Chapter I: Introduction
Introduction:

Ethnic groups within a plural society may differ from one another in their respective numerical strengths, political orientations, socio-economic affiliations, influence in national affairs and communal solidarity. Inter group relations acquire a problem when they are marked by persisting distrust, conflict, tension and disharmony. The problem of ethnic conflict is engendered through grievances based on perceived deprivations and non-reciprocated expectations of the ethnic communities toward one another. This perception is usually associated with the feelings of political insecurity, economic antagonism and threats to cultural identity.\(^1\) Ethnic conflict in its extreme form is characterised by large scale violence, widespread insurgency and extensive civil war causing death, decay, destruction, misery and sufferings. A prolonged continuation of such a situation may seriously weaken and disturb the social order and lead to its political-economic disintegration.\(^2\) That is why the problem of ethnic conflict in contemporary time has become one of the central issues of discussion among the scholars, social scientists, academicians and others. The problem of ethnic conflict in Indian society is a serious one. It has affected different parts of India and most particularly the north-eastern part of India. Insurgency and ethnicity are mainly responsible for growing ethnic conflicts in India in general and Assam in particular. It is also a fact that some of the recent conflicts are politically constructed antagonism between the ethnic communities. Thus the sense of “us versus them” comes into being which implies one community against another or a community against state.\(^3\) That is why the problem of ethnic conflict has become more complex in recent years.

Conflict amongst ethnic group is a widely observed social phenomenon across the world societies. Conflicts between the Walloons and the Flemish in Belgium, the Scots, Welsh and Irish in the United Kingdom, African - American in the United States, the Albanians and Serbs in Yugoslavia, the Christian and Muslim Arabs in Lebanon, the Sunni Kurds and Shia Muslims in Iran and so on are some such examples in other national societies. The south Asian nations are also witnesses

\(^1\) B.B. Kumar, “Tension and Conflict in North East India”, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi,2005,p1
\(^3\) Atul Kohli and Amrita Basu, “Community, Conflict and the State in India”, eds, Oxford University Press, New Delhi,2000,p2
to various ethnic conflicts such as, in Pakistan (in its religious perspective) the conflict between the Shia- the Sunni community, the Muhajirs and the Sindhis, in Sri Lanka the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, in Bangladesh between the Muslims and Buddhists, in Bhutan between Drukpas and Lhotshampas, in Nepal conflict between the Bahuns – Chhetris and the Janajaties, the Bahuns – Chhetris and the Newars and so on.\textsuperscript{4}

India also bears witness to various ethnic conflicts in different parts of its territory. Ethnic conflicts have been resolved and reduced, but also re-created. The conflict arising out of the demand for the Tamil language and land during the early 1960s was resolved, although potential tension between Tamil and the declared national language, Hindi, still exists. The Dravidian movement has played a significant role in the populous southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu since the First World War and parties emerging of it have dominated politics in the state since 1967. It began with exclusionary ethnic appeals which had the potential to cause considerable conflict and undermine civil society. Moreover, the success of Dravidian parties has inhabited the growth of Hindu revivalism which has caused much ethnic conflict and violence in other parts of India. The growth of Hindu revivalism has been dramatised in recent years by the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party as the leading party in the parliament. The destruction of a medieval mosque after a decade long agitation to build a Hindu temple on the site where the mosque was located is responsible for nationwide riots which arose in its aftermath.\textsuperscript{5}

The accommodative bargains which the Indian state struck with the ethnic elites have unraveled in Punjab and Kashmir. The creation of a separate state for the speakers of the Punjabi language as Punjab and the added autonomy given to Jammu and Kashmir ceased to satisfy ethnic mobilisers.\textsuperscript{6} The Rajiv-Longowal accord of 1985 was a major move to contain the conflict in Punjab, although it proved futile. At the same time, there are signs of new conflict formations among some of the hitherto neglected tribes. The movements of Tribal’s in the Jharkhand region (Bihar)

\textsuperscript{5} Narendra Subramanian, “Bringing Society Back In: Ethnicity, Populism and Pluralism in South India”, eds, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002,p367
\textsuperscript{6} P.N. Rastogi, “Ethno-Social Conflict and National Integration”, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi,1993,p9
and Nepalese in Darjeeling and Sikkim over the language issue have become sufficiently politicized and militant to create flashpoints.

The north-eastern region of India also bears witness to the problem of ethnic conflict. In fact, the region is often called as conflict ridden area. The last decade of the twentieth century is best remembered in Manipur for the violent ethnic clashes between Kuki-Naga which was started in 1992 and continued till the year end of 1998. It was followed by clashes between Meiteis and Muslims in May 1993, Kuki-Paite clashes in 1997-1998. Nagaland has also experienced numerous ethnic conflicts which includes the Chakhesangs - Tangkhuls conflict in Phek district during 1995-1996. Assam was one of those states where linguistic issues have emerged as dominant issue in the post-independent period. The two successive language movement indicate that how dominant was the language issue in Assam. The first most notorious language riot was started in 1960-1961, before and after the passing of the Official Language Bill by the state Assembly. The second outbreak of language movement was in 1972, when Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University decided to introduce Assamese as the medium of instruction in the collegiate level. In both instances, there were violent conflicts between ethnic Assamese and Hindu Bengalis and there were deaths, destruction and sufferings as a result of inter-ethnic conflicts as well as of police attempt to control protest demonstration and movements. Socio-political development and economic growth have also contributed to ethnic tensions. Relatively better economic opportunities have led to mass migration from Bangladesh to India, particularly to the bordering state of Assam. The native Assamese have mobilized in protest against the new migrants and have accused the central government of deliberately ignoring their loss of jobs, overcrowding and political shifts unfavorable to the native Assamese. Assamese leaders charge that India’s central government, largely dominated by the Congress Party, sought the migrant vote and therefore ignored the Assamese demands. These suspicions led to several “sons of the soil” movements in Assam since the 1970s. In the mid-1980s there was tension and conflict between the

8 Sanjib Baruah, “India against itself: Assam and The Politics of Nationality”, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999,p105
10 Sanjib Baruah, “India against itself: Assam and The Politics of Nationality”, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999,p105
Assamese and the Bengali Muslims, because of agitation against the influx of foreigners.\textsuperscript{11} This conflict has now reemerged in violent form under the leadership of the NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland) and the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam). The state has also witnessed another ethnic clash between Bodo and Santhals in early 1996.\textsuperscript{12} In the same way, the other ethnic conflicts witnessed by the state include Karbi- Kuki and Dimasa- Hamr conflicts in the year 2003, Karbi – Dimasa conflict in the year 2005, Garo-Rabha Conflict in 2011, Bodo- Muslim conflict in the year 2008 & 2012 and so on.\textsuperscript{13}

Since the Independence of India, the ethnic conflict between various ethnic groups has become a common phenomenon. And the ‘ethnic factor’, which previously occupied a peripheral space in Indian politics, has now become embedded in its core. Ethnicity has emerged as a major instrument for the political parties to share in and access to political power. In fact, ethnicity has become a heavy weapon to political parties in their struggle for power. Politicisation by the political parties takes place at two levels- at one level, politicisation of people’s cultural, linguistic and most importantly ethnic sentiments resulting in ethnic conflicts and at another level, politicisation by the political parties to find a solution to the conflict.\textsuperscript{14} Ethnic conflicts arise because these are grist to the political mill of electoral campaigns. Political leaders appeal to pride, historic achievements and current injustices—real and imagined—to win elections, to deny the same to opponents and to gain office, position and power. Indian politicians have become extremely adept at mobilizing ethnic mass support for all kinds of political and personal objectives. The threat of mass disaffection, whipped up by ethnic leaders, works effectively against a central government unwilling to accede to ethnic demands. Ethnic leaders who command a large following in a particular province are not unlike feudal lords commanding loyalty from their “captive” fiefdoms based on myths of common origin, language, and religion. This is evidenced by the

