Chapter V: Conclusion

In this chapter we propose to present a summary of the study and the major findings. Besides, limitations of the study are reported and the suggestions for further research are also made.

**Major Findings:** The discussion in the preceding chapters leads to the following inferences.

The study “Ethnic Conflicts and Political Parties in Assam” began with a brief description of the historical perspective of migration of different ethnic groups to Assam during the pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial period and how British colonialism contributed in a major way towards the formation and emergence of ethnic identity in Assam. In the pre colonial period groups were not conscious of their identities and their world was confined to their family clans and villages. But during the colonial period, the different groups began to develop an ethno-tribal identity in Assam. The Britishers opened the floodgate of migration of different people from different parts of the country. The colonial Assam had to experience the migration of some new social groups such as the Hindu Bengalis, the Marwaris, the Nepalis, the Biharis, the Tea Garden Labourers, the Muslim Peasants and so on. These various migrant groups not only transformed the ethnic composition of Assam, but also fostered a political climate in which questions of ethnicity became a vital factor for political parties in Assam. In Assam, the presence of migrant groups has caused new tensions and increased racial, linguistic and religious conflict. Clashes between indigenous and migrant communities have often become a prominent feature of politics in Assam. The vast number of "outsiders" in Assam has upset the state's once-existing demographic and economic balance and threatened the Assamese culture with extinction. The growing numbers of various migrant and immigrant groups may already have reduced the Assamese people to an ethnic minority in their own homeland. The Assamese middle class responded to the situation in a way which in turn, gave rise to a number of conflicts between different groups in Assam.

In post independent Assam, conflicts among the ethnic groups became very frequent. This is mainly due to over politicisation of ethnic issues since
independence. Ethnicity has now become an instrument for political parties in their competition for political power and gaining maximum benefit in the politics of the state. Political parties use culture, language and most importantly ethnic identity for electoral campaign and for winning the election. The political leaders appeal to their respective ethnic groups for help to come to power and, in return, they promise them to protect their culture, language and identity in the multi-ethnic society of Assam. In this regard Tiplut Nongbri, Sanjib Baruah and Walter Fernandes have traced the rise of ethnicity as a social and political force in the northeast in general and Assam in particular to the coming of British Colonialism. It is to be noted that ethnic identity and language was used as an instrument to make Assam a nation province of the Assamese. After independence, the Assamese middle class became increasingly assertive of their socio-cultural and linguistic rights. The aspiration of the ethnic Assamese to make Assam a “nation province” of the Assamese did grow up. Therefore, the Assam Official Language Bill of 1960 was introduced in the Assembly to give Assamese language its ‘rightful place’. The initiative of the government was supported by the Assamese middle class and it was expected that the languages of different communities and their culture will be absorbed in Assamese culture. When all state affairs will be conducted in Assamese, it will stand in good stead for hill people to transact their business in Assamese with their Assamese brethren. As soon as the State Language Bill was introduced in the State Legislative Assembly, different ethnic groups including Bengalis, both in the hills and plains, vehemently opposed the Bill. They stated that it would deprive them from their share of government jobs unless they knew the “Assamese” well. In fact, the Bengalis and the emerging tribal middle class, both in the hills and plains, felt terribly insecure of their interest within greater Assam. As a result of the aspiration of the ethnic Assamese to make Assam a “nation province” of the Assamese, two successive conflicts took place between ethnic Assamese and Bengalis. One in 1960 for introducing Assam Official Language Bill and the other in 1970 for declaration of Assamese as the medium of instruction in the collegiate level by the two universities of Assam, namely, Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University.

It also needs to be noted that the hills tribes such as Khasi, Garo, Mizo, Karbi, Dimasa and others were also not willing to accept “Assamese” as Official
Language for the state of Assam. The declaration of Assamese as official language was viewed by different tribal groups of Assam as a threat to their cultural identity and language. It gave a serious jolt to the process of the formation of Assamese nationality. The people particularly from hills areas and from the district of Cachar could not absorb the declaration of Assamese as official language. Therefore, the leaders of hill tribes formed All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) and demanded for the creation of separate hill state. The passing of the Assam Official Language Act in 1960 raised fears and suspicions in the minds of the different hill tribes and accelerated the process of their separation from Assam. The Act specified Assamese as the official state language and the medium of instruction in schools throughout Assam. In the mountainous regions where Assamese was not the native language, this chauvinistic move on the part of the Assamese-dominated provincial legislature was met with great opposition. Fearing that Assamese linguistic expansion would eventually lead to the elimination of their own cultural identity, the tribal groups increased their agitation for the creation of new states within Assam wherein they could practice self-determination of language and culture. As riots and violence escalated during the 1960s, the central government finally intervened and Assam underwent a process of phased vivisection.

