CHAPTER V
ETHNIC FESTIVALS AS PLATFORMS OF REPRESENTATION

The recognition of Intangible Heritage as a “mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development” by the UNESCO Convention in 2003 provided the scope for museums to venture outside the vague tangible essence of its collections to non-conventional, somewhat ‘anti-museum’ settings of representation. Museums are adopting and adapting to multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches. Museums around the world are showing a renewed interest in documenting, studying and exhibiting intangible cultural heritage. Fairs and festivals are major subjects for such studies.

It is important to mention that there is a prolonged insufficiency leading to visible discontentment in the way ethnic identities have been represented in museums and recognized in the nation-state system in India. Therefore, ethnic festivals so to speak are observed to have established themselves as an alternative space for representation of ethnic identity and most importantly, a space for assertion of distinct identity. The festivals manifest as tools for contemporary identity assertions and thereby become integral part of identity movements.

In most of the cases, ethnic festivals are a celebration of nature, its fertility and fluidity. Ethnic festivals have always interested the scholars and researchers in the field as they provide an interesting opportunity to document and interpret a community’s cultural practices in time and space within their own surroundings. Traditionally, the festivals
of indigenous people of Assam, in India’s north-east have been deeply rooted to everyday lives. The rituals associated with the festival are significant because they are generally performed for the wellbeing of the entire village. The ecstasy of the festive time is imbued by the performance of folk songs and dance usually by the youth in their own domain and with a sense of freedom and joy. The cultural setting of these festivals is very much indigenous to the land and its people.

Over the time, ethnic festivals have transformed significantly. They are visibly influenced by the festivals of the dominant culture which nowadays occurs amidst the glitter and elitism of corporate sponsorships at permanent venues especially constructed for them in public places. The introduction of performance stage and competitions in the traditional ethnic festivals has significantly transformed these festivals.

The Rongali Bihu, the most important festival of the indigenous Assamese is one such festival. ‘Bohag’ (first month of the Assamese Calendar) or ‘Rongali’ Bihu celebrates the onset of the Assamese New Year (around 15th of April) and the coming of spring, the season when nature itself is reborn. Rongali Bihu is a celebration of youth, love, beauty and fertility. Traditionally, Rongali Bihu celebrations have been marked with cattle worship and abundance of food and wine which is typical of a predominantly agrarian society. The festival also marked the beginning of a new agrarian cycle. The festival of Rongali Bihu which is celebrated all over Assam in the month of April has seen in the contemporary times, a completely different cultural setting than what it traditionally used to occur in. This is an apt example of the transformation of a traditional festival to a class-conscious, urban-elite, almost corporate affair. In addition, there is an extension of the celebration propagated largely by Television channels which continue to show programmes themed around Bihu till as late as July.
which makes the essence of the festival confusing to the point of insanity. Interestingly, early colonial modernity in Assam, viewed Bihu as a transgressive practice. Bihu was considered as an objectionable festival by the Assamese gentry. This was a time when the early Assamese gentry desperately tried to detach itself from anything primitive in order to establish themselves under an imagined Indo-Aryan cloud of modernization in a pan Indian context. In his book, “Assam Buranji”, Haliram Dekhial Phukan provided a view of the Bihu as an objectionable festival.

“Womenfolk of the common people and dissolute men get together and perform dance and music of a very objectionable type. This festival is most prominent in the countryside, but this bad custom is not found in Kamrup, it is found to a larger extent in upper Assam” (Dhekial Phukan, 1995).

In this context historian Jayeeta Sharma opines that

“…from the late 19th century, as Assam’s gentry fashioned themselves into a colonial intelligentsia, they evinced a new, strong desire to be Indian, and “Aryan”. High-caste claims of Aryan descent became central, with the gentry’s self-representation now anchored to a distant migratory origin in the Indo-Gangetic plains.”(Sharma, 2012, p. 59)

During the colonial Assam’s changing cultural landscape, the Brahmins, Muslims or the Ahom warrior elite emphasized a common theme of elite superiority over subordinate groups (Autochthones), which led to a larger cultural isolation and distancing themselves from the subordinate castes and tribes. This led to social immobility and distinctly overwhelming reified representations of the ‘self’ and the
‘other’ in the various cultural platforms like festivals and subsequently in museums. These perceptions towards the cultures of the tribes and subordinate groups may have also translated into the realms of Assam popular culture eventually.