\textsuperscript{11}ibid
\textsuperscript{12}Internet Source: Pralip Kumar Narzary, “Hidden Truth of Ethnic Clash Between Boro Tribe and Santhals in Assam”, Post Graduate Department of Population Studies, Fakir Mohan University, Vyasa Vihar, Balasore 19, Orissa, India
\textsuperscript{14}Internet source: http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/NESRC/Pranami.html, Pranami Garg, “Aspiration for an Ethnic Identity- Evolved or Created: A Question Asked in the Context of Assam”. 
existence of a large number of regional and provincial political parties, which regularly win elections and form governments in India.\textsuperscript{15} For instance, by the emphasis on race, language and territory in the evocation of Tamil ethnicity, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party has emerged in Tamil Nadu. Similarly, for mobilising the Sikhs, the Siromani Akali Dal combines religion and territory in such a way as to dilute the linguistic marker as well as the long drawn cultural affinities between the Punjabi Sikhs and Punjabi Hindus.\textsuperscript{16} Again, the ethnic leaders such as Lalo Prasad Yadav in Bihar, Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra, Jayalalita in Tamil Nadu and Prafulla Kumar Mahanta in Assam have prevailed because of their appeals to respective fellow ethnic groups. For the political advantage, political parties nominate individuals who enjoy high standing in their ethnic constituencies. A closer examination, however, suggests that centralization alone is rarely the sole reason for ethnic disaffection. More often than not, demographic pressures, as in Assam, a change in the distribution of power within an ethnic community, can change the position of an ethnic group within India’s polity, leading to conflict.\textsuperscript{17} In North-East India, different tribes have no common affinity with each other and minimum level of political consciousness. That is why, the political scenario is always influenced greatly by racial-ethnic identity questions, culture and linguistic questions raised by different political parties. The formation of the communal-ethnic oriented groups like Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU), Khasi National Durbar, Jaintia Durbar, various kuki national organisations of Manipur like Hmar Association and Vaiphei National Organisation (VNO), People’s Party of Arunachal Pradesh, the Seng Kark (SK) of Tripura and others had gradually resulted in different movements for sub-national political identity on the basis of language and culture within the region of North East India.\textsuperscript{18}

Assam, one of the eight states of North-East India, is enclosed by Bangladesh, Bhutan and Tibet and linked with mainland India by a narrow corridor between Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. The population of Assam consists of the inhabitants who migrated into the region at various periods of history from Tibet, Burma, Thailand, Bengal and elsewhere. Over time, they got integrated as a

\textsuperscript{16} Lipi Ghosh, “Ethnicity and Issue of Identity Formation”, eds, Oxford University Press, New Delhi,2001,p89
\textsuperscript{17} “Encyclopedia of India, Vol.2 (E-J),” Thomson Corporations, United States of America, 2006, p39-44
\textsuperscript{18} B.C.Bhuyan, “Political Development of the North East,” (vol.1), Omsons Publications, New Delhi,1989,p29
population and have given birth to the greater Assamese nation. Present day Assam roughly covers the area ruled by the ‘native’ ethnic groups, the Ahoms, Bodos, Koch, Mataks and Chutiya and different branches of Kacharis such as Dimasa, Sonowal, Thengal and so on.\(^{19}\)

With the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, a Line System was introduced on the pretext of protecting the minority indigenous ethnic groups in the hill areas of Assam by restricting outsiders’ entry, business activities, land transactions and settlement. For the same purpose, in 1935 the hill areas were demarcated and divided into “excluded areas” and “partially excluded Areas”. The former fell under direct British jurisdiction and the latter were given a limited representative system under British administrative control.\(^{20}\) A sense of incompatibility grew into one of resentment against being made a part of India and an anti-India sentiment emerged among some communities in the region in post-independent period. To deal with this feeling of discrimination, the Constitution of India contained a special provision in the form of the Sixth Schedule for the administration of the “tribal” areas. It was meant to protect their communities in the Hill areas of the Northeast. Under it, the “tribal” areas in the Northeast were divided into two parts, Part A and Part B. Part A has autonomous Districts administered by the Government of Assam, with a limited representation in the State Legislative Assembly and in the National Parliament. Part B was administered by the Governor of Assam acting as Agent of the President of India. The United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District, the Garo Hills District, the Lushai Hills District, the Naga Hills District, the North Cachar Hills District and the Mikir Hills District were placed in Part A and the North East Frontier Tract, the Balipara Frontier Tract, the Tirap Frontier Tract, the Abor Hill and Mishmi Hills Districts and the Naga Tribal Area came under Part B. Tripura and Manipur were made special administrative regions under the control of the central government. The reorganization of the states on linguistic terms further aggravated the scene. The tribal areas under the 6\(^{th}\) Schedule

\(^{19}\) Udoyan Misra, “*The Transformation of Assamese Identity*”, North East India History Association, Shillong, 2001, p25

got statehood one by one. Thus, Assam was broken up and North-East India became 7 states.²¹

The process of getting divided on the line of ethnicity did not stop here. The aspiration for a distinct identity among the ethnic groups resulted in a number of ethnic movements demanding autonomy. As a result, at present there are several Autonomous Councils in the state. Today in Assam, there are either movements for separate states or autonomy on the part of different ethnic groups. These groups had come together and supported during the Assam Movement 1979-85, but the Assam Accord 1985 mentioned only the ethnic Assamese.²² That alienated the groups that had identified themselves with a common Assamese identity. Slowly the non-Assamese groups developed a desire to be separate and hence have come up with a struggle for a separate state. Why did that happen? It is because of politicization of the ethnicity elements on the one hand and deprivation and domination by the dominant group on the other. Along with such factors a crisis is created through politicisation by the political parties and ethnic leaders. The very crisis arising out of cultural, economic and linguistic deprivation grows and develops into a conflict through political interference. Politicisation helps the ethnic groups to grow conscious of their existence and rights. But over-intrusion of politics in the phenomenon of an ethnicity makes the situation worse. The present situation of ethnic identity crisis, social formation and rise of sub-nationalism in Assam is to a great extent due to political orientation in the wrong direction.²³

Politics plays a two-way role in ethnicity and rise of sub-nationalism in Assam. Firstly, politics of recognition and representation has encouraged the growth of the ethnic groups’ demand for a distinct set up which results in the formation of sub-nationalism or a nation within a nation. At this stage, it is important to recognize the distinctness of these groups. However, when it is perceived as a favour granted or a right acquired through a political struggle, the state policy of recognition of traditional institutions and representation of the ethnic groups in the decision-

²¹ ibid
making bodies can nourish stronger sentiments and emotions of ethnicity among other groups. Its outcome can be noticed at various levels. At the institutional level, the ensuing politics of ‘recognition’ employed by the federal state have fashioned a multiplicity of institutions which contest with similar institutions of other groups and also with the structures of the state and autonomous institutions. In such circumstances, Benedict Anderson’s (1991) phrase ‘imagined community’ seems to become a reality. Ethnic sentiments, emotions related to their culture, language, symbols etc. and politics of recognition and representation come together to give birth to an image of their communion or nationhood which can also be described as sub-nationalism. In fact, there is a need to “imagine” a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-linguistic integrated Assamese society, but politicisation has turned this imagination into an ethnic conflict and crisis.

Secondly, the presence of political intrusion is again felt when this sub-nationalism grows to its full capacity causing a threat to the state. As Dov Ronen suggests, “ethnicity is politicized into the ethnic factor when an ethnic group is in conflict with the political elite over such issues as the use of limited resources or the allocation of benefits.” Stanley Tambiah, reiterates the same when he says that “central problems posed by our present phrase of ethnic conflicts are startlingly different arising out of an intensified ‘politicalisation of ethnicity’ and ensuing in conflicts between member groups of a state and polity, which itself is thought to be in crisis.”

The first instance of politicisation and alienation of ethnic groups from the greater Assamese society can be traced to the politicization of their identity aspiration. There are three reasons for the identity crisis of the ethnic groups in Assam. The emergence of consciousness of one group being different from the other group, feeling of getting segregated and discriminated against and desire for bigger share in power wielding


27 ibid
machinery, for more economic, educational and job facilities.\textsuperscript{28} The discriminatory policies of the Centre and political aspirations of the groups which form an integral part of the game of politics, play the chief role in emergence of new ethnic conflicts.

Besides, the vested political or power interests of the ethnic groups get fulfilled through the sentiments of culture, language and symbols. All the autonomy movements in Assam have started with the premise that immense discrimination has been done to them by the dominant group as well as the centre and they should get autonomy. For example the movements of different ethnic groups such as the Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa-Kachari, Lalungs, Rabha Hassong etc and these movements are carried out through the formation of different political parties in Assam. In 1984, Plains Tribal Council of Assam demanded for the creation of autonomous state namely ‘Udayachal’ comprising all the tribal areas of Assam. It claimed the protection of Bodo language, culture and identity.\textsuperscript{29}

The most vigorous type of movement for separation has been launched by the Autonomous State Demand Committee formed on 17\textsuperscript{th} may 1986 in Karbi Anglong district of Assam. One of the major problems which is inflicting the people of the district of Karbi Anglong in contemporary time is the demand for an autonomous state or separate state. Though, the solution to this problem remains confined in article 244(A) of the Sixth schedule of the Indian constitution, no solution could be reached yet. The reason for this inability to come to a concrete solution is politics. Taking advantage of that particular article of the Indian constitution, various political parties and organisations have started various movements and resulted in creating differences amongst the people. Peace and harmony existing amongst various communities living in the state have gradually started to wane under various acts of violence.\textsuperscript{30} The rising expectation of ethnic groups namely, Assamese and Bengali Muslims resulted in the formation of Axom Gana Parishad and United Minority Front in 1985. In recent time, the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and the Bodoland Progressive Front (BPF) are also playing an important role in state politics for the protection of distinct identity for their respective

\textsuperscript{28}Shakuntala Bora, “\textit{Ethnic Struggles in Assam: An Observation}”, Regency Publications, New Delhi,2006, Pp 459–468

\textsuperscript{29} B.C.Bhuyan, “\textit{Political Development of the North East}”, Omsons Publications, New Delhi,1989,p.29(Vol.I)

ethnic community.\textsuperscript{31} From the political point of view, the emergence of different separatist movements and formation of political parties for the protection of ethnic identity have led to a sort of consolidation of the emerging ethnic conflict in the state of Assam.

