CHAPTER : 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Genesis:

The North-East India, the home of seven sister states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura is a rare specimen of diverse elements. Some writers describe the region as miniature India, an anthropological museum and a unique place for research. In natural vegetation and beauty, it is described as the Switzerland of the North-East.

In this wonderland I. J. S. Jaswal in his paper "Tribes of North East India: Ethnic and Population Aspects", in the volume of the Tribes of North East India, narrated that, a large number of Tribes inhabit the hills and plains of North East India. These tribes entered this region at different points of time and through different routes. After entering this area, they occupied marginal territories and had been living for centuries in isolation
from one another. The interaction between various tribes was minimal till recent times. The isolation led to a very high degree of variability among tribal population. This variation of cultural patterns and dialectical differences is characterized by the presence of large number of tribes and sub-tribes living the region. I. J. S. Jaswal presented a list of 64 such tribes of North East India having a population ranging from 703 of Khowa tribe to 853, 585 of Kacharis (Census of India, 1971). The name of Koch tribes has also been found place in the said list and their population has been mentioned as 13,520.

With every tribe and tongue, there is a saga of unique civilization and heroism. All the indigenous people of northeast India have such saga of their migration, civilization and deeds of valour at one stage or the other of their history. The indigenous people of Garo Hills have also similar stories to tell us about their coming, settlement, social folk custom and about their struggle for existence. Some of these tribes area Koches, Hajongs, Banias and the Garo, who have come to Garo Hills at different periods of time and settled at different areas of Garo Hills where they are found today. Some of these indigenous
peoples' life and culture have been written down, whereas some of them are still preserving their history in their mouths only, but are passing them on from generation to generation.

The subject of the present research is "Social Folk Custom of the Koches in West Garo Hills District of Meghalaya". Before coming to the subject mater it is necessary to discuss precisely the origin and migration of the Koches of Garo Hills. The Koch community is one of the unique groups among the permanent inhabitants of Meghalaya. It is believed that they are more ancient than the Garos. This caste is also found in other parts of the world. According to Dr. Risley, the Koches are traceable from Burma on the East Kashmir on the West. A good number of historians have mentioned and thrown light too about the Koches in their books. In Puranas and Tantras also their reference is available. It is quite natural that a group of people which has been existing for centuries together would have their own language and deep-rooted culture. Specially, the art, culture, social custom, faith and belief draw the attention of not only of the past writers, but also

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have become curious about them. It can not be denied that the Koches living in Garo Hills from ancient times have their own culture. The scholars who did research work on the origin of the Koches are not unanimous. Nevertheless, according to W. C. Smith, the physical structure of the Koches of Garo Hills creates an impression that they belong to the Mongoloid clan and are influenced by the Tibetan-Mongoloid culture. It is very difficult to establish when the Koches permanently settled in Garo Hills. It is assumed that during third century when the Mongoloids entered into Assam, the Koches also entered into Manipur, Tripura and later entered into Meghalaya and settled in Garo Hills. History tells us that the Koch King Surya Narayan, Dharma Narayan and Mahendra Narayan respectively ruled Garo Hills. The ruins of capital at Puthimari, the Gopalbari of Mahendraganj, the Kamakhya Temple of Mankachar, and the Temple of Mahamaya Mandir of Harigaon are the evidences in favour of the above mentioned facts. The Koches believed that they are descendants of Shalbhang of Mahadeva.
The Koch caste is found among the Assamese Hindus throughout the Brahmaputra valley. But the Koches of Garo Hills are much different from the Koches of the Brahmaputra valley. The Koches of Garo Hills claim themselves as an independent community. The major communities of the Koch group of communities are as follows:

(i) Song or Harigya
(ii) Tintekiya
(iii) Satparia
(iv) Chapra
(v) Wanang

All these groups have a common Koch identity. They are to some extent indigenous groups.
1.2. Aims and Objective of the Present Study:

A study of our unknown or little known neighbours is a stepping stone for national integration through proper understanding of the cultural parameters which govern the more or less self-managed tribal communities.

The study of the social folk custom of small communities has been drawn the attention of the researchers. In studies of the Indian small scale tribal and peasant community, the social folk custom structure and its peculiar characteristics have been investigated by the researchers for over the last two decades. Yet there a few studies concentrating on the social and cultural conditions of tribal societies. When one further delimits the area and considers the North East India, the study of social folk cultural structures appears to be very few and far between.

There is no gainsaying the existence of some suitable ethnographic accounts of a number of tribal communities. But we rarely find a detail picture of a village community describing the interrelations between society and cultural activities. By dealing the village community and its culture as single side of
activity, we wish to examine the features of rural life as a whole. For this occasion our preference fall on Koch tribe who represents social community which is half way between tribal as well as farmer village group. Moreover, this is a study of tribal community which has migrated from place to place and adopted system of cultivation.
1.3. Scope of the Study:

The community of West Garo Hills Koches is preferred as this community does not constitute only a demographically important tribal community in Meghalaya, more over Koches are one of the out and out conservative tribal communities. Yet, at present Koches follow many of the old customs and traditions. The elements of social changes and their operation are highly accountable one structural relationship, popularly known as maladjustment in tribal groups. The tribal societies have undergone social transformation and some of their cultural traits have disappeared due to changing panorama of development activities.

