CHAPTER : 10

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made in this study to dwell on the social folk custom of the Koches with special reference to the Koches of West Garo Hills in Meghalaya.

Among the old communities of the world, the Koch is one of them from the Vedic period. This community traveled from one end to the other end of the world. The Koches are of tribal origin and they have their own culture, language, own living style and traditional dresses etc. The Koches of Meghalaya trace their relationship to Naranarayan and Chilarai two Koch kings who once established a great kingdom in western Assam. As such they believe in the story of their origin from an adulterous union between two sisters Hirai and Jirai with Shiva the Hindu God. The story of their migration to their present habitat in Garo hills was given to the present author by Sri Binod Chandra Koch of Harigaon village in West Garo hills.
The Koch caste is found among the Assamese Hindus throughout the Brahmaputra valley. Koch is a caste in the Brahmaputra valley and as such it is part of the larger Assamese community. On the other hand, the Koches of the Garo Hills are much different from the Koch caste of the Brahmaputra valley. The Koches of Garo Hills claim themselves as an independent community. Though it is not possible to draw a clear-cut distinction between a tribe and a caste for the purpose of the present study, we can take the operational definition of a tribe as ‘a community having its social structure independent of the larger Indian society’. And according to this definition the Koches of Garo Hills can very well be considered as a tribe, though neither in Meghalaya nor in any other part of North East India the Koches are constitutionally regarded as a ‘Scheduled tribe’.

A group of more or less independent communities claim themselves as Koch in Garo Hills. The major communities of the Koch group of communities are: (i) Harigaya, (ii) Tintekiya, (iii) Satpari, (iv) Chapra, (v) Wanang. All these groups have a
common Koch identity, though they are more or less endogamous groups. All the above groups excepting Satpari and Chapra have preserved their dialects belonging to the Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. All the groups except Satpari have independent matrilineal clan organization. These groups are in different stages of Sanskritization and the degree of Sanskritization roughly determines their social position in respect of each other.

Under each of the aforesaid endogamous groups there are small exogamous groups or sects or called *Nikini* or *Jat* in Koch language. These sects are almost identical with the Garo *Machong* and the Khasi *Kur* in their organization and function. The Koch Nikinis are many and numerous. It seems that the Koch Nikinis are still in the making from its 18 Nikinis. Dr. Kar has mentioned about 64 such spatial groups of the Koches on the basis of the survey conducted by Dr. Majumder.

The Koch language is of Tibeto-Burman origin (Gait, 1924). The influence of both Bengali and Assamese languages is reflected in their language. The Koches of Meghalaya can
speak Bengali, Assamese and Garo and the educated section among them can converse in English and Hindi as well.

So far as the social folk custom of the Koches are concerned, they propitiate the supernatural powers for the acquisition of the things or objects they desire. Religion plays a vital role in their daily life. The religious beliefs of the Koches are largely influenced by Hinduism to a great extent. To appease the supernatural forces they sacrifice domestic animals and birds in various rituals as most of their deities are regarded non-vegetarian. Among the Koches we find the following three categories of supernatural beings:

1. Deities which are responsible for the general well being, and which are generally worshipped collectively by the whole village. Deities coming under this category are Kali, Kamakhya and Shiva.

2. Lesser supernatural beings capable of doing harm to individuals only. These supernatural beings are not propitiated collectively.
3. Clan deities whose action is limited to members of particular clans only.

Among the Koches in general we find a general decay of the last two categories and prominence of the deities of the first category. This is bringing them nearer to Hinduism, because all the deities of the first category are adaptations from Hindu pantheon.

Both belief and religion are also closely associated with rites and rituals. Most of festivals are always connected with various performing art forms such as char mage, dance, Pabuni and so forth. Now it is also observed that the grandeur of celebration of the festivals has been declining to some extent.

The traditional folk games of the Koches may disclose its ethic features. The most of the folk games have reflected their life struggle with nature for their existence. These folk games have contributed generally to physical, social and psychological growth and development of the Koches. Due to the appearance
of the modern games, the folk games have been disappearing in the Koch society by leaps and bounds.

Folk medicine has been playing a vital role in the Koch society from unknown time. There are a few professional magicians called Oja or Kaviraj. Both malevolent and benevolent spirits are worshipped. Like other primitive people, they try to trace out the cause of diseases in the provocation of a deity or an evil spirit which is detected by the Oja. Animals, birds and fishes are sacrificed to appease the deities or evil spirits. They apply variety of medicinal plants for domestic treatment. Chanting of holy words and magical formula are other means of folk treatment of the Koches.

While the Koches go to build a new house, they maintain the old traditional customs. The residential houses face either eastward or southward direction having verandah. Of late, due to influence of modernisation the pattern of architecture has been changed. The young generations now a day have a tendency to build their houses with bricks and cement as well as iron and steel sheet in the roof. Owing to the influence of
neighbouring non-tribal people, the traditional food habits have been changed by leaps and bounds. They also prepare their own unique cuisines.

The artistic taste of the Koches is chiefly reflected through their textile and handloom. Most of the household dresses are prepared on their looms. The colour and design of their weaving clothes are decorative. They are well-up in skill of preparing various indigenous colours for their clothes from herbs. They make various traditional musical instruments for using both in the religious and secular contexts.

The Koches have their traditional dresses and ornaments. A unique feature is always seen in their dress and make up. They give special importance on the uses of handloom products. Adorning cloth with designs is a part of weaving. The women folk are skilled in forming designs on cloth. Various kinds of flower designs are woven on cotton and silk clothes used by women folk. Handloom is an important part of domestic life in the Koch society. The Koches also can exhibit a high artistic skill in performing art forms to some
extent. Most of the dramatic and semi-dramatic performances are based on rituals and they may fulfill the demand of folk dramatic performances.