Thus, a study on ethnic conflicts and role of political parties will not only bring to the focus a burning problem of the state but will also help to find out the actual role played by the political parties in ethnic conflict. Such a study may help to put solutions to continuing ethnic conflict in Assam.

**Objectives:** The objectives of the present study are:

1. To understand the nature of ethnic conflict.
2. To understand the causes and consequences of ethnic conflicts in Assam.
3. To examine the role of political parties in ethnic conflict in Assam.

**Review of Literature:**

There are plenty of scholarly works on the conceptual background of ethnicity, ethnic conflict and identity politics. One such work is Phadnis and Ganguly’s\textsuperscript{32} ‘Ethnicity and Nation Building in South Asia’ which in a comparative framework gives an appraisal of the dynamics of ethnic identities and movements in South Asian states. Such a comparative perspective, posited within the region and also covering wider issues of theoretical concern, has helped in identifying certain broad parameters of ethnicity and the process of nation building. They address the central issue of regional politics in both the inter-state and the intra-state manifestations and provide an incisive analysis of ethnicity as an idea and its application to the politics of the region. They also discuss various ethnic movements in these countries as also the constraints and compulsions within which different regimes handled such ethnic assertions.

Amartya Sen\textsuperscript{33} in his work ‘Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny’ argues that conflict and violence are more sustained today, not less than in the past.

\textsuperscript{31} Sanjib Baruah, “India against itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality”, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999,p139-141
\textsuperscript{32} Urmila Phadnis & Rajat Ganguly, “Ethnicity and Nation Building in South Asia”, Sage Publication, New Delhi,2001
The world may be more riven by murderous violence than ever before, that the brutalities are driven as much by confusion as by inescapable hatred. The world is increasingly taken to be divided between religion and cultures or civilizations, ignoring the relevance of other ways in which people see themselves through class, gender, profession, language, literature, science, music, morals or politics and denying the real possibilities of reasoned choices. Human beings are deeply miniaturized and deposited into little boxes, when good relations among different human beings are identified in this way.

A.K. Singh\textsuperscript{34} in his work ‘Ethnicity and Inter community conflict: A Case Study of Kuki -Naga in Manipur’ provides a coherent interpretation of the nature of ethnic consciousness and causes of ethnic tensions in north east India in general and Manipur in particular. He addresses the central issue of inter community conflict between Kuki- Naga clashes which was started in 1992 and continued unabated till the year end of 1998. Such ethnic assertion considerably affects inter community and intra community relations at both the inter-state and intra-state level among its various ethnos. The study is also significant for recasting the existing theory of ethnicity and identity and addressing the issue of identity question in relation to ethnicity, language, religion, inter group relations and future directions in the ethnic mine field of Manipur.

Sanjib Boruah\textsuperscript{35} in his work ‘Durable Disorder’ explores a new perspective for the understanding of ethnic conflict and the meaning of democracy with reference to the Northeast India. He also discusses that over a decades, states in this region have experienced ethnic conflict and suffered human and material losses due to insurgency and counter insurgency operation. He addresses that if peace and development are to be brought to the region, India’s policy will have to be reoriented and linked to a new foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. The study also argues that prolonged counter insurgency operation has eroded the democratic fabric of the region and institutionalized authoritarian practices. The result is a growing dissonance between the idea of ethnic homelands and the actually existing political

\textsuperscript{34} A.K. Singh, “Ethnicity and Inter Community Conflict: A Case Study of Kuki -Naga in Manipur”, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi,2008

\textsuperscript{35} Sanjib Boruah, “Durable Disorder”, Oxford University Press, New Delhi,2005
economy of the region that makes ethnic violence and internal displacement quite predictable. Drawing the examples in this major study from a wide variety of multiethnic situations in India with special emphasis on Northeast, presents a distinctive approach and theory concerning with the understanding of politics in Northeast India.

B.B. Kumar\textsuperscript{36} in his work ‘Tension and Conflict in North East India’ explores various factors which are responsible for the existing tension and conflict in north east India in the post independence period. The language politics is the most contributing factor for tension and conflict in this region. The conflict between the Assamese and Bengalis on language began in 1847and it seems that in 1960 the conflict comes to an end when the Assam official language act was passed. But in 1970 the language conflict again broke out as regard the medium of instruction. Another factor is the immigration of people from the neighboring countries mainly from East Pakistan. Various measures are taken by the government but of no avail. Besides that, the ethnic identity has also arisen as a contributing factor for conflict and tension in this region. Insurgency and separatist movement are also highlighted while referring to other factors. He suggests that the present situation of north east India demands early and firm action from the central government to solve the existing tension and conflicts by taking the steps like sealing the borders with Bangladesh creating no man’s land if necessary, peaceful talk with the insurgent groups and so on.

In their work ‘Community, Conflict and The State in India’ Atul Kohli and Amrita Basu\textsuperscript{37} explore the ethnic self determination movements to changing state practices with special reference to the movements organized by Tamils, Sikhs and Kashmiri Muslims. They address the interaction between state and politics on the one hand and consequences of the growth of community conflict on the other hand.

S.K. Chaube\textsuperscript{38} in an article ‘Tribal Societies and the Problem of Nation Building’ introduced the element of “class” as the objective basis of articulation of

\textsuperscript{36} B.B. Kumar, “Tension and Conflict in North East India”, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 2005
\textsuperscript{37} Atul Kohli & Amrita Basu, “Community, Conflict and the State in India”, eds, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000
\textsuperscript{38} B. Pakhem , “Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity” Omsons Publication, New Delhi, 1990
'little communities'. He pointed out the salient features of politics of integration as a confrontation between tradition and modernity after commenting on the political heritage of the North-East India. It also reveals that the tribal elite is not clearly demarcated by the line dividing tradition and modernity. This is because of the fact that the traditional elite has a strong populist base and the class of professional politicians as functionaries of modern state has to reckon with them. The creation of district council and separate state is the result of the political aspiration of the tribal elite. It is to be noted that the growing secessionist movements in North-East India is an aspiration for “political freedom” of the tribal people and the post-independent state is responsible for it.

Paul R. Brass\textsuperscript{39} in his work ‘Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison’ argues that interethnic conflict and secessionist movement have been the major forces in shaping the modern world and the structure and stability of contemporary states. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, such forces and movements have emerged with new intensity.

Rongbong Terong\textsuperscript{40} in his article ‘Ethno-Centric Problem and Karbi Anglong’ discusses the genesis of ethnic conflict and peace initiative in Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The ethno-centric problem is one of the main reasons for the reigning ethnic conflicts and disturbances in North-East in general and Assam in particular. Perturbation caused by ethnic sentiments has threatened the unity, peace and harmony of Karbi Anglong district of Assam. This has given rise to the feelings of agitation and doubts amongst the ethnic communities ultimately resulting in ethno-centric secessionism and extremism in the district. One of the major problems in contemporary time is the demand for an autonomous state or separate state. Though, the solution to this problem lies in article 244(A) of the Sixth schedule of the Indian constitution, yet, no solution could be reached at even after 64 years of independence. The reason for this inability to come to a concrete solution is politics. Taking advantage of that particular article of the Indian constitution, various political parties and organisations have started movements of different kind and it

\textsuperscript{40} Rongbong Terong, “Ethno-Centric Problem and Karbi Anglong”, eds, Peace Studies, OKDESCD, Guwahati & Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2007
created differences amongst the people. Peace and harmony existing among various communities living in the districts have gradually started to wane under various acts of violence and counter violence. As a result, the gravity of these internal ethnic conflicts has hampered the overall peace and security of the district.