British exclusivist policies of political demarcation and separate system of administration in the hills had always been a factor of ethnic division and differences between the hills people and plains people. In the post independent period, suspicion and fear grew up in the minds of hills people that the people of the plains, taking the help of the state power would exploit them. And such fears and anxieties among rival ethnic groups have also contributed to the ethnic conflict in Assam in post-independent era.

In the post-reorganized Assam, a new dimension came into sharp focus and that is the steady ingress (opening) of the Muslims into the political power structures and now it is viewed as the principal threat to the political security of the ethnic Assamese in the State. Relatively better economic opportunities have encouraged mass migration from Bangladesh into India, particularly into the bordering state of Assam. After India's partition in 1947, the Indian and Pakistani governments agreed to a two-year "grace period" during which Hindus of Pakistan could settle in India
and Muslims of India could immigrate to Pakistan. Pakistanis who migrated to India during the grace period automatically became Indian citizens. After July 26, 1949, however, immigration was possible only by completing certain legal procedures and unrestricted cross-border migration should have ceased. Practically this did not happen. The flow of immigrants to Assam was not stopped. The native Assamese were mobilized in protest against the new migrants. They accused the central government of deliberately ignoring the cause of Assam. Assamese leaders charged that India’s central government, largely dominated by the Congress Party, sought the migrant vote and, therefore, ignored the Assamese demands. As a result, in the late 1970’s and in the mid 1980’s, a large–scale movement was led by a student organization and some political parties, namely, All Assam Student Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad in Assam which is known as Assam Movement or the movement against the foreign nationals. At the initial phase when the Assamese "movement against foreigners" was launched, it was labeled variously as secessionist, anti-Muslim and anti-Bengali. The Assamese involved in the movement have long denied these characterizations. They insisted that their struggle was to "protect" Assam from non-Indians. It was not a religious, ethnic or separatist movement. Rather, it was claimed a national movement against the continued presence of foreigners in Assam and was designed to succeed where both the Indian government and the Indian Constitution have failed. Indeed, there are millions of illegal Nepalese and Bengali immigrants in Assam and the Indian government has failed in its duty to prevent this illegal migration. Nevertheless, it is also true that the Assamese have been agitating not only to expel foreigners, but also to protect the Assamese language and culture and preserve Assamese dominance in the state's political arena. It would be oversimplifying the issue to characterize the conflict in Assam solely as a matter of Indians versus non-Indians. A more honest approach recognizes that the growing non-Assamese groups in the state genuinely threaten the Assamese identity with extinction and that the purpose of the movement was to stop this threat. The anti-foreigner movement rocked Assam between 1979 and 1985 and led to large-scale, free-for all types of ethnic riots. The ULFA, now the leading separatist organization in Assam, was born out of this movement. Its initial credo was ethnic cleansing—it sought by the force of arms to drive the “foreigners” out of Assam. It is to be noted that during the past several decades; the issue of illegal
migration had acquired a distinction of being a highly politicised issue in Assam. Different political formations across several states have been taking up the issue differently to suit their political ends and hence there is no political consensus on this issue. For instance, in Assam, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) have been accusing the Congress (I) for encouraging cross-border migration to build up its vote banks. On its part, the Congress (I) has accused BJP for communalising the issue. Even as each side seeks to score ‘political goals’, the central issue continues to be sidelined. Differences are also often heard at the highest level of the state government.