The influence of popular culture can also be witnessed in other ethnic festivals of Assam. A discussion about the Joon Beel Mela, a festival organised by the Tiwa Community of Assam is presented later in this chapter.

It is also observed that the temporal spaces of the festivals sometimes act as a space for contestation between the divergent groups within (perhaps) the same community. A manifestation of such has been discussed in the study of the festivals of the Karbi community living in the plains.

Socio-political issues that were revealed while attempting to document certain ethnic festivals namely “Domahi, Dehal-Rongkher Kachirdom” and “Amri-Karbi Youth Festival” are discussed here. These are then understood to be stemming up from two divergent groups earlier recognized as one ‘tribe’ in the region of Assam in India’s north-east. This substantiates and reflects largely on the fluid nature of identity which is constantly redefined from time to time.

**5.1 Contestation, Invention and Fluidity in the Festivals of the Karbis living in Plains**

Cultural identity is recognized by scholars as dynamic, fluid, dialectical and multifaceted. The prominence of identity changes relationally with the context. It may rise or fall depending on the relationships with other people. Scholars opine that the establishment and maintenance of identity are problematic due to the competing and paradoxical forces that move towards different directions of identities. Fitzgerald
contends that we do not see our self-identity passively but through active selection and reconstruction (Fitzgerald, 1993). We select our identity and pick which ethnic name we prefer to be called. In this chapter, certain Ethnic festivals are examined under the light of such perceptions. An attempt has also been made to trace the genesis of some of the festivals and subsequent interesting transformations that some of the festivals have gone through over the years.

5.1.1 Domahi

The Karbi community residing in the plains celebrate Domahi generally in the months of March-April. It is a festival of thanksgiving to the almighty “Hemphu” the traditional God and head of Karbi household. During the festival all the ancestors of the village are remembered and worshipped. The practice is called ‘Sar-Kacherdung’ literally ‘Remember the Ancestors’. The role of the traditional priest is observed in the festival. The festival is associated with an attempt to appease the supernatural with ritualistic practice.

5.1.2 Dehal Rongkher Kachirdom

Dehal Rongkher Kachirdom is considered the most important festival of the Karbis living in the plains of Assam. The festival is generally celebrated in the months of January-February. It is a harvesting festival where rituals are performed before the start of the new agricultural season. Prayers are offered to the deities Tamlong (the main male deity) and Bilimi (the main female deity). The festival is celebrated over three days. On the first day, ritual lores are recited and deities are invited by the priests to accept the offerings during the festival. On the second day, ritual sacrifices are done. The third day is the day of the grand community feast. This festival however is
celebrated differently by the karbis in the hills of Karbi-Anglong. This also indicates to the fact that the festival of Rongkher has complex regional variations not only in terms of the Karbi inhabited areas of plains and hills of Assam but also within these areas.

Anthropologist Phillip Ramirez in his essay “Politico-ritual variations on the Assamese fringes” (2007), details the complex territorial variations of Rongkher”

“The general impression is that Rongkher is definitely a collective ritual, that is not clanic but all territorial, but according to the locality, it is held on different territorial levels and according to different procedures” (Ramirez 102).

He further writes,

“the sophistication of a central authority at the higher level does not imply that practices at lower levels are similar and tightly regulated, and it does not imply as well that inhabitants of a particular locality are aware of their neighbours’ practices” (Ramirez 102).

Dehal Kachirdom Rongkher is nowadays celebrated annually under the tutelage of All Assam Bhoiyam Karbi A Dorbar (a socio-political organization of the Karbis living in the plains). Leaders of the body during the field interviews explained the need felt to organize the festival centrally in one place. According to the leaders of the All Assam Bhoiyam Karbi Adorbar, the decision to organise Dehal Puja centrally was because the leaders felt that if things for the betterment of the Karbi community living in the plains were done individually and differently, they will not be able to fulfil their goals towards the betterment of the people. Therefore, it was decided to distribute tasks to various socio-cultural and political organizations. Approximately 3 Lakhs Karbi people are
living in the plains; i.e outside the hill district of Karbi Anglong. To unite the Karbi people in the plains, a big festival for the community was needed. The community leaders selected the Dehal Rongkher Festival. It was a popular festival and this festival reflected traditional values of the Karbi people. The organisation Bangthe Asem, which is the organization of the priestly class among the Karbis, was assigned the task of preserving various rituals, customs and the like through the performance of the same in the festival.