B.C. Bhuyan\footnote{B.C. Bhuyan, “Political Development of the North-East”, Omsons Publication, New Delhi, 1989} in an edited work, ‘Political Development of the North-East’ dealt with the growth and development of regional political parties and state politics in North-East India. The Indian National Congress as a national political party gained ascendancy in the north eastern region just after India’s independence. But the regional interest groups had gradually developed themselves into regional political parties with the aims and objectives to achieve separate political and administrative units for the purpose of protection and preservation of their distinct identity. The formation of the communal-oriented groups like Eastern India Tribal Union, Jaintia Durbar, Karbi-A-Durbar, Khasi National Durbar and various Kuki National Organisations of Manipur, Hmar Association, Vaiphei National Organisation, the Sengkrak of Tripura are the examples in this trend. It also discusses that North East India as a region is divided into different sub regions with different demographic compositions, political diversity and complexion and development of sub national political identity usually based on ethnicity, culture and language. That is why the dichotomy between the hill and valley politics of Manipur brings political instability in that state. Meghalaya with its matrilineal system is still struggling in forging a common political identity. Mizoram has not yet finally settled the political identity of the Pawi, Lakher and Chakma.

S.K. Chaube\footnote{S.K. Chaube, “Hill Politics in Northeast India”, Orient Longman Limited, Patna, 1973} in his work ‘Hill Politics in Northeast India’ deals with the social and political evolution and the emergence of autonomy movements in the hills of northeast India. Since the middle of the nineteenth century the region has grown from ethnocentric tribal organisations to territorial autonomous structures through a profound process of change in all spheres of life and society led by an educated and sophisticated middle class. It also focuses about the contradiction/competition between the traditional chiefs making use of the tribal’s love for pristine freedom to preserve their vested interests against the republican wave in India and new elite- the Christianised literati-claiming the leadership of a democratically constituted society that would at the same
time retain its autonomy. The situation today has grown complex; the traditional chiefs have been largely sidelined and partly accommodated in the new structure of power. Statehood, the creation of job opportunities and some developmental activity have only partly satisfied the aspirants of the hill people, particularly of the rapidly increasing numbers of educated youth. Frustration has pushed a section of them to the politics of violence, not necessarily secessionist. Violence has become endemic to northeast Indian politics.

B.C. Upreti in an article ‘Ethnic Identity Consciousness and Nation-Building in Plural Societies: Some Observation’ discusses the factors inducing ethnic mobilisation and its implications for the process of nation building in plural societies. In plural societies the process of nation-building has proved to be quite complex and hazardous. It is very difficult to integrate diverse ethnic groups in plural societies which have been mobilised and feel dissatisfied in the arena of modernisation and development. The various ethnic groups which are mobilised to seek proper concessions from the state usually move in a gradual process and their demands may vary in accordance with the extent of their mobilisation. It may be an assertion of ethnic identity for political influence and resources, demand for autonomy or a secessionist movement by claiming a separate national identity. It is clear that ethnic identity is multi-dimensional, comprised of certain characteristics which may be used for group mobilisation for certain actions. Therefore, ethnic identity consciousness is situational and contextual and has to be constructed for a collective action. In this regard a number of factors may play a contributive role such as historical-cultural, communal, linguistic, religious, political and so on. The study also focussed that ethnicity is a universal phenomenon. Group assertion on the basis of distinct ethnic identities has taken place in the developing as well as in the developed countries. A number of countries all over the world underlined the significance of political assertion of various nationalities.

Nani Gopal Mahanta in an article ‘Assam: Portents of Violence and Hope for Peace’ discusses the conflict resolution approach of the Indian state. The security paradigm of the state is complicating the peace process in the region. That is why, the

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state has failed to provide basic human security to the people and as a result of which various sub-national groups is taking recourse to violent methods. There is no easy solution to political violence in Assam because the insurgent groups are inextricably mixed up with the global terrorist network. It also discusses the current politics concerning sixth schedule which indicates the further division of the state. The ethnic groups of Assam like Bodos, Karbis, Rabhas, Missing, Tiwa, Koch-Rajbangshis and so on increasingly assert an identity which is quite distinct from the caste Hindu Assamese identity. Therefore, there is an urgent need to seriously ponder over the identity question of the Assamese people. It is also suggested that the State requires a major change of thrust from the State security to people’s security, where people can take care of their basic socio-economic and cultural issues democratically. The state should try to resolve the identity issues of the sub-national groups by involving the various representatives of the civil society groups.

D. Nath and D.N Majumder⁴⁵ in an article ‘Some Characteristics Ethno-Cultural Identity in North-East India’ define the term “ethnic” from broad perspective and stated that in its broader sense the term “ethnic” refers to any group of people within a cultural unit who identify themselves as a distinct identity. In North-East India it is difficult to determine the ethnic affinities of its population. It also reveals that different ethnic associations are formed in North-East which is involved in different ethnic movements based on ethnic identity issues. The purpose and demands of such association is to claim for a separate administrative unit. Therefore, smaller communities tend to merge and form bigger identities making it convenient to raise political demands.

Narendra Subramanian⁴⁶ in an article ‘Bringing Society Back In: Ethnicity, Populism and Pluralism in South India’ explores the role of party-society transactions in reconciling the Dravidian movement, the oldest and most durable ethnic movement in India. The Dravidian movement has played a significant role in the populous southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu since the First World War and parties emerged from it have dominated politics in the state since 1967. It began with exclusionary ethnic appeals which had the potential to cause considerable conflict and undermine civil society. Moreover, the success of Dravidian parties has inhabited the growth of Hindu revivalism

⁴⁵ B. Pakhem, “Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity” Omsons Publication, New Delhi, 1990
which has caused much ethnic conflict and violence in other parts of India. The destruction of a medieval mosque after a decade long agitation to build a Hindu temple on the site where the mosque was located is responsible for nationwide riots which arose in its aftermath. The accommodative bargains which the Indian state struck with the ethnic elites have unraveled in Punjab and Kashmir. The creation of a separate state for the speakers of the Punjabi language as Punjab and the added autonomy given to Jammu and Kashmir ceased to satisfy ethnic mobilisers. Further, a new generation of ethnic militants emerged and launched armed separatist movement and the state’s brutal repression has failed to suppress those movements. The explanations given by the centre have attributed the growth of ethnic conflicts in India since the early 1970s and it has failed to explain why it is going on.

Chandana Goswami in her work ‘Nationalism in Assam’ discusses the growth and development of political consciousness in Assam during the last three decades of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth century. The study highlights the factors responsible for the emergence of political awakening and the role played by the intelligentsia for the growth and development of Assamese nationalism. It also highlights the new stream of consciousness penetrating Bengal and its impact on Assam, which help to save the Assamese literary renaissance in the nineteenth century through the development of Assamese language and literature. It also discusses about the contributions of the various socio-political regional organisations like the Ryot Sabha, the Upper Assam Association, the Jorhat Sarbojonik Sabha and so on towards the growth of Assamese sub-nationalism.

N. Joykumar Singh in an edited work ‘Ethnic Relations among the People of North-East India’ discusses the ethnic relations among the people of the Northeast India with special reference to Manipur. The Northeast India has been experiencing contested identity formations and dynamic ethnic relations for centuries. Ethnic relations in the region are thus associated with its social, cultural, economical, political and historical experiences. They have their ramifications in identity formations, ethnic conflicts and territorial assertions. These ramifications are prompted or even contested on the basis of unique histories, cultures and affinities of the people in the region. It also discusses the

47 Chandana Goswami, “Nationalism in Assam”, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2008
48 N. Joykumar Singh, “Ethnic Relations Among the People of North-East India”, Centre for Manipur Studies, Manipur University & Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2006
dynamics of Kuki-Naga inter group relations and the genesis, ramifications of the Kuki-Naga conflict in Manipur and gives a critical estimate of the process of ethnic amalgamation by which Bishnupriyas became a part of the Manipur society and the fragmentation of the society that resulted in the Bishnupriyas-Meitei conflict. The study also explores the genesis and extent of the Kuki-Paite clash, the historical circumstances of social integration in ancient Manipur and the process of integration among the different communities and clans in both the hills and valleys.

Sajal Basu⁴⁹ in his work ‘Regional Movements: Politics of Language, Ethnicity-Identity’ deals with the regional movements and the rise of identity aspirations in the states of Assam, Punjab, Jharkhand and West Bengal. In a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual country like India, sectional sentiments could easily be translated into political action. The linguistic, religious and ethnic sentiments set a tenor of regional movements in the different states of the country. The study also focuses about the socio-cultural factors of the regional movements without sticking to the age old concept of primacy of economic factors and level of development. The ethno-regional movements in Assam, Punjab, Jharkhand and west Bengal do not fit in with the economic premises because the regional, sub-regional movements were based on ethnicity, language, identity factors which had given rise to resurgence and reassertion of groups who were earlier marginalised. Some of the common factors which were responsible for the rise of these regional movements such as influx of migrants, cultural differences between the migrants and local people, restricted job opportunities for indigenous middle class, immobility of local population, rapid growth of education among the lower middle classes, language domination or insecurity of language-culture-religion and so on.