In the post reorganised Assam too, the state witnessed a number of ethnic movements demanding autonomy. The demand for separation or autonomy in the name of protecting one’s own culture and identity and to promote socio-economic development has been put forwarded by the ethnic groups such as Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, Tiwa, Sonowal, Deori, Missing and so on. It is to be noted that all these groups had come together during Assam movement against the existing illegal immigrants in Assam. But the Assam Accord that was signed between the movement leaders and the government resulted in alienating the tribal groups from the Assamese. This is so, because Clause 6 of the accord had promised constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, promote and preserve the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people. The Assam Accord was understood to be a constitutional protection mechanism for the Asomiya speaking people. This led others to struggle for their own protection mechanisms. Different tribal groups had their disenchantment with the Assam Accord, because according to them it sought to protect Assamese identity and culture but made no mention of tribal identities. Other ethnic groups of Assam argued that the clause that referred only to the Assamese people could provide legitimacy to the imposition of the Assamese language and culture on the Bodos, Bengali and others. The insistence of the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) on the issue of 100 percent job reservation for the ‘indigenous people’ is at the centre of the controversy. Many groups are very apprehensive of clause 6 of the Assam accord and fear that they will be left out of this definition of ‘indigenous Assamese’. Slowly, the non-Assamese groups developed a desire to be separate and hence
started movement for separation from Assam. The Bodos, the Karbis and the Dimasas all joined the Assam movement to expel “foreigners” and “infiltrators. But, after settlements with the Indian government, they felt the Assamese “had taken the cake and left us the crumbs. The result: fresh agitations, often sliding into violent insurgencies, spearheaded by smaller ethnicities demanding separate homelands. The ethnic imbalance in power sharing has often caused retribalization, which has had its own cascading effect in restricting the growth of local nationalisms that could challenge the Indian state. The 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. The most vigorous type of movement for separation has been launched by the Autonomous State Demand Committee formed on 17th may 1986 in Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The solution to this problem remains confined in article 244(A) of the Sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. No solution could be reached at even after so many years. The reason for this inability to come to a concrete solution is politics. Taking advantage of that particular article of the Indian constitution, political parties and organisations have started movements and resulted in creating differences amongst the people. Peace and harmony existing among various communities living in the state have gradually started to wane under various acts of violence. The rising expectation of ethnic groups namely, Assamese and Bengali Muslims resulted in the formation of AGP and United Minority Front in 1985. In recent time, the AIUDF and the BPF (H) are also playing an important role in state politics for the protection of distinct identity and interest of their respective ethnic community. 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.

A number of things have to be taken into account if one is to find a lasting solution to the whole problem of ethnic conflict, which we have seen in different parts of Assam, particularly in Karbi-Anglong, Dima Hasao District (N.C Hills) and BTAD. For one, there is no denying the fact that the clashes were the handiwork of the political parties and militant outfits. They were responsible not only for the
outbreak of the clashes but also for the continuation of the clashes. Denial of political autonomy, the rise of ethnic and religious tensions in response to intensifying competition for economic and political opportunities, control over land, establishment of ethnic homeland, insurgents groups or extremist groups fighting on behalf of their community, preservation of one’s own identity custom and tradition, migration of outsiders, government policies, protection of territorial boundaries, feeling of becoming minorities in their own land and the minorities perceiving the threat from the majorities and so on are the other causes of ethnic conflicts that have taken place in Assam. The state has witnessed ethnic clash between Bodo and Santhals in early 1996. The Bodo-Santhal conflict took place in April, 1996 after the killing of three Bodo ladies in Satyapur under Gouma Forest, one of the Santhal localities of Gossaigaon sub-division. The failure of the government to take immediate steps resulted in the spread of conflict in other parts of Kokrajhar district of Assam. One of the important aspects of this conflict is that, perhaps, the government itself is a patron of this conflict. The government patronised the conflict with a view to weaken the separate state movement of Bodos by breaking the Boro-Santhal unity. Hence, the government did not take immediate and useful preventive measure to stop the conflict. Instead of taking any strong action against the NDFB which was involved in that conflict, the government put forward the argument that the Bodos were trying to solve the demographic equation in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra through ‘ethnic cleansing’.

There were unprecedented ethnic conflicts in the Karbi-Anglong district of Assam in 2003 and in 2005. The ethno-centric problem is one of the main reasons for the reigning ethnic conflicts and disturbances in Assam in general and Karbi-Anglong in particular. The two hill districts of Assam have been demanding an autonomous state since 1970, to chart out their political, social and economic destiny.

From October 2003 to March 2004, the district of karbi-Anglong witnessed the conflict between the Karbis and the Kukis. It is clear from study that the Karbi-Kuki conflict was the first ethnic clash in Karbi Anglong and resulted in the breakdown of relations between the two tribes. The conflict gave the political parties an opportunity to blame each other for their contribution to the situation. All the
opposition parties blamed the ruling Congress-I at the state and at the district level, for not doing much to reduce the number of violent incidents. The CPI (ML) also held the ASDC (U) responsible for the conflict because of its MoU with the KNA. The ASDC retaliated by claiming that CPI (ML) president, Dr. Rongpi was responsible for permitting the Kuki migrants to settle down in the Singhason hills area. Other political parties too used the conflict to gain political mileage just before the General Elections of 2004. The Congress-I blamed both the ASDC and CPI (ML) for encouraging the settlement of Kukis in Karbi Anglong and the subsequent support to the demand for a regional council.