Interviewees commented that the Bangthes are their tribe’s Murabbi (Traditional Leaders). Interviewees also provided that a constitution of their organisation is yet to be formulated. Interviewees commented that as of now, they are able to obtain a Restricted Holiday on the occasion of Dehal Rongkher Kachirdom and a Gazette notification of the same was obtained from the Government. The community leaders had argued with the Government and said that when a legend like Bishnu Prasad Rabha can comment that Karbi people are Columbus (an indication towards the history of the earliest migration of the community to the northeastern part of India), then why such a glorious tribe of theirs cannot get a holiday for their most important festival? The government apparently agreed and they could get a restricted holiday declared. But, it came after many demands.

The Bangthe Asem was formed by uniting the various Bangthe of different villages. They function under the aegis of the All Assam Bhoiyam Karbi Adorbar. It was revealed that Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia helped them a lot in their endeavour.

The festival of Dehal Rongkher was earlier losing its uniformity. The community leaders had to do something about it. Earlier, different villages used to celebrate Rongkher in different times of the year according to their own wishes. Some villages
would organise it in the month of Phalgun (eleventh month of the Assamese Calendar), some in Bohag (the first month of Assamese Calendar) and likewise. But, according to their traditions and ancestral knowledge system, Dehal Rongkher must be organised on the first Tuesday of the month of Phalgun. This needed to be implemented so that the festival gets its original ritualistic date and time.

Another interviewee commented that Sri Ratikanta Teron should be given credit on behalf of the Karbi community living in the plains for being able to organise the Dehal Puja centrally. He commented that Ratikanta Teron is a father figure for the Karbi people living in the plains. He always worked for the betterment of the Karbi community throughout his life since childhood.

Dehal Rongkher Kachirdom was centrally organised for the first time in Sipinijal near Lokhra in Guwahati in the year 1992. The government generally doesn’t give any financial support to organise this festival.

It is interesting to note how the word “Rongkher” began to be associated with Dehal Puja. Rongkher is a festival which is celebrated in Karbi Anglong. One of the interviewees revealed that Lonki Phangso and John Engti Kathar of Karbi Anglong were also associated with the Bhoyam Karbi Adorbar and supported the organisation. However, John Engti Kathar was not given much importance as he was a Christian. There was a perceived fear that in their religious festival John would talk about Christianity. The administrators working for the government who were supporting Bhoyam Karbi Adorbar told the leaders of the body that if the Festival would be organized on one particular day throughout the state, the government might be persuaded to declare a full holiday on account of Karbi Dehal Ronghkher Festival. However, the Dehal festival has a regional character. It is celebrated only among the
karbis living in the plains. From this perspective, the government might declare a Restricted Holiday only.

Interviwees commemented that friends and well-wishers of the leaders of All Assam Bhoyam Karbi Adorbar who were residing in Karbi Anglong at that time conveyed that Rongkher is celebrated in the month of Phalgun. So, if Dehal, which is the festival of the Karbis living in the plains and Rongkher which is celebrated in Karbi Anglong is united into a central festival, the government might be convinced to declare a full holiday as a Karbi festival. Interviewees commented that Rongkher is a completely different festival and it has no similarity with Dehal Puja which is celebrated in the plains.

One of the interviewees commented that there is a problem in bringing Dehal Puja to the performance stage like the Bihu festival in Assam. Dehal Puja has lots of religious rituals. There are problems in showing rituals on stage.

It was revealed during interviews that initially Domahi festival was also organised under the ageis of All Assam Bhoiyam Karbi A Dorbar. This was continued for three years. However, the responsibility of organizing Domahi was given to the Karbi Student’s Union (KSU) eventually.

Field interviews also relvealed the need for the formation of of Bangthe Asem which is the organisation of the Karbi priests. A lot of people from the community started telling the community leaders that Dehal should not be organized by the Karbi A Dorbar. It is a ritual based festival and the Bangthes of various villages are better equipped to organize this festival. Therefore, it was decided to unite all the Bangthes of different villages together. Bangthe Asem was formed. They were given the responsibility of
organising the rituals associated with the festival. Bangthe Asem was formed in 1994. The responsibility of the rituals of Dehal Puja was given to Bangthe Asem in the year 1995.