Ramesh K. Chauhan⁵⁰ in an article ‘State, Ethnic conflicts and Tamil Nationality in Sri Lanka’ deals with the problem of nation building in South Asia in general and Sri Lanka in particular. The process of nation building is proving to be a most challenging and complicated phenomenon because the whole of South Asia is facing the acute challenge of ethnic conflicts. Ethnicity has been a critical variable in the formation and reformation of the state structure in this area. The experiences of South Asian countries

during the last five decades of their independence witnessed that the models and strategies which were adopted by the ruling elites of these countries for building a strong nation have proved inadequate and failed to fulfill the expectations and aspirations of different ethnic groups. It also discusses the problem of ethnic conflicts between the Sinhalese and the Tamils and the role of the state in resolution of political conflicts in Sri Lanka. Apart from this, the chauvinist and communalist stance of the successive Sinhalese government, the role of major political parties dominated by the Sinhalese, the failure of the moderate Tamil political parties and leadership to resolve the problem within the existing constitutional framework are also discussed. Further, it also covers the genesis and the development of Tamil militancy for separate “Tamil Eelam” and the efforts to resolve the ethnic conflict through negotiations with the mediation of third party.

George Schopflin\textsuperscript{51} in his work ‘Nations Identity and Power: The New Politics of Europe’ discusses the problem of ethnic minorities in central and eastern Europe. The problem of ethnic minorities is a global issue, though politically the problem is more acute in central and eastern Europe. The modern democratic nation is the most effective instrument for stabilising ethnic conflicts which can be defined as a set of interactive relationship between the state, civil society and ethnicity. The role of the state is to provide stability, predictability and good governance and the role of civil society is to provide articulation of interest and the contest for power within society. The role of ethnicity is to provide bonds of solidarity, the expression of the deepest levels of identity and cultural reproduction for the tacit regulations by which a society creates coherence. Therefore, if ethnicity is expected to be the source of good governance, it will fail the test because that is not what it is supposed to do. Likewise, civil society cannot be the sole basis for democratic consent because civil society is the field where public contests for power take place and is structured around the aggregation of conflicts. The problem with respect to ethnic minority in their relations to ethnic majority is that while they may except the state and may take part in civil society, their conception of identity will certainly differ from that of ethnic majority. This is the source of much friction which can spill over into conflicts and in extreme cases into violence as happened in Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, Bosnia and so on.

N. S. Narahari\textsuperscript{52} in his work on ‘Socio-Ethnic Conflict in the North-East’ discusses the problem of ethnic conflict in north-east states in general and north Bengal and Sikkim in particular. The peace and harmonies of this region is no more there, because these regions are intensified with ethnic conflict, insurgency and the movement of various underground groups. He also highlighted the conflicts between the Lepchas (the real inhabitant of Sikkim) and Nepalese in Sikkim. As a result casteless and ethnically balanced society is now caught up in a divisive, communal, and caste class exercise. He also stated that another notable conflict area is related to Darjeeling and Gurkhaland issues. The formation of Gurkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) is led to formation of a separate Gurkhaland in the region. Gurkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) argues that the continuous infiltration from the neighbouring country like Bangladesh has created a great havoc in north Bengal region in particular. Generally the border villages constitute Muslim villages and it is difficult to identify the immigrants from Bangladesh. In this regard Narahari observes that the conflict situation is looming in the region because militant groups from neighbouring states such as Assam and Bihar were helping in militant activities of Gurkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). The formation of Muslim Fundamental Organizations (MFOs) again intensified the conflict in the region. This organization is encouraging insurgency and it is nurtured by neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh. Pakistan and Bangladesh have numbers of militant organization which are activity indulging in carrying out militant activities in India. The government has taken many measures to tackle these problems but there are loop holes.

Dennis Austin\textsuperscript{53} in his work ‘Democracy and Violence in India and Sri Lanka’ discusses the scenario of democracy and violence in India and Sri Lanka. These two South Asian republics adopted parliamentary form of government but periodically threatened by outbreaks of conflict. The violence of political and communal conflict is very frequent, brutish and widespread in this area. In Sri Lanka, mainstream politics became divided over religion and language and extreme ideological differences has come up from the 1950’s onwards. On the other hand In India, caste, religion, language, ethnicity is the primary source of inter-ethnic conflicts and provincial insurrections. In

\textsuperscript{52} N.S Narahari, “Security Threats to North-East India”, Manas Publication, New Delhi, 2009

this endeavour democracy itself is a spur to violence. When societies are divided,
democracy adds depth to the sense of division. People in fragmented societies do not
necessarily choose democracy but give their support to the causes of division. They
democratically cast their votes for parties intend on conflicts. It is now widely accepted
that Indian and Sri Lankan politics have been poisoned in this way and both the countries
keep an uneasy balance between violence and democracy.

R. S. Sandhu54 in an article ‘Theoretical Understanding of North-East India’
discusses the causes and nature of ethnic conflicts, problem of language, identity politics
and intra tribal relations of North East India. All the states of North East have forces of
fragmentation reflected by violence and insurgencies which resulted in separatist trends
and struggle for self determination since the independence of India. This has adversely
affected the process of nation building and the working of the Indian federalism. The
contemporary India confronts a variety of problems which are related to the socio-
economic aspect of life. Of these, ethnic divisions have raised some of the complicated
issues. Ethnic issues, no doubt have decisively influenced the political life of the north
eastern states.

It is thus clear that there are plenty of scholarly works on theoretical
understanding on ethnicity, identity politics, causes and nature of conflicts in north
east India. But, there is hardly any work on the role of political parties in ethnic
conflict in Assam. In this respect, the present study is a pioneering one. The present
study is significant in the sense that it will help to understand the role played by the
political parties in ethnic conflicts and will also help in finding a solution to the
problem of ethnic conflicts among different groups in Assam.

Theoretical Framework:

There are three competing approaches to the understanding of ethnicity such
as primordialist, instrumentalist, and constructivist. Primordialist views assert that
ethnic identification is based on deep ‘primordial’ attachments to a group or culture.
The instrumentalist views treat ethnicity as a political instrument exploited by
leaders and others in pragmatic pursuit of their own interests and the constructivist

54 R. S. Sandhu, “Theoretical Understanding of North-East India”, eds, Kanishka Publishers, Distributors,
New Delhi, 2002
views emphasize the contingency and fluidity of ethnic identity, treating it as something which is made in specific social and historical contexts.

**Primordialist views:** Edward shills is considered as the first person who used the term ‘primordial’ for the first time. The primordial thought of ethnicity is based on the assumption that ethnicity is a ‘natural’, ‘given’ and ‘assumed’ phenomenon. They have the belief that ethnicity is an assumed or given of the human conditions and state, parties, bureaucracy, politics are regarded as the public expression of these pre existing ethnic cleavages and cultural identities. Shills viewed that ethnicity is a natural phenomenon with its foundations in family and kinship ties. He is of the opinion that attachment that the family members feel for each other ‘was not merely to the family members as a person, but as a processor of certain especially significant relation qualities which could only be described as primordial’.\(^55\) Steven George defines primordial ties in terms of attachment that people feel for their kin and local nativity. He believes that primordial ties are rooted in ones’ birth and the collective role played by the family, locals and own people for the protection of his/her life. Therefore, the human beings have to be attributed to his/her family.\(^56\) Walker Connor another primordialist, who tries to explain ethno-national consciousness in terms of psychological traits. According to him ethno-national bonds are profoundly rooted in the minds of human beings or in their psychology. Therefore, ethno-national bonds are essentially psychological in nature. He also views that ethno-national cannot be explained by the objective elements like common language, culture, religion, social custom because nation itself is attached with psychological bonds.\(^57\)

The objectivist theories of ethnicity also hold a primordial view which assert that ultimately there is some real, tangible foundation to ethnic identification, can be subdivided into those in which ethnicity is viewed as a predominantly biological phenomenon and those in which it is construed as a product of culture and history. Ethnicity is usually determined by genetic and geographical factors. Pierre van den Berghe (1981) has explored the contribution of socio-biology to the explanation of ethnic phenomena and suggests that these are rooted in a genetic predisposition for

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\(^{56}\) *ibid*

\(^{57}\) *ibid*
kin selection or ‘nepotism’. In general, ethnicity is defined as a comprehensive form of natural selection and kinship connections, a primordial instinctive impulse, which ‘continues to be present even in the most industrialised mass societies of today’. It is to be noted that recognition of the group affiliation is genetically encoded, being a product of early human evolution, when the ability to recognize the members of one’s family group was necessary for survival.

