Chapter 6

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to understand the ethnonational activism of Assam in its socio-historical perspectives, with special reference to the case of Karbi ethnicity. For accomplishing that, this study has been made to begin with a survey of the various theoretical perspectives, debates and ideas pertaining to the issue of ethnicity and nationalism, in the first chapter. In the second chapter, attempt has been made to trace the emergence of ethnic consciousness in Assam by historicizing the social formations in Assam in the medieval period; and then looking into the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial social-political developments. The third chapter has been a discussion on the leading ethnonational movements in Assam in the post-colonial times. Some of the claimed parameters of the on-going ethno-political narrations, such as indigeneity, territoriality etc, have been discussed and argued that the roots of these presently claimed ethnic attributes can be traced back to the colonial Rule by the British. This chapter has also looked into culture as an instrument used in articulating ethnic sentiments through the process of ethnicization of cultural distinctions and political differences. Initiating the gender-question in ethnic assertion, it has looked into the ethnic imagination on gender – how the ethnic movements construct and exploit its ethnicized images of women. The fourth and the fifth chapters together have been devoted to present a case study of the Karbi ethnonationalism. Collecting data from various secondary sources, archival materials and through interviewing of activists and common people, the political trajectory of the emergence and development of the Karbi ethnicity movement has been outlined in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter focusses on the cultural politics of the Karbi movement; how the de-territorialization as well as re-territorialization of the Karbi ethnic world is currently in process through symbolic cultural codes, through processes like museumization of its cultural
distinctions, valorization of its national heroes and articulation of contesting narratives about its origin and migration.

The last five chapters have been an attempt to discuss the ethnonational developments in Assam with references to different historical contexts. What can be summarized as a conclusion to this socio-historical exploration of the ethnic question in Assam is that the various formations of ethnicity in Assam need to be seen as a part of continuous historical processes. “The construction of ethnic identity and culture”, as effectively elucidated by Nagel, “is the result of both structure and agency-a dialectic played out by ethnic groups and the larger society. Ethnicity is the product of actions undertaken by ethnic groups as they shape and reshape their self-definition and culture; however, ethnicity is also constructed by external social, economic, and political processes and actors as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions” (Nagel 1994, 152). As such, the on-going ethno-political mobilizations in Assam need to be understood as the result of the structural bindings provided by the specific historical conditions in one hand; and the agential enactments by the respective communities to these conditions on the other.

Therefore, the ethnonationalism in Assam can be theorized as the dialectical discourse of such external or historical conditions, and the responds articulated by people towards them, in three identifiable historical phases: firstly, the colonialism that created the spatial categories necessary for invoking identity consciousness; secondly, nationalism and its discontents that triggered the eruption of ethnic mobilizations due to national disparities and relative deprivations; and thirdly, the impact of globalization that brought in a new political fashion of protest and resistance through ethnicization of cultural differences.

As it has been argued and demonstrated in the second chapter of this thesis, the British colonial administration was responsible for creating the spatial or territorial categories which are still being capitalized upon by the various groups in demonstrating their ethnic consciousness. Due to the colonial operations of
classifying and labelling the various human geographies of Assam, through colonial actions like Inner Line Permits, Census operations, designation of different tribes with various nomenclatures resulted in a distinct enumeration of communities which later became the building blocks of ethnicity formations. With the introduction of monetized economy, print media, industrial and urban life worlds, the colonial modernity was responsible for creation of the necessary ambience within which the various communities in Assam could become politically conscious of themselves and the others. As discussed in the early part of the second chapter, there were indeed pre-colonial sites of cultural and social formations, particularly within the so-called non-tribal populace of Assam. However, as far as the sense of identity is concerned, these pre-colonial social and cultural categories could become catalysts for identity building only when they were later exploited for constructing a valorized past during the 19th century romantic nationalism – which was again induced by a sense of anti-colonialism. Therefore, in historicizing the ethno-national politics of Assam, the colonial intervention seems to be the unmistakable starting point that set the ball rolling towards a never-ending politics of identity.

If ethnicity is understood as a scaled down version of nationalism, then a great deal of the ethnic formations in Assam was intricately connected to the ways in which the so-called Indian and Assamese nationalism functioned at the lower levels, during both pre- and post-independence times. Cultural dissimilarities amongst the constituent groups, unequal consumption of colonial modernity, relative deprivation, failing to create political space for the minorities and smaller groups in the new set-up, helped in shaping different ethnicities, which different groups carried on as ‘proto national bonds’. Moreover, the national struggle for freedom also became a model to be simulated at the lower scale of the various ethnicities in their struggle against the national discourse itself – which was relatively a dominant hegemonic discourse for the ethnic groups at the bottom of the hierarchy. The discontents of the ethnic minorities with the bigger players of the project of nationalism started to manifest even before the gaining of the national freedom, as evident in the formation of the conglomerate Tribal League
1933. In addition to such conglomerate bodies, the roots of individual ethnic formations of the various groups were germinated during the high time of Indian nationalism itself. What happened in post-independence times was only a more forceful articulation of the previous agonies in a renewed rhetoric of neglect, deprivation and betrayal.