Their dances more or less are ritualistic in both content and context. The dances are simple but impressive and stimulant. They contain amazing melody of music rhythm and folk elements. At the time of dance performance as well as dramatic performance, the performers dress themselves with traditional and colourful clothes.

The Koch culture is rich in the field of folk songs, verse and music go hand to hand and the musical aspect is clearly reflected in practice. These songs are merely a vehicle for the folk-tune. The Koches refresh themselves by singing as well as dancing with the accompaniment of various musical instruments. The combination of the songs and music is confined to selected ones who are in great demand at weddings, festivals and other similar occasions. The simple catchy folk tunes conveying the feelings and sentiments of their ancestors, their lives and thought, their activities and
achievements, their morals and discipline are great value. Of late, such songs are of very great value in teaching the younger generation of the Koches who are the active force of change as well as progress of the society by adopting incentive to bring unity among the entire community through performing their traditional art forms.

The process of continuity and transition has been actively moulding on the impact of tradition. The Koch community is too a tradition oriented tribe; as such their tradition cannot escape from the influence of both continuity and transition. They have been once migrated from one place to another and scattered over the various districts of Assam, Meghalaya and Bengal. At the risk as well as uncomfortable ways of life they have been residing in inaccessible hill track with various types of cruel animals and poisonous snakes is no longer found now. As change is the law of life, the Koches have faced and facing changes. In the changing context, they have come forward for the development of their society and the country as a whole. Of late, new avenues of life have been free for them. They have
gradually developed in the field of agriculture. Very few of them engage themselves on trades. Most of the Koch youths engage themselves in the easy livelihood of agriculture. They are expert in agricultural activities and still continue to use their traditional methods of irrigated terrace cultivation on plain land. Now-a-days a few of them have introduced fishery, poultry farm, animal husbandry and horticulture. Moreover, weaving textile plays a vital role in the development of household economy in the Koch society. Of course, the women folk weave and knit beautiful textile carrying traditional designs in seductive colour with the modern colourful yarns. In respect of the construction of houses, changes have taken place even in spite of utmost efforts to maintain their traditional characteristics.

After independence considerable improvement has been made for the construction of roads and bridges for which the people are able to visit the markets as well as rural areas. Now the government has been setting up primary and secondary schools from where the Koch society too gets benefits. Today a
tendency has been grown among the younger generation, specially the educated ones to restore their original language, culture, custom through meetings and conferences held every year in different Koch areas in West Garo Hills.

Like other tribal societies in North-East India, the Koch society has also been subject to social change and transformation. They are coming in contact more and more with outsiders who work among them either as government servants or as traders voluntarily. There is a change in their family structure and other social institutions. The joint family system has been affected seriously among the Koch society. The couples do not prefer to live in a large family which is regarded a source of perpetual quarrel.

Long and continuous contacts are there between the Koches and the Assamese Hindus. As a result the Koch society has long been assimilated to a greater or lesser extent. Now they have undergone selective acculturation and have added selected traits or features of the Hinduism to their respective traditional cultures. They accept the culture of the
neighbouring Hindu society as superior to their own and adopt the Hindu concept of the doctrine of Karma, of pollution and purity, the Hindu way of observing rites-de-passage.

Some of the Koches have been influenced by the Bhakti culture. Most of them have now begun to lose faith in their traditional worship. They have adopted the Assamese Hindu "style of life" and a Brahmin is invited for marriage ceremonies or death rites.

The Koches attempt to know the oral tradition of both sacred as well as secular genres from their local priests and elders since time immemorial. Apart from this, they too know traditional arts, crafts, games and recreation which are handed down traditionally. In the changing context, all these provide them a moral knowledge and education. Today with amenity of modern media viz. Radio, T.V., computer etc. has passed away the ethical values of their traditional culture. Now the educated section of the Koch community has to think that their traditional culture is gradually declined. So they pay proper attention towards the development of traditional cultures. A vast change
in festivals and celebrations of the Koch society has taken place now a day due to acculturation. As a result they embrace the neighbouring Hindu festivals i.e., Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Shiva Ratri, Janmastami, Doljatra and so forth.

In the olden times, the folk medicines played a dominant role amongst the Koch society. Most of the diseases were cured by the village doctors called Oja by using herbal medicine or by imploring benevolent deities. Now the health programme along with the introduction of modern medicines, the faiths on folk medicines have been declining by leaps and bounds. The government has set up hospitals and dispensaries in the remote places. As a result the Koches use to modern medicines for their treatment. But in the case of some diseases such as snake bites, pox, jaundice etc. they depend on the Oja even today.

Concern for the performing art forms amongst the Koch society is mere means of recreation as well as amusement in the past time, when there were no other means of entertainment. At present with initiation of education for the
society at large, the younger section of the Koch community has grown apathetic towards such art forms and these traditions have become lesser extent unaffected.

In conclusion, it may be said that the social and cultural life of the Koches is being constantly influenced by the neighbouring Bengali, Assamese Hindus due to the process of acculturation and assimilation. From observation it is seen that this community has been maintaining still most of their traditional distinctiveness not withstanding changes in their socio-cultural fabric, which have been incorporated in to the culture in its natural process. They are too lesser known owing to the lack of comprehensive literature as well as studies on them. Through the present study an attempt has been made to understand the general and inclusive picture of the social folk custom aspects of the Koches in West Garo Hills. At present, due to the impact of modern education they are found to be conscious about their own place in the welfare and development field amongst the different ethnic groups of Meghalaya. Their own conscious efforts together with the
efforts of the government would surely bring them at par with others.