flexibility became
the norm with which the elite class has moved and operated, and ultimately made their stand doubtful. The movement of territorial self-determination was started by the Kuki National Assembly either for a separate Kuki state or for a revenue district, without proper mass base and without a clearly defined socio-political and socio-economic policy and was empty of substance and intent from the very beginning. Commenting on such developments N. K. Bose has written, "Instead of a prime concern in releasing the peasantry and the worker from economic bondage, the principal object in these developments has been the search for power among the educated upper class of the state." 2

The slogan for territorial self-determination for the Thadou-Kukis, by the Kuki National Assembly at this hour therefore, only acted as a mechanism to arouse false consciousness while the fundamental need for realisation of a true tribal self-image still remain largely unfulfilled. Territorial self-determination of the tribe rather became a great sentimental factor by the exploitation of which the Thadou-Kuki leaders tried to advance their political career.

The demand for territorial autonomy in Nagaland and Mizoram, by the modernist leaders was aimed more at regional than at ethnic soliderity. Naturally it was broad based. Thus "when the Khasi National Conference, the Mizo Union and the Naga Nationalist Council (before Phizo)", as noted by S.K. Chaube, "spoke of autonomy of the hill people through the district council, they aimed at destroying the vested interests of the chiefs and bringing the hill peoples closer to the national main-stream. Their autonomy was more regional than ethnic". The Kuki National Assembly by contrast did not take such a stand. Moreover, clamouring for independence was made by the Naga National Council as an 'all-Naga Platform', while the Kuki National Assembly made such demands without a solid pan-Kuki base. The only understandable ground for their autonomy demand was the general backwardness of the tribal areas which seems to be common with any other tribal society of the North Eastern region. Moreover, the vision of a 'Free Naga State' was greatly inspired by a notion of a Christian democracy (after

Phizo) which perhaps never, has mobilised the Kuki National Assembly in its autonomy demand. In the Thadou-Kuki society at least, Christianity has not interfered in the process of development of political aspirations until now.

Under such circumstances, it is quite likely that the Kuki National Assembly shared a "Naga mind", though for only sometime, quite naively without properly appreciating the real implication of it in its context.

The Kuki National Assembly as an ethnic-based elite organisation had its own paradox. With the generic stamp of 'Kuki', the elite organisation had tried to mobilise all the non-Naga tribal groups. But in fact the latter was not a "single" tribe. There were many components within it, each rearing a political ambition of its own. Some of those like the Hmars and Paites were rather committed to democracy and liberalism than the others like the Thadous who had not only a dominating mentality but also monopolised most of the important ranks of the organisation. Naturally, the moderate sections seceded from the Kuki National Assembly in the subsequent course. This had made the cause of their autonomy demand weak. Quite naturally, the Kuki National Assembly as a modernist platform of the Kukis, by contrast to the
Nagas, could not go beyond its narrow ethnic consideration in their autonomy demands. This is a very peculiar characteristic of the Kuki National Assembly having little relevance of this demand even with the other people of the same race living in North Cachar hills, Tripura and Naga hills.

VI

The stated objective of the Thadou-Kuki chieftainship organisation was to maintain the traditional customs specially those which were vital to the survival of their powers and privileges. Starting from the Hill peoples (Administration) Regulation, 1947, to the Manipur (Village Authority in Hill Areas) Act, 1956 and the subsequent acts, the chieftainship organisation was threatened with serious erosion of their powers and privileges. In the changing context of the country's politics, the Thadou-Kuki chiefs specially, had a great apprehension of losing their status in their villages as was happening among the Paites and Mizos. The Circle Council constituted under the Hill Peoples' (Administration) Regulation, 1947, curtailed almost all the tributary benefits hitherto enjoyed by the Kuki chiefs. These tributes provided the basis for their power structure. But the chiefs had to accept these humiliating resolutions no doubt because they felt the very survival of the chieftainship organisation was at stake. That is why they adopted a
reconciliatory tone of compromise and acquiescence.

The acquisition of chieftainship right is a part of democratisation process in Indian polity after Independence though in many of the democratically organised Naga communities this headmanship is maintained. In the Lushai or the Mizo community where the authority structure was dictatorial, the chieftainship system met with an opposition from Mizo Union which favoured and aided the abolition of the system. But in the Thadou-Kuki society there is no political opposition from within. As a result, the Thadou-Kuki chiefs got a safe passage to fight for restoration of their traditional status. To the Thadou-Kuki chieftains the democratisation process appeared to be a more sensitive issue, and the pride of their tradition flared up. So they started politicising their cultural issues and concentrated on the point that the institution of chieftainship is infallible. While the government side equated their chieftainship system with the Zamindari system, the chieftainship organisation argued for an egalitarian society.

The Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act, 1956, recognised the chiefs and made them ex-officio chairman of the duly elected village councils. This itself not only partially retrieved their otherwise lost position, but also
left ample loopholes so that the chiefs could dictate over the village administration more or less in the traditional manner. But once their position was secure as the chairman of the village authority, they invented and precisely guarded their genealogy of succession to the chieftainship. The Thadou-Kuki chief have now become more conscious of their genealogical descent. In case of a clan chief the monopolisation of clan genealogy and in case of an ordinary village chief the monopolisation of his genealogy of succession to the chieftainship have become the only viable rationale for their survival as the village or clan headmen in modern times.