5.1.3 Amri Karbi Youth Festival

The Amri Karbi Youth festival is fairly a recent phenomenon. It is organized by the Amri Karbi Student’s Union (AKSU) every year since 2010. There is a permanent venue being set up for the festival.

From 1970’s, a group of people residing in the present Kamrup (metropolitan) district of Assam began to claim their identity as Amri Karbis. They asserted that they are distinct and different from the Karbi community residing in the plains of Assam and therefore are a separate ‘tribe’. The Karbis residing in the plains of Assam (commonly known as Plains Karbis to distinguish themselves from the Karbis residing in the autonomous district of Karbi Anglong) however refutes these claims as baseless and regards that such separatist tendencies would only weaken the long struggle of the Plains Karbis to fulfill their demand of being accorded the ‘Scheduled tribe’ status by the Government of India. After a series of protests and agitations, the government of Assam has set up a Development Council by the name of Amri Karbi Development Council.

The Karbi Student’s Union (KSU) opines that the group claiming themselves as ‘Amri’ is misguided by political opportunists with vested interests. They also claimed that they are supported by local politicians. The KSU also alleges that there is a nexus of Christian Missionary activities involved in this polarization. The percentage of the followers of Christianity among the divergent ‘amri’ group is high. The KSU
leadership claims that the missionaries are finding it hard to polarize Karbi society in religious line and so they are supporting select individuals and groups to assert a separate ethnic identity.

In support of this accusation, they refer to a specific website www.theseedcompany.org and an article published in it under the title: *Amri Karbi of South Asia:*

“Unlike many parts of South Asia, the Amri Karbi area is open to the Gospel. More than 40 villages have heard the news of Jesus since 1994, and about half of those have established congregations. Yet today, 95% of the people still live bound inside a religious system that’s laced tight with fear and saturated with the blood of animal sacrifices. But because they are open to truth, project personnel recognize the urgency of getting the gospel to them while this opportunity is available”. (www.seedcompany.org, n.d.)

It is beyond the scope of this study to analyse the claims and counter-claims arising out of this intra-community conflict. However, the Chartered Demands of Amri Karbis includes a demand for a museum which is already discussed in Chapter Three. Further understanding on this issue from the museum point of view was achieved through informal interviews during the course of fieldwork for this study.

In an informal interview with a leader of the community, a question was asked as what historical evidence and cultural heritage they intend to present in their demanded museum. On asking what materials the community leader would like to show in their demanded museum that would distinguish the community from the Karbis in Karbi
Anglong and also from the larger group of Plains Karbis, the answer is found to be confusing and misplaced.

The community leader replied that their plough looks slightly different from the ones used by the Karbi people who are not Amris, as it is more angular in shape. Also, it was conveyed that their textiles are of different colour than other groups of Karbi people living in the plains.

This kind of statements seems to reflect a tendency of inventing traditions to get a visual endorsement to assert identities on separatist lines. The demands to create a museum to showcase objects of material culture and to assert a separate community identity is also being witnessed among other communities. This reflects the urge to use museums and for that matter fairs and festivals as political tools to build collective memories and to mark and make territorial claims.

During the course of fieldwork, an elderly lady of one of the Amri Karbi dominated villages was interviewed on 20th of November 2013. An excerpt from the same is provided below:

“I do not want to be called Amri or anything. I am a Karbi woman. My sons have become Christians. Christian priests are good. They give our children free education. I do not understand what this Amri (identity) is. I know our people have problems. But, our problems are common to the karbi people of the plains, - poverty, lack of education and neglect from the government. This has been going on for a long time. I want to go to Dehal to prey to my ancestors. My sons don’t like me”.

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This statement reflects the divergent fluidity of individual identity in the same household. Many scholars hold that cultural and ethnic identities are dynamic and constantly in a flux. The sense of belonging to an ethnic identity is related to how meaning is socially constructed. Identity is understood as a fluid process which involves constant redefinition and reconstruction. (Chuang 52)

There are reports that some leaders of both the parties are now voicing for a united struggle against the government for fulfilling of their various demands. The construction of a separate youth festival for the Amri Karbis make one ponder over the making of the highly successful and popular Karbi Youth Festival celebrated by their hill counterparts in Karbi Anglong. The Amri Karbi Youth Festival is clearly influenced by the famous Karbi Youth Festival celebrated in Karbi Anglong, the official homeland of the Karbi people.