Instrumentalist views: Fredrik Barth and Abner Cohen are regarded as the founder of this approach. Instrumental approach of ethnicity argues that ethnicity is essentially a social or political product. It is the creation of elites. According to John and Anthony, “Ethnicity is socially constructed and people have the ability to cut and mix from variety of heritages and cultures to from their own individual or group identities.” Fredrick Barth and Abner Cohen viewed that ethnic assertion is an “individual strategy” in which individual move from one identity to another to “advanced their personal economic and political interest or to minimize the losses.” Cohen also stated that ethnicity is a political phenomenon rather than the product of cultural affinity. He is also of the opinion that culture is not fabric element of ethnicity rather it becomes the sources of conflict when it comes into clash with political interest. Therefore, instrumentalism, with its intellectual roots in sociological functionalism, treated ethnicity as a product of political myths, created and manipulated by cultural elites in their pursuit of advantages and power. The cultural forms, values and practices of ethnic groups become resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantage. They become symbols and referents for the identification of members of a group which are called up in order to ease the creation of a political identity. Thus, ethnicity is created in the dynamics of elite competition within the boundaries determined by political and economic realities.

Constructivist views: Fredrik Barth and his colleagues, conceptualizes ethnicity as group identity that is essentially fluid depending upon how the boundaries of an ethnic group are drawn in a specific context, and hence the precise

59 ibid
content of ethnic identity is defined in relation to the distinct external stimuli. The task of ethnic mobilization research is to determine what factors activate the creation of ethnicity in a given context. Paul Brass who agrees with the instrumentalist approach argues that often ethnic symbols and collective loyalties are mobilized especially for the attainment of a particular ends—principally gains in power and economic advancement. This conceptualization has enabled anthropologists to concentrate upon the situational and contextual character of ethnicity, to see more clearly its political dimensions such as the ability to structure inter-group relations and to serve as a basis for political mobilization and social stratification. With the advent of a new interpretative paradigm based on postmodernism, attention has shifted to the negotiation of multiple subjects over group boundaries and identity. In this atmosphere of renewed sensitivity to the dialectics of the objective and the subjective forms in the process of ethnic identity formation and maintenance, even the negotiable character of ethnic boundaries stressed by Barth was too reminiscent of his objectivist predecessors’ tendency to reification. It was argued that terms like ‘group’, ‘category’ and ‘boundary’ still connote a fixed identity and Barth’s concern with maintenance tends to reify it still more. For Joane Nagel who follows a constructivist approach, ethnicity is constructed out of the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry or regionality. The location and meaning of particular ethnic boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised, revitalized, both by ethnic group members themselves as well as by outside observers. She emphasizes that the constructed ethnic boundaries determine who is a member and who is not and designate which ethnic categories are available for individual identification at a particular time and place. The construction of ethnic boundaries or the adoption or presentation of a particular ethnic identity is often used as a strategy to gain collective political or economic advantage.

64 Thesis Ferdinand Banteilang Basan, “Ethnic Identities and Issues of Development: A Case Study of Meghalaya”, Centre for Political Studies, JNU, New Delhi
In the present study the instrumentalist view bear relevance. Ethnicity is used as a political instrument by the political parties and ethnic leaders in pragmatic pursuit of their own interests. It is a fact that ethnic identity and its articulation in terms of ethnicity is not pre-determined or given. It is socially constructed and thus both Indian and non-Indian social scientists working in the field have categorically suggested that the politics of identity and ethnicity is the product of modern society particularly highlighted by the middle class in most of the developing countries. The situation obtaining in Assam comes close to this understanding. Theoretically speaking, ethnic identity is the symbolic use of certain markers of culture by a community to differentiate itself from other groups and communities. It involves claims to a higher status as a group in relation to others. Such self-conscious groups develop their own criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from the group. The use of ethnic identity for pursuing group interests is ethnicity which is initially utilised for people’s mobilisation. Subsequently the same identity turns into an instrument to seek political and economic advantages. That is why in Assam, ethnic conflicts are instrumental in nature. Keeping in mind these realities, the instrumentalist view is adopted in the present study.

Theoretical Development:

Ethnic phenomena have been studied by social scientists since early 19th century. But academic interest has increased in the recent past in the wake of the historical resurgences of ethnic identity throughout the world. That is why, the social scientists have started to examine and re-examine ethnic issues in the context of the current ethnic conflicts scenario which has resulted in distinct theoretical formulations and perspective on the subject. Besides the three lines thoughts of ethnicity such as primordial, instrumental and constructive, there are some other theories of ethnicity which try to explain the basis of ethnic movement. A brief discussion on this formulation is given below:

The Functionalist Perspective: This perspective had its roots in the work of Emile Durkheim and in the structural functionalism of Talcot Parsons. These theoretical formulations led to the assumption that over time, usually a couple of

65 M. N. Karna, “Conflicts amid the Historical Experiences of Identity, Nation and the State in North Eastern India”, North Eastern Social Research Centre Guwahati, 2008, p 18-28
generations, immigrant ethnic communities in large and plural societies such as American or Australian, would first acculturate to the dominant secular culture and later through marriage and socialisation would get absorbed into the larger society. It also assumed that several ethnic communities and their traditions would gradually disappear into a ‘melting pot’ of the overarching society and would have only the shadow memories of their former religious traditions. In this ‘melting pot’, sociologists have seen a process of natural adaptation by the groups on the criterion of equality. Starting with social interaction on mutual distrust and fear but later on the groups overcome these barriers and settle for a life of harmony. But the critic has comprehensively questioned the adaption ideas on the basis of ethnic developments since 1930s. Critics have argued that ethnic divergence potential inheres in ethnicity. The smaller groups are exploited by the dominant groups. Therefore, predicting the course of ethnicity will precede predicting ethnic disturbances in society.  

The Psychological Perspective: Psychological manifestation in ethnic behaviour taking place in a social context focuses on the subjective nature of ethnicity. Ethnic feelings arise out of individual’s innate identification with one group and adherence to it varies from member to member. Attitudes, prejudices and stereotyping are three broad categories of psychological predispositions towards ‘they’ group. They are directed against ‘them’ and acting as barriers to interactions in sphere of social life. Attitudes have important implications in understanding ethnicity. Social attitudes are very complex in their origin and structure and manifest themselves in the form of prejudices and stereotypes about the other communities, caste and groups. The subtler forms of ethnic attitudes may also be a cause of an ethnic conflict. On the other hand prejudice has been defined as ‘an antipathy based upon faulty and inflexible generalisation’. It may be felt and expressed. It may be directed towards a group as a whole or towards an individual because he/she is a member of that group. That is why prejudice is viewed as a negative feeling or attitudes of one group towards another group.

The Socio-Cultural Perspective: The cultural approach was a response to the earliest writings on ethnicity which identified race with ethnicity and considered

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67 ibid
68 ibid
generic factors as the prime determinants of ethnicity in the context of colonialism. This response recognised race as a biological construct which could not by itself explain the formation and behaviour of ethnic groups unless factors such as traditions, customs, historical and geographical factors were taken into account. Sociological perspective provides insights into the sources of inequalities which create an environment for ethnic cleavages. Melting pot is a desirable phenomenon but social structural barriers exist in melting of ethnic differences. Sociologists see ethnic reality as largely conflictual and as the consequences of institutional structures. Scholars have defined it as “actions and practices carried out by members of dominant groups or their representatives which have a differential and harmful impact on members of subordinate.” Acculturation, cultural pluralism, even realism are used as ideologies to institutionalise discrimination and propagated through family, school and even media. The end point of this process is that resources and rewards of the society are distributed discriminatorily and which may lead to the ethnic conflict in society.  

The Communication Perspective: The communication perspective first defines inter-ethnic communication as “a subset of inter-cultural communication within a societal boundary that applies to individuals who differ in ethnicity.” It then goes on to attribute ethnic conflicts to lack of effective and continuing communication between ethnic groups. Its absence creates distance which creates ignorance and fear which breed hostility. The hostility is a measure of the potential for minimising ethnic conflict or maximising harmony among the ethnic groups. 