Another conflict witnessed by the district of Karbi-Anglong is the Karbi-Dimasa conflict in 2005. The involvement of armed opposition groups, the DHD and the UPDS and the lack of will of the political parties’ vis-a-vis government to find out a solution to their demands are responsible for this conflict. One of the important factors responsible for Karbi-Dimasa conflict is the non implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in 1995 for creation of an autonomous administrative set-up in the district. The Government of India had entered into a cease-fire agreement with the UPDS effective from August 1, 2002, extended periodically. All the socio-political organisations welcomed the ceasefire agreement with UPDS and other militant organisations. But only ceasefire agreement was not enough to solve the problem. Insurgency is a socio-political problem and, therefore, political dialogue is very important to arrive at a solution. During the process of negotiation with the insurgent groups, the government indulged (a) in delaying tactics by prolonging the talks (b) encouraged fratricidal clashes and (c) used them for narrow political interest. This make the political situation worsen in the district and led to conflict between two groups.

With intensification of violence in Karbi Anglong there started a blame game among the political parties of the state. Opposition political parties have criticized the state Congress leaders for failing to respond quickly enough to stem the violence. They accused each other of being involved in the violence. However, the study reveals that undisputed and exclusive claim over land was the single most important reason for the clashes. What make matters worse in the case of Karbi-Dimasa relation was that the two groups namely, the UPDS and the DHD lay claim
to the same piece of land, especially in the Karbi Anglong district, which is largely dominated by the Karbi tribe.

The Cachar and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam also witnessed the ethnic conflict between the Dimasa and the Hmar tribes in March 2003. The genesis of this conflict lies in the HPC (D) demand for an autonomous Council under the sixth schedule of the constitution for the Hmar people. The HPC (D) was helped by NSCN (IM) to execute and implement their as well as missionary's agenda in North-Cachar Hills. Further, the "Indo - Burma Pioneering Mission" sponsored by "Partnership Mission Society” located at Slelmat in Manipur has also been responsible for Dimasa-Hmar conflict. It was engaged in educating the people in the Hmar dominated villages of Cachar and North Cachar Hills. But the fact was that this Mission was used by the Christian Missionaries for camouflaging their anti Hindu proselytizing agenda in North Cachar Hills. This was protested by the Dimasas and consequently the clash took place between the two tribes in March 2003.

The state of Assam also witnessed the ethnic conflict between the Garo and the Rabha community in January, 2011. The root of this conflict lies in the politics of the autonomous councils in both the states of Meghalaya and Assam. In Meghalaya, there have been problems brewing up because of the suspension of the Garo Autonomous Hills Council. The ruling United Meghalaya Alliance (UMA) coalition government in Meghalaya (Shillong) has dissolved the Garo Autonomous Council following allegations of discrepancies in the fund and unchecked appointments. The Garo Student Union (GSU) as well as the political parties have again and again raised demands that the Council be soon made functional and enquiry into it be conducted simultaneously. However, as quoted in many news reports from Shillong, Chief Minister Dr. Mukul Sangma deliberately kept the issue in limbo so that he can run the Council through “Administrator Rule”. Common people and council employees have suffered the most in this process. Another important aspect of this conflict was linked with the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council in Assam. Garo people and their organizations along with a conglomeration of non-tribal minority communities and their forums have been jointly protesting against the inclusions of their villages inside the Rabha Hasong Autonomous
Council jurisdiction. Such protests have caused serious clashes among the communities.