Observing the process of tribal integration in democratic societies, Roy Burman had opined that "there is always a striving not only in the nation but also in every human group to construct hierarchy of models in terms of which internal relations are tended to be organised to present a coherent whole, but again there is centrifugal tendency of the constituent elements to form autonomous units. Result of the synthesis is emergence of new models" (Roy Burman 1961: 28).

The elite theories of ethnicity, formulated by Brass, Pareto, Mosca and Michels which were discussed in the first chapter, hold good for interpreting the organizational practices of the various ethnic groups, including the Karbis. The core perspective of these theories tends to interpret the ethnic phenomenon more as the result of the craze on the part of the few elites in a community to gain political as well as economic mileage. In the context of the current fashion of ethnic politics of Assam in general and the Karbis in particular, the failure of the mass-supported movements (often read as betrayal of the leadership) and subsequent splits in the leaderships provide undeniable validity of the elite interests in such movements.

With the advent of globalization that accompanied the unstoppable waves of reterritorialization of the existing social and cultural categories at the end of the twentieth century, the unresolved demands and unfinished agendas of the ethnicities in Assam gained new cultural vocabularies. Amidst a situation where the world at large began to feel "ethnicity everywhere", the ethnic movements in Assam distinctly resorted to a war to be fought extensively with cultural symbolism. Like the cases elsewhere, the ethnic scenario in post-globalization times in Assam is marked with the over-exploitation and manipulation of cultural symbols through extensive museumization of the respective ethno-cultural
resources and construction of new historical narratives to counter the dominant hegemonic discourses. In one sense, this was phase of overwhelming ethnicization of all sorts of social, cultural, economic and political differences amongst the various communities of the region.

If the colonial and post-colonial (or national) phases of the ethnic question in Assam can be seen as the result of distinct historical and socio-political particularities within a specific geo-political region, the ethnic situation after the globalization appeared to be a part of globally experienced universal phenomenon. Though the same political issues and confrontations of pre-globalization times have been spilled over to the post-globalization times, the massive cultural articulations of the ethnic consciousness that accompanied the globalization process make the current ethnic manifestations quite distinct from the previous ethnic incarnations in pre-globalized times. This aspect connects the ethnic question of Assam in current times with the contemporary ethnic scenario in the global scale where culture is increasingly being created, recreated and consumed as economic as well as political commodity.

The ethnic outbreak as a worldwide phenomenon, and experienced as a part of the globalization processes, has been addressed by several scholars from varied perspectives. Reading ethnonationalism as an outcome of the post-Cold War global politics towards the end of twentieth century, Adrian Guelke has pointed out that despite ethno-nationalism being associated with minorities dissatisfied with their place in an existing polity, the phenomenon is much broader than simply providing recourse for rebellious minorities (Guelke 2010, 2). Emphasizing on the sudden decline of communism and the left-leaning political activism, as the counter-hegemonic forces against the western capitalist order, after the cold-war, Guelke observes:

..The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the demise of the Soviet Union underlined that for the time being at least, the forces of capitalism had triumphed. The class struggle’s lack of credibility opened the door to other agendas, centred on the environment and on issues of identity; including gender and
ethnicity. So prevalent were the latter that the post–Cold War era has been dubbed 'the age of identity. (ibid)

Such perspectives may explain the more intense yet fragmented and diversified sites of identity-formations and their more diversified manifestations.

Guelke's argument does provide useful insights in interpreting the increasing ethnicization of various problems, pertaining to issues like gender, environment and development, as a global phenomenon in post-Cold War times. However, the ethnic situation in Assam, as evident in the previous chapters, cannot be reduced to a follow-up of the fall of communism. The influence of an emerging global political fashion of resisting the dominant order of polity, economy and cultural representation, is evident in the current articulation and mobilization of ethnic identities in Assam, particularly after the last decade of the twentieth century. What is apparent is the fact that these universally erupting politics of protest and resistance did not initiate anything radically new in the ethnic situation in Assam, but they indeed influenced the political games by providing a new rhetoric where any social difference or conflict can readily be ethnicized.

In the Indian context, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia incidentally coincided with another significant event. It was the formal acceptance of the economic liberalization policies with the necessary legislative changes by the state. This led to the entry of another, and perhaps more powerful, determinant of identity politics in the form of an entirely different reconfiguration of the nation and the state. It has been pointed out in several literatures on globalization that the increasing shares of the multinational corporate houses resulted in a new structure of power where the states are no longer the masters of their own nations. The classical idea of the nation-state as the ultimate protector of the nation and the interests of its people has been in sharp decline. This weakening of the state in holding the nation has led to a situation where "the 'national' is increasingly losing its significance as the master frame for the construction of collective identities and has become overlaid, undermined, or even replaced by deterritorialized identity formations" (Berking 2003, 248).
Thus, a kind of differentiated identity formation with multiple ethnic collectivities, which is replacing the erstwhile centralized and totalitarian nation, is no longer an exception but has become an increasingly common phenomenon in the globalized world.