5.2 Karbi Youth Festival

The Karbi Youth Festival (KYF) is celebrated every year from 15-19 February. The festival happens at Karbi People’s Hall, a permanent site especially developed at Taralangso near Diphu town in Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The KYF is immensely popular especially among the youth. The KYF acts as an annual event of reaffirming Karbi nationalism and provides a platform of representing ethno-linguistic ties between different groups within the Karbi society. The KYF is considered as the oldest ethnic festival in the region.

To get an understanding of the making of the Karbi Youth Festival, it is important to look into the expressions of Karbi ethnicity and identity in the history of the Karbi Ethnic Movement.
The Mikir Hills tract in the colonial period was constituted with the administrative boundary of Nowgong district from the year 1884. There was no administrative boundary of Mikir Hills until 1884. Through the Frontier Regulation Act 1884, it came under Nowgong district. A part of the tract was transferred to Sivsagar district in 1893. In 1928, the Simon Commission arrived and under its advice, the categories of excluded areas and partially excluded areas were created. Creating and separating some regions from the generally administered areas by this process, the colonial Government began treating such areas with different administrative measures. The Mikir Hills fell under the partially excluded areas in 1935. In the year 1935, the Mikir Hills, as the area was designated at that point was separated as *Partially Excluded Areas* and one person nominated as a member of the Assembly. “The partially excluded areas including the Garo, Khasi-Jaintia and Mikir Hills districts came under the control of the Governor and were subject to ministerial administration, but the Governor had overriding power when it came to exercising his discretion. No act of the Assam or Indian legislatures could apply to these two hill divisions unless the governor so directed”. (Syiemlieh, 2014)

From the middle of the 19th century, Christian missionaries began to arrive in the hills of Assam. A small section of the Karbi population began to be converted to Christianity by early 20th century. The Christian Missionaries along with the colonial state brought western education to the hills of Assam. It is important to mention that the conversion to Christianity in the hills of present day Karbi Anglong was not uncontested, but like all hill areas of northeast was a slow and painstaking process. Unlike Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland where a huge majority of the population was converted to Christianity by middle of 20th century, the conversion in Karbi Anglong was sporadic.
and partial. Significant numbers of the people adhered to their ‘animistic’ traditions and religious affiliations.

However, western education assisted by missionary efforts created a section of educated people who emerged as harbingers of change for the region and the people. Along with their presence the traditional landed elite of Karbi Hills were empowered by the British and they assumed unprecedented rise in the local politics. This class of landed elite, the Mauzadars, transformed the rural hinterland of the hills and hence the economy and social foundations. This nascent middle class amongst the Karbis became the architects of Karbi ethnic assertion.

Samson Singh Ingti (1910-1948) is considered as the father of Karbi nation. Originally, a native of Tika hills of present day west Karbi Anglong, Samson’s father moved to Golaghat as a part of a Christian Mission. Samson got his early education from Golaghat Mission School and passed his matriculation examination from Bezbaruah High School, Golaghat. He went to Cotton College in Guwahati and thereafter completed his graduation in the year 1933 from Murari Chand College of Sylhet. After completing his education, Samson joined the Education Department as a school Sub-Inspector. His fieldwork-based duties provided him the opportunity to realize the abject backwardness and appalling conditions of education in which Karbi people were living.

Samson with few other educated Karbi elites namely Nihang Rongpher, Khorsing Terang, Song Be etc. began to voice the demand for a unified administrative entity for the Karbis. Samson voiced the immediate need to unite all the Karbis scattered in different places under a single platform for representing the political consciousness of the Karbi people. Most importantly, Samson and his friends realized the need to form a unified group to pressurize the government for developing the Karbi dominated areas of
the hills in ways which will be actually beneficial for the people. In the year 1940, when Sir Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam visited upper Assam via Mikir hills, Samson and his colleagues welcomed him at Mohongdijua Camp and submitted a memorandum. The memorandum informed Sir Reid, “the deplorable condition of the Mikirs (colonial term denoting the Karbi community) due to complete isolation in the jungle area of the hills”. It also expressed gratitude to the government for taking in for the first time a Mikir Representative in Provincial Legislature. The relevant lines read as:

“Mikirs who have been kept in perpetual subordination by their progressiveneighbours beg to express our deep gratitude to Your Excellency for taking in for the first time a Mikir Representative in Provincial Legislature, an act which has not only received appreciation from the Mikir people but has also worked as an initiative among the Mikir youths for improving the status of their tribe; and we sincerely hope that however busily engaged Your Excellency might be with multifarious activities, your Excellency would be graciously pleased to bear in mind the deplorable conditions of the Mikirs due to complete isolation in the jungle area of the hills and further to redress to their legitimate grievances as embodied in the memorial annexed herewith.”
(Rongpher, 2006, pp. 344-345)

With Semson and his colleagues’ pioneering mobilizational works, the idea of Karbi nation began to take shape and got strengthened in the later years with the formation of various other organisations. In the year 1946, Karbi A Dorbar (a socio-political organization) was formed. Sarsing Teron Habe became the President and Semson
Singh Ingti became the General Secretary. The Karbi A Dorbar was instrumental in voicing the concerns of the Karbi people and the need for developmental initiatives in the Karbi dominated areas. Karbi A Dorbar from the beginning also voiced the demand for the creation of a separate district for the Karbis.

The Karbi A Dorbar represented for an administration which could safeguard the tradition and culture of the Karbi population. In the year 1947, Karbi A Dorbar submitted a memorandum to the then Governor of Assam, Sir Andrew Claw (Rongpher, 2006, pp. 346-347). The memorandum is important to get a grasp of the consolidation in terms of ideas of ethnic assertion by the karbis at this moment. The memorandum stated as:

“We, the Mikir people who are in every respect backward and neglected, feel most encouraged by Your Excellency and Lady Claw’s presence in our midst today.

………..The country is passing through a most critical time in the political history of India. Every minority community is fully alert of the situation and asserting their best for their own political safeguards. The Mikirs, as well have strongly organized themselves to voice their feelings through their only All Assam association called ‘Karbi A Dorbar’. We humbly pray to Your Excellency to give due recognition to the aforesaid Association, so that in the matter of framing the coming Constitution of the country, the Association is consulted.

Your Excellency is aware that the Mikir people are living in areas where there are scanty educational, medical, and agricultural facilities. Communication as compared to with rest of the province is nil. So we most humbly pray the immediate steps are taken to better the conditions prevailing in these areas. It is general opinion of the country that the backward tribes require protection and protective rules in the Hills. But we have
come to know that there is a proposal for the abolition of Chin
Hill Regulations. If that is done, we pray that some other rules
or regulations should be substituted for safeguard the interest
and existence of the illiterate and ignorant Mikir people.”
(Rongpher, 2006, pp. 346-347)

During the same time, under the aegis of the Constituent Assembly, committee of
Fundamental Rights of the Minority and Tribals and Excluded Area was formed. A
sub-committee was also formed to address the issues of Assam and its Excluded Areas.
Gopinath Bordoloi was nominated Chairman of the sub-committee. The Bordoloi sub-
committee realised the backward condition of Mikir Hills. The Karbi A Dorbar in a
memorandum to the Bordoloi sub-committee demanded a separate district for the
Karbis. The United Mikir and North Cachar district was created. In the year 1951,
Autonomous District Council was granted under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule
of the Constitution. Elections to the Autonomous Council was held in the year 1952.

In the year 1954, when the State Reorganisation Commision under Fazal Ali toured
Assam, The tribal leaders of the various Autonomous Hill District Councils of Assam
demanded for a separate hill state. They asserted that the Sixth Schedule autonomy
‘would not satisfy the Hill tribes.’ (Ghurye, 1963, p. 334) They therefore submitted a
memorandum to SRC demanding formation of separate hill state comprising
Autonomous Hill District Councils of the United Mikir and North Cachar District of
Assam. This demand was rejected by the Commision.

In the year 1970, dividing the existing United Mikir and North Cachar district, two
separate districts Mikir Hills and North Cachar districts were formed. In 1976, Mikir
Hills district was renamed as Karbi Anglong which is presently the largest district in
Assam. In the year 2016, Karbi Anglong was divided into two administrative districts,
East Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong headquartered at Diphu and Hamren respectively under a unified Autonomous District Council.

In the year 1959, Karbi Student’s Association was formed. Immediately in the subsequent year the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 started a series of agitations. The KSA got associated with the All-Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) movement and collectively supported the demand for a separate hill state. The KSA propagated the cause of the APHLC movement and advocated the use of Roman Script for Karbi language.