So far as the day to day administration is concerned it is carried on in the traditional way and it seems that the Thadou-Kuki chiefs never took the rules of the village administration as stipulated in the acts so seriously, nor the government has seriously insisted upon their enforcement. The common men of the Thadou-Kuki society however, always preferred the customary administration because the latter not only quickly dispose any case but also is much less severe in inflicting any capital punishment upon any culprit for doing serious crimes.

The two types of Thadou-Kuki chieftains, namely - the clan chiefs (Miupa) and village chiefs (Hausapa) have developed
at two points of time. The clan chieftains claim their
descent from the progenitor of the clan and as such its
structural basis is kinship. The basis of traditional
village chief is also by and large kinship. By contrast
the territorial village chiefs are not from the main
lineage of the clan but have come into existence as a
result of local migration necessitated not only by the
pressure of subsistence and demographic expansion, but
also by a desire for power and prestige. What has given
an additional scope, is the loose control over the outgoing
persons-an inbuilt lacune of the Thadou-Kuki custom. As a result
there was mushroom-like growth of the Thadou hamlets in the
uninhabited patches of the hills under the leadership
of a headman who in most cases was an adventurous commoner,
frustrated in his original village, having no or tenous kin-
ship connection with the clan heads. Hence the territorial
village chieftains. These territorial village chieftains in
the Thadou-Kuki society are not democratic leaders and they
should not be logically compared with the Gumlao organisation
of the Kachin Gumsa society who were out and out anti-chief
and against their vested interest. Quite naturally, although
the village chieftains were the dissidents from their original
villages, the power and prestige attached to the position of
the chieftains, remained a desired factor in Thadou-Kuki society.
As a result there developed no antithesis between the two types of chiefs. This is an important factor which has also contributed to the stability of the chieftainship organisation.

In the changing socio-political context the chieftains have always moved with their cultural cause and through the Kuki National Assembly, they upheld the apparently most sensitive issue of territorial politics for the otherwise homeless tribal mass. These factors in the changing context justified the continued existence of the chieftainship organisation as the main mouthpiece and hence a legitimate body in their society. It could still maintain a docile attitude even at the face of stiff democratic opposition and could revitalise their authority structure in the changing socio-political environment. Chieftainship as a legitimate body in neighbouring Mizoram, by contrast is a matter of past. Though the Mizo chiefs wanted to guard their powers and privileges through the platform of United Mizo Integration Front, the Mizo Union successfully campaigned against it and aided the process of abolition of the chieftainship system. But purely subjective attitude of the Thadou-Kuki mass left the scope for their chieftainship organisation not only to survive but also to consolidate a few protest movements in Manipur against the abolition of the chieftainship system.
Tradition and modernity in North-Eastern India have got varying connotations in different societies and have affected the leadership pattern in different ways. Among the Mizos and Nagas modernism has aimed against the traditional chieftains and the modernist leadership has emerged as an antithesis to tradition. But by contrast, in Thadou-Kuki society as an antithesis, modernity became a springboard of the traditional leaders and the traditional leaders themselves combined their traditional role with modernity and hence innovated a new channel of legitimacy in modern times. As noted before, on the threshold of Independence the traditional chieftains became quite uncertain of their future in the traditional set up. So they started looking for the new legitimacy, (i) by exhibiting a remarkable capability of oscillating itself to the changing socio-political context of the country and, (ii) by taking the fullest opportunity of their age-old hold over their inert society.

A much interesting recent phenomenon of the Thadou-Kuki chieftainship organisation is that whenever the power structure of their traditional organisation has been weakened, they have tended to prefer a modernist path to protect their traditional status. But this process very subtly and imperceptibly helps to shape a crisis of legitimacy of the Thadou-Kuki chieftainship organisation. That
is, whether the chieftainship will continue on its traditional foundations or on the new territorial foundation. The two foundations are not only quite different but also logically contradictory to one another in a tribal society. So the Thadou-Kuki chieftainship system is to sacrifice one for the sake of the other. But the latter insists on territorial self-determination without impairing their traditional social and political system. The two factors are so irreconcilable that they themselves can not make any rational correlation between the two, although the same organisation has commanded the tradition and modernity. All that the chieftainship organisation has done so far is that they have made their organisation a vested organisation and also have diffused any sort of innovation from the rest of the society. In the strict logical sense of the term, modernity is a negation to tradition and its structural and functional pre-requisite is differentitation. Until and unless the new organisational position is not separated from the traditional social status, the intense and sincere

commitments to the requirements of modernity can never be expected. In the changing socio-political context the fusion of the two roles by the same body, has not only left the whole society in suspense and dilemma but also has invited a problem of legitimacy of the chiefship organisations as the mouthpiece of tradition against modernity and vice-versa.