The Marxist Perspective: The class theorists explain the revival of ethnicity in terms of the exacerbation of internal contradictions in the world capitalist economy. They regard contemporary ethnic situation as byproducts of capitalism which necessitated large scale population movements. Some Marxist studies focuses on the nature of national liberation movements, self determination and ethnicity’s strategic political role. It also discussed the nature of cultural and political domination and the economic exploitation by the dominant groups. In India a group

69 ibid
70 Susheela Bhan, “Impact of Ethnic Violence on Youth: A Study Tribal-Nontribal Violence in Kokrajhar”, Assam, Institute of Peace Research and Action, New Delhi, 1999, P 7-33
71 ibid
of scholar, starting with S. Jones have applied the notion of ‘internal colonialism’ to understand the ethnic situation in Indian context. The issue of uneven development and internal colonialism has been explored by Nirmal Sengupta in examining the situation in Jharkhand. Later J. Pathy examined the situation of ‘ethnic minorities’ in Orissa from the perspective of political economy, considering ethnic expression ‘as a product of uneven development’ in the process of nation building and focusing on the class dimension of the ethnic phenomenon.\(^\text{72}\)

**The Pluralist Perspective:** The pluralist theories give ethnicity a key role in the dynamics of modern society but at the expense of their economic dimensions. In pluralism, economic class formation is considered as largely irrelevant to the analyses of social and political structure. Pluralists do call attention to economic class formation but relegate it to relative insignificance, arguing that ethnical/ racial solidarities are stronger than those based on economic class. In its current form, the theory of pluralism has been developed by M.G.Smith. According to Smith, colonial societies are characterised by structural pluralism which entails a differential distribution, either through legal or extra legal practice of civil and political rights. For Smith incorporation is essentially a political act and a society is held together by authority and regulation of one segment over others. Thus, from the pluralist perspective, the question of inter-ethnic conflict is a matter of political domination of one group over the others.\(^\text{73}\)

**The Middleman-Minorities Perspective:** In Africa, Indians constitute what have been termed as “Middleman Minorities” or marginal trading communities. It has been observed that they are often found in complex, stratified agrarian societies characterised by a status gap or marked division between elites and common masses. Middleman minorities were not necessarily the creation of colonial economies. In many cases, they existed in pre-colonial and pre-capitalist societies. Chinese in South-East Asia, Jains and Parsees in India, Jews in Europe, provide some of the examples of such communities. But why do middleman minorities come into conflict with other groups within the host society? This perspective argues that middleman minorities in present feudal societies served as a buffer group in the

\(^{72}\) ibid
\(^{73}\) ibid
power struggle between the two major classes, the elites and the masses. In times of prosperity and reduced class conflict the middleman minorities finds themselves relatively secure under the protection of the elite group. In times of stress, however, they becomes a naturally victim group.\(^\text{74}\)

**The Resource Perspective:** In the resource perspective, scholars visualised a relationship between material conditions of society and ethnic conflict. Ethnic group clash with each other because they perceived distribution of resources as a zero-sum game, that is, one group’s access to resources is the loss of access for another group. Scarcity of resources only feeds the suspicion among the groups that distribution is unequal. That is why, now a days groups are competing for resources on the basis of ethnicity. From the resource perspective it can be argued that ethnic conflict is a conflict over the resources because democratic institutions have not assisted the ethnic groups to access society’s resources. The empirical evidence shows that ethnic conflict takes place more severally and frequently in democratic countries like India. The modernisation dimension is also a part of resource perspective. It asserts that ethnic competition for resources have led to a sort of conflicts amongst the people.\(^\text{75}\)

**The Civilizational Perspective:** The civilizational approach developed in Latin America is specifically addressed to the realities of the present Third World societies, particularly, to the situation of indigenous populations in Latin America. It emerged in opposition to extremes in the perception of ethnicity and to economic reductionism. Ethnicity is seen from this perspective as an expression of civilizational alternatives based on people’s awareness of the historical depth of their collective socio-cultural styles. This approach views conflicts expressed in ethnic terms as confrontation with economic as well as with socio-cultural domination. Critiques of the civilizational approach have come from some Marxist Anthropologists who underline the weak treatment given to the location of indigenous movements in the class structure of the specific nation states- the

\(^{74}\text{ibid}\)
\(^{75}\text{ibid}\)
identification of the ‘ethnic essence’ and a return to the source and the emphasis on the confrontation of ethno-national groups with the west as a basic contradiction.\textsuperscript{76}

It needs to be observed that no single approach by itself can adequately explain and deal with the current ethnic situation in the state of Assam. Though scholars have looked at ethnicity from different theoretical perspectives, the complexities of the ethnic situation defy any neat generalisation or affirmative theorization. An eclectic approach which takes the integrative and disintegrative processes occurring simultaneously may provide a more authentic theoretical frame towards building a comprehensive and acceptable theory of ethnicity. Each ethnic situation in Assam represents a unique combination of historical, social, economic, political and cultural correlates which in itself presents a challenge to social science students despite the extensive and intensive attention that has been given to this phenomenon.

From the resource perspective it can be argued that ethnic conflict is a conflict over the resources because democratic institutions have not assisted the ethnic groups to access society’s resources. From the Marxist perspective it can be argued that the cultural and political domination and economic exploitation by dominant group are the fundamental cause of ethnic conflicts in Assam. One can understand the ethnic conflicts situation in the context of Assam through applying the Marxist notion of internal colonialism. The issue of uneven development and internal colonialism has been explored in examining the ethnic situation in Assam. From the perspective of political economy, considering ethnic expression ‘as a product of uneven development’ in the process of nation building and focusing on the class dimension of the ethnic phenomenon, we can also understand the situation of ‘ethnic minorities’ in Assam. Keeping in mind these realities, in the context of the ethnicity and conflict in Assam, it would unwise to look at issues of ethnicity, ethnic identity and ethnic conflicts from a single vantage point. Hence, it is proposed here to employ a multi disciplinary approach in analysing the problem of ethnic conflicts and role of political parties in Assam

\textsuperscript{76} ibid
Conceptual Definition of Terms:

The present study entitled ‘Ethnic Conflicts and Political Parties in Assam’ is socially relevant and academically significant as it focuses not only on a very burning problem of our society but also gives an opportunity to understand the intricacies underlying the problem. Thus, in an endeavour to understand the various aspects of the problem of ethnic conflicts, the concepts relating to the study are explained.

Ethnicity: Ethnicity stands for a group’s way of conceptualising and relating to society. It welds together individuals who share a history, culture and community, who have an amalgam of language, religion and regional belonging in common and perhaps most critical of all; they feel that they come from the same stock. Ethnicity is a concept probably first used by David Reisman in 1953 but the concept itself is not new “nor was the phenomenon new or un-recognised previously; it was merely labelled differently”. It has objective as well as subjective connotations. Objectively, it is seen as “primordial affinities and attachments” and subjectively, as an “activated primordial consciousness.” Max Weber was one of the earliest scholars, to give importance to the concept of ethnicity. He defined ethnic groups as ‘those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration’. He distinguished ethnic groups from ‘races’ conceived in biological terms. However it is not only biological difference that constitutes a group, but other factors especially common language, common customs, shared religious beliefs and especially outward differences in terms of clothing, food habits, style of housing and division of labour between the sexes. Along with these cultural and physical characteristics what is more important in defining ethnicity is the subjective perception of these characteristics, both by those who share them and by those who react to them. He also says ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind particularly in the political sphere. He emphasizes that it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized that inspires the belief in common ethnicity. He suggests that

the belief in common ancestry is likely to be a consequence of collective political action rather than its cause; people see themselves as belonging together—coming from a common background—as a consequence of acting together. Collective interest thus not simply reflect or follow from similarities and differences between people; the pursuit of collective interest does however, encourage ethnic identification.

Another scholar who have tried to define this concept, Van Den Berghe argues in favour of combining the subjective and objective approaches to the understanding of this concept. However, most other scholars have emphasized on the subjective aspect of it. For instance, Weber defines it as a “sense of specific honour”, Barth as a “subjective process of status identification”, Wallman as a “perception of group difference”, Glazer and Moynihan as “interest groups” and Bell as “interest plus affective tie”. 80 Stanley Tambiah more recently reiterates that the “central problems posed by our present phase of ethnic conflicts are startlingly different, arising out of an intensified “politicization of ethnicity” and issuing in conflicts between member groups of a state and polity which itself is thought to be in crisis (“the crisis of the state”). 81 According to Paul Brass, “ethnicity is the subjective, symbolic or emblematic use by a group of people of any aspect of culture in order to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from other groups.” This understanding of ethnicity recognizes that the internal and external functions of group identity are cohesion and differentiation. 82 A.C. Bhagwati explains ethnicity as ‘a resource, which is mobilized by the communities. It is a dynamic powerful tool, which can be kept dormant or activated at any point of time and can be invoked in specific socio-political contents or realities’. 83 Rajni Kothari, on the other hand, conceives of ethnicity as a consequence of a much broader process of modernisation, which instead of doing away with religious, linguistic or cultural identities has “hardened them and provoked ethnic conflict and communal violence”. It is perhaps relevant here to mention Susanna Devalle’s *Discourses of Ethnicity* because she has discussed the conceptual shift from tribe to ethnicity,

80 ibid
81 ibid
which according to her has taken place without a “deep transformation in theoretical approach.” Another much related and recent work is that of M.G. Smith. He convincingly argues that “race” and “ethnicity” are in analysis and theory “indiscriminately assimilated to one another.”