The consistent and reversible processes of ethnic conflicts can be understood in the context of Bodoland. The BTAD areas of Assam witnessed a massive humanitarian crisis in July, 2012 when there started violent clashes between the Bodos and the Muslims. There started a debate about the nature of Bodo-Muslim clashes. However, political parties like the B.J.P, AGP and the Congress started blaming each other. The congress claimed that the B.J.P was trying to ‘give a communal or religious fervor’ to the recent ethnic clashes. Such claims made by the congress and counter allegations by the opposition parties on ‘minority vote-seeking politics of the congress may not be totally unfounded or surprising. Nonetheless, the debate is thought provoking, for it compels us to reanalyze the archetypical pattern of violence that resurfaced in the BTAD areas since late 2000s. Certainly, one has to be much more careful before analyzing the pattern of these riots through issues such as number of the migrants, the amount of land increasingly occupied, the government’s reluctance to take precautionary measures against land accusation by settlers, land encroachment etc. Even the state’s chief minister Tarun Gogoi categorically expressed that land security had a direct correlation with the recent violence between the Bods and non-Bodos. What Gogoi and the Congress general secretary Digvijay Singh, however, failed to acknowledge are the perennial causes of the problem, the issue of undocumented migration and resultant demographic pressures. Further, the political re-configuration in the Bodoland Territorial Council also contributed to the intensification of inter-group rivalry. In the BTC, the Bodos though minority, are allocated 30 seats (out of total 46 seats) and the rest are given to non-Bodos and unrepresented groups including two women to be nominated by the governor of Assam. This form of asymmetrical provisions is usually meant to provide a platform for disputes and clashes. Besides, the ambiguity in the clauses of the BTC accord also contains the seeds of conflicts. For example, Clause 4.3 of the BTC accord contains some ambiguous provision about land rights. While it retains the ‘existing rights and privileges of the indigenous groups’, it says that ‘any citizen will not be barred from acquiring land either by way of inheritance, allotment, settlement or by way of transfer if such citizens were eligible for such bonafide
acquisition of land within the BTC area. Because of these ambiguities, perhaps the biggest intergroup security dilemma is caused by the apprehension of non-Bodos.

Like many post-mortemist findings, the leaders of BTC and the AIUDF share at least one view in common that the onus lies on the state government for not controlling the riots. But why did the government ‘fail to prevent the diffusion of violence to other areas’ in the first place? Some argue that the problem lies with India’s ‘cosmetic federal arrangements’ a term employed by Ian Copland in the 1990s in the context of Eastern Europe. The state has in fact, contributed to intergroup rivalry by electoral mobilization on the basis of ethnic and religious identities as a result of which, it has tremendously failed to execute the process of genuine identification and extradition of illegal migrants on the basis of March 25, 1971, the agreed cut-off date. All concerned agree that the Indo-Bangladesh border should be sealed by all possible means.

In Assam one has to respect diversity and build an inclusive society by adopting policies that explicitly recognise cultural differences. Individuals can and do have multiple identities. Identity is not a zero sum game. There is no inevitable need to choose between state unity and recognition of cultural differences. The main question is how one can accommodate the burgeoning demand of the different tribal and non-tribal groups. To achieve this objective, one has to explore a socio-political structure that can satisfy the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Tiwas, the Chutias, the Koch-Rajbangshi, the Tai-Phakes, the Matak and Moran, the Ahoms, and the minority groups like the Bengali Hindus, the Muslims, the Nepalis and the Adivasis. Unless one works out a comprehensive structure that can at least satisfy the basic socio-cultural and economic needs, there will be continuous turmoil in the state. Thus, how the Asomiya middle class accommodate their own demands with the growing aspirations of the smaller tribes and nationalities will be the single most important factor in determining the course of politics in Assam. There is one more thing which has to be always kept in sight while dealing with the entire problem of the ethnic clashes. At the core of the problem there are the claims and counter claims of exclusive ethnic territories which are in one way or the other bound to have adverse effects on the territorial integrity of the state. However, so far political parties inside the state have not been unanimous about their stand to protect
the territorial integrity of the state. Fact is that the politicians and ethnic leaders always sought their voice for separation and creation of ‘ethnic based’ homeland. Overlooking this fact is bound to seriously endanger the already disturbed inter-community relations inside the state. It is to be noted that the growing consciousness of ethnic groups about available limited resources has created not only a very competitive atmosphere but also a very volatile situation in which conflicts can break out anytime. Hence, over the years the situation of peace and security has drastically declined and it seems that fear has overtaken the minds of the people. This situation of fear and insecurity and frequent breakdown of law and order has affected the region both in terms of human and economic development.

**Limitation of the study:** Given the limitation of time and resources at the disposal of the researcher, the aspect of the role of insurgent groups in different ethnic conflicts in Assam could not be thoroughly investigated.

**Suggestions for further research:** In view of the limitation of the present study, it would be worthwhile to undertake a study to ascertain the role of insurgent groups in different ethnic conflicts in Assam.