The changes are markedly visible among the Koches of West Garo Hills who happened to migrate from one place to another. Their acculturation and assimilation with the neighbouring people have brought changes to their life and culture to the greatest extent possible. However, in spite of erosion of their culture in the periphery, they are found to have maintained their core culture intact. Social change and
transformations are affected by the social and geographical environment especially in case of immigrants who must adopt themselves to changed situation in their new habitat. According to Gillin and Gillin, "Social changes are variations from the accepted modes of life; whether due to alterations in geographical conditions, in cultural equipment, composition of the population or ideologies and whether brought about diffusion or invention within the group."\textsuperscript{2} The rural area under study provides an ideal field to know the complexities of tension and conflicts between old and new values, indigenous exogenous ideas and practices which appear in all changeable societies. The Koches have their distinct identity from other tribes of North East. They are also lesser known due to the lack of comprehensive literature and studies on them. Since significant research materials have not been available in published form, the scholar has to depend particularly and extensively on interviews of the Koch community.

The present study is expected to be very significant as it will make an attempt to study the marginalized ethnic group

\textsuperscript{2} Gillin and Gillin: \textit{Cultural Sociology}, New York, p. 125.
(i.e., Koch) of Meghalaya who are trying to erect a distinct identity of their own. The study is expected to bring into focus the dynamics of tradition in the life of a marginalized ethnic group like the Koches.
1.4. Works done so far in this Field:

It has already been stated that no systematic study has been attempted so far on the social folk custom of the West Garo Hills Koch community of Meghalaya. Of course a very few articles and papers in different aspects of the Koches may be found, which are largely written in Assamese language. Furthermore, these articles and papers are not systematic and research oriented studies. Although systematic study on the social folk custom aspects of the Koches is not adequate books or monographs on the Koch community as a whole are very poor, since a very few British administrators have given brief account in their monographs regarding the Koches. In this context we must mention the name of E. T. Dalton who had written a monograph entitled, “Tribal History of Eastern India” in 1878. Here the writer has given impressive accounts about various ethnic groups of Bengal and Assam including the Koches. L. A. Waddle was another British administrator who had written the book entitled, “The Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley”. The book contains a brief ethnographic account of the
Koches of Assam. B. C. Allen was also a British administrator who has written the book entitled, "Assam District Gazetteers", Vol. III in 1905. The book contains brief clan accounts of the Koches.

The Census Reports of Assam furnished by the British administrator in different times may find detail accounts of the Koches, of which Sir Mekinji's Census Report, 1881, is worth mentioning. He has made an attempt to give an idea about the language of the Koches which is the mixture of Assamese and Bengali.

In the Census Report of 1891, while the Koches have been considered as a separate tribal ethnic group, their racial affinity to the Garos and Kacharis has also been referred to. In addition of these reports, the following books may give an idea about the ethnographic accounts of the Koches, e.g., Rev. S. Andle's *The Kachari* (1975), S. Karotemprel's *The Tribes of North East India* (1984), B. N. Bordoloi's *Tribes of Assam* (1991), L. S. Gassah's *Garo Hills: Land and People* which may give vivid picture and varied descriptions of the Koches of
Meghalaya.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that no body has written a systematic monograph on various social folk custom aspects of the Koches till today. So it is hoped that the proposed study would be the first attempt to focus significant light on the social folk custom of West Garo Hills Koch society.
1.5. Methodology:

Methodology is the most important part of a research, without proper method nothing can be studied. In social science research, methodology implies how the relevant information or data are to be collected and how they are to be analyzed for answering the research questions or, for accepting or rejecting the research hypotheses. In other words, the data are used to substantiate the research study.

Various methods of investigation and research in social phenomena are adopted to collect the requisite materials. But for the proposed study, the following methods have been adopted:

i) Observation Method

ii) Interview Method

iii) Case Study Method

Since adequate research materials are not available in published form, I have to depend mainly on participation with the people. As I am the people of Mankachar (near West Garo Hills), it gives me the opportunity of coming into direct contact
with the Koch people concentrated areas. The rest of the materials in which I was not directly involved have also been witnessed on different occasions.

The materials from the field study have been collected through interview method. For the purpose, many Koch villages of Meghalaya are visited. I interviewed a number of Koch families and active bearers of their culture at Kumblee, Harigaon, Ampati, Manjureegaon, Pankata, Batapara, Baghapara, and other villages.

The selection of informants for field study was made on the following basis:

i) For social aspects- old Koch people of age above 50 years.

ii) For cultural aspects- Koch people i.e., bearers, of age in between 50-70 years.

iii) For social customs- Koch Adhikaris (village chieftains), Priests, Ojhas and active bearers in the age group 50-70 years.
iv) For folk performances and verbal art forms- Koch actors, drummers, dancers, singers in the age group 20-60 years.

Questionnaires and schedules are prepared to collect data from the informants and, information collected are checked and cross checked from various sources. The investigator, instead of impartially interpreting the data, has also interpreted that to suit his/her convenience and purpose. Connections are established with the aid of the Koches making friendship with them. For this, their traditional ways and courtesy are followed. The act of giving process is followed and, betel nut, cigarettes, wine and donation to festivals, and taking of rice and tea with the families of the Koches have also taken place.

Moreover, library work has been done at different libraries of the state with the view to collect the secondary data. In addition to the published works of the Koch authors and non-Koch authors, some unpublished papers have also been studied intensively.