Among the various scholars who have tried to define this concept, Dov Ronen definition is more appropriate for the present study. That is why, in the present study, the term “Ethnicity” is defined as Dov Ronen suggests that “ethnicity is politicized into the ethnic factor when an ethnic group is in conflict with the political elite over such issues as the use of limited resources or the allocation of benefits- issues that are particularly intense in developing Third World countries, where the greater the stakes involved, the greater the ethnic factor with which the central government must deal”.

**Ethnic Group and Ethnic Conflict:** The terms “ethnicity,” “ethnic groups,” and “ethnic conflicts” mean different things to different people. To pre-empt misunderstanding, one needs to specify the meaning one is using. The origin of the term “ethnic group” was associated with the biological formation of populations. Cultural parameters have been added to it when it has been accepted also as a social entity. Ethnic group is defined by Scott as, “either a large or small group of people, in either backward or advanced societies, who are united by a common inherited culture (including language, music, food, dress, customs and practice), racial similarity, common religion and belief in common history and ancestry and who exhibit a strong psychological sentiment of belonging to the group.” It is to be noted that Milton J. Esman made the classification of ethnic groups into two distinct typologies, namely, ‘Homeland societies’ and ‘Diaspora Communities’. According to J. C. Turner, ‘every social group attempts to achieve an identity in contradiction to the other group’. Shibutani and Kwan defined ethnic groups as “people who

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85 *ibid*
86 Urmila Phadnis & Rajat Ganguly, “Ethnicity and Nation Building in South Asia”, Sage Publication, New Delhi,2000,p6
conceive of themselves as being of a kind, concerned with preservation of their type.” 88

Besides that, some definitions of the term ‘ethnic’ are broad enough to include socially defined ethnic group. For example, in Gordon’s broad definition, an ethnic group is a social group distinguished ‘by race, religion or national origin’. According to Glazer, ethnic groups form a part of a single family of social identities—a family which in addition to races and ethnic groups, includes religion (as in Holland), Language group (as in Belgium) and all of which can be included in the most general term, ethnic groups, groups defined by decent, real or mythical and sharing of a common history and experience. 89 There are other analysts who prefer a narrower definition of an ethnic group. Since the 1930s and 1940s a number of prominent social scientists have suggested that the narrower definition of an ethnic group, in line with literal Greek meaning, makes the term useful. The Soviet ethnographers have defined ‘ethnos’ (a community of people) as a historically established community characterised by common relatively stable, cultural features and distinctive psychological traits and by an awareness of their identity and distinctiveness from other community. 90 The Western anthropologists have similarly defined groups largely as biological self-perpetuating communities sharing fundamental cultural values realized in overt unity in cultural forms and as having a membership which identifies itself and also identified by others, as constituting a category that is distinguished from other categories of the same order. 91 Some scholars have looked at ethnic groups as minority groups. Louis Wirth explicitly defined a minority group in terms of a subordinate position, as a group of people who because of their physical or cultural characteristics are singled out for differential and unequal treatment and who; therefore, regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination.

Michael E. Brown in ‘Ethnicity and Violence’ gives us six important criteria that are required by any group before they can claim themselves the status of an ethnic group. First, the group must have a name for itself; second, it must believe in

89 ibid
90 ibid
91 ibid
a common ancestry; third, members of the group must share historical memories often myths or legends passed from generation by word of mouth; fourth, the groups must have a shared culture, generally based on a combination of language, religion, laws, customs, institutions, dress, music, crafts, architecture and even food habits; fifth, attachment to a specific piece of territory which it may or may not actually inhabit; and sixth, people should think of themselves as a group in order to constitute an ethnic community. To quote Ferdinand Banteilang Basan, “These six points can be considered as the basic attributes to the concept of ethnicity. Based on these categories, we have groups of people identifying themselves as a particular ethnic community. By belonging to a particular ethnic group, it provides an individual with answer to the question of ‘Who am I?’ It is to be noted that there are two distinct ways in which the term “ethnic” is interpreted. In the narrower understanding of the term, “ethnic” groups mean “racial” or “linguistic” groups. This is the sense in which the term is widely understood in popular discourse, both in India and elsewhere. For example, for politics and conflict based on religious groupings, Indian scholars, bureaucrats and politicians have used the term “communal,” not “ethnic,” reserving the latter term primarily for linguistically or racially distinct groups. There is, however, a second, broader definition. As Horowitz argues, all conflicts based on ascriptive group identities—race, language, religion, tribe or caste—can be called ethnic. That is why the following conflicts are also considered as an ethnic conflict in this regard, (1) the Protestant-Catholic conflict in Northern Ireland and the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India to (2) black-white conflict in the United States and South Africa, (3) the Tamil-Sinhala conflict in Sri Lanka, and (4) Shia-Sunni troubles in Pakistan and so on. In the present study, the term “Ethnic Group” is defined from the broad perspective and “Ethnic conflict” is defined as a conflict based on ascriptive group identities such as race, language, religion, tribe and caste.

Political Party: A political party can be defined as a party of the people, organised on the basis of an ideology, which is always keen to get power and

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remains continuously involved in the process of politics. Its final aim is to secure political power in the state and to use this power for making and implementing authoritative values for the entire society. It is an extra-constitutional political structure which plays an active part in politics. Political parties, though extra constitutional in nature, always play a leading part in every political system and more particularly in every democratic political system. These are the key instruments which perform the function of interest aggregation and transform the demands into policy alternative. Political party plays a key role in the political functions of adaptation and integration. Political parties are the vital channels of political communications which transmit two ways information from the people to the government and vice-versa.

There is no single definition of “political parties” that satisfies everyone. In fact, two scholars or students of politics might define “parties” in different ways. One definition, often called the pragmatic party model, suggests that parties are organizations that sponsor candidates for political office under the organization’s name with the hopes of controlling the apparatus of government. The ends are control of government, which has often meant the perquisites of control (e.g., patronage jobs, government contracts). In this regard Max Weber advocates the view that, “Parties are specialized associations whose purpose is to secure power, within a corporate group, for their leaders in order to obtain ideal or material advantages.” M. Durverger defines Political Parties as, “groups organised for the purpose of achieving the exercising of power within a political system.” On the other side of the spectrum is the responsible party model. Here “parties” implies organizations that run candidates to shape the outcome of government—to redirect public policy. Rational parties work to win elections to control government, while responsible parties work hard during elections in order to shape public policy. The former is instrumental and the latter is ideological. In connection with this view Sigmond Neumann gives a comprehensive and clear definition of a political party. He argues, “We may define political party generally as, the articulate organisation of society’s active political agents, those who are concerned with the control of governmental power and who complete for popular support with another group or groups holding divergent views.” As such it is “the great intermediary which links
social forces and ideologies to official governmental institutions and relates them to political action within the larger political community.” In recent times, another much related comprehensive view is given by William N. Chambers on Political Party. He writes, “A political party in modern sense may be thought of as a relatively durable social formation which seeks offices of power in government, exhibits a structure of organisation which links leaders at the centers of government to a significant popular following in the political arena and its local enclaves, generates in group perspectives or at least symbols of identification of loyalty.” In the present study, the term “Political Party” defined from the instrumental perspective as well as from pragmatic party model view and therefore among the various scholar who have tried define this concept, Max Weber definition is more appropriate for this study. That is why, in the present study “Political Party” is defined as Max Weber argues that political party is organization that sponsors candidates for political office whose purpose is to secure power, in order to obtain ideal or material advantages such as patronage jobs, government contracts etc.

**Research Questions:** The present study is conducted to find out the answer of the following questions:

1. Are ethnic conflicts in Assam instrumental in nature?
2. What are the causes and consequences of ethnic conflicts in Assam?
3. What role do political parties play in ethnic conflicts in Assam?

**Sources of Data and Methodology:** The required information are obtained from books, memorandums, pamphlets, party proceedings and manifestoes and other archival records both official and non-official. The method of historical analysis is employed to find out the answer of the research questions proposed.

**CHAPTERISATION**

| Chapter I | : Introduction |
| Chapter II | : Socio- Economic Profile of Assam |
| Chapter III | : Nature of Ethnic Conflicts in Assam |
| Chapter IV | : Ethnic Conflicts and Political Parties in Assam |
| Chapter V | : Conclusion |