Another socio-cultural organisation which played a significant role in shaping the course of Karbi nationalism was Karbi Riso Adorbar. Karbi Riso Adorbar was established in the month of February in the year 1964. Bronson Ingti was the first President and Birensing Ingti was appointed as the first Secretary. The Karbi Riso Adorbar provided a platform to the Karbi youth to work towards the preservation and propagation of the dying heritage, art and culture of the Karbi people (Borah, 2016, p. 298). However, Karbi Riso Adorbar was not in agreement with the Karbi-A Dorbar on the issue of a separate hills state. It is important to mention that the All-Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) movement which demanded separate states for the hill areas of then Assam was not given support by certain fractions of Karbi leadership. The APHLC voiced serious concern over the Assam Government’s Language Bill passed in the Assam Assembly in 1960 whereby Assamese was adopted as the State language. APHLC movement gained momentum and as a consequence in 1963, the state of Nagaland was created. In 1969, Meghalaya was created comprising Garo, Khasi and Jayantia hills vide 22nd Amendment of the Indian Constitution. The APHLC supported the initial idea of creating a separate state including the hill districts of Assam.
excluding Nagaland. A section of karbi leadership including those of the Riso Adorbar opposed the inclusion of karbi dominated areas in the proposed hill state.

In reaction to the Language Bill of Assam Assembly in 1960 which implemented the Official Language Act, the Roman Script Movement was started by a section of Karbi leaders. The Karbi language in the past had adopted Assamese script for writing as the language did not have any script. However, the Roman Script movement voiced serious concerns regarding this and propagated that this would reduce the status of Karbi identity and language in Assam and before the world especially when Assamese is adopted as a state language. They asserted that to save Karbi language from the tyranny of Assamese chauvinism, a separate script i.e. Roman script should be implemented. Riso Adorbar opposed the Roman script movement. This has been reflected in field interviews that one of the important reasons for the difference of opinion among the Karbi organisations regarding separate state and roman script was the issue of religion. It is pertinent to mention that almost all the leaders of the APHLC movement were Christians. There was a perception among certain section of Karbi population which were not yet converted to Christianity that the outcomes of the APHLC movement would only benefit the Christians. Karbi Riso Adorbar played an instrumental role in opposing this perceived Christian threat. This perception towards Christianity was not new in Karbi Anglong. It is a well-known fact that Samson Singh Ingti, who is considered the father of Karbi ethnic assertion and was an extremely revered personality, lost the election to Khorsing Teron in the assembly seat from Mikir Hills because he was a Christian.

It was also reflected in the interviews that the election to Autonomous District Council (ADC) was held in 1952, 1957 and 1962 in Mikir Hills. After that, the election was not
held for two terms citing reasons of constituency delimitation which essentially meant that the Delimitation Commission of India was in the process of redrawing boundaries of various constituencies based on the recent census. The Delimitation Commission of 1952 was empowered to increase the number of seats of ST and SC candidates from a particular state based on recent census. However, field interviews indicate that there is ground to believe that this situation was used by the ruling elite to delay the due course of elections. Therefore, it was clear that the section of Karbi leadership who were voted to power in 1962 continued to rule unhindered for nearly 10 (Ten) years.

In the year 1973, the demand for Roman script intensified under the tutelage of the Script Implementation Committee. Protest rallies were organised in various areas of the district. The Karbi Student’s Association was particularly active in the mobilization of students across the district for the cause of implementing roman script. Brute force was used by the state police to suppress the protest of students. On 29th December, 1973 in a protest rally in Diphu, a group of students were severely injured in police action. As revealed by field interviews, this incident marked the beginning of an intense nationalist sentiment of unity among the Karbi students which directed the course of Karbi ethnonational movement in the future. This is reflected in the making of a consolidated Karbi cultural identity through the festival space of the Karbi Youth Festival.

Interviewees commented that after the incident of 29th December, the morale of the youth in the district went low. To motivate the Karbi youth and students towards the making of a Karbi cultural identity and keeping their spirits alive for the script movement, the addition of a cultural dimension was required. A platform was needed where manifested expressions of a Karbi identity could be represented. Therefore, it
was decided to organize the 1st Youth Festival at the Karbi Club in Diphu. Cultural programmes were organized and students and young people were encouraged to participate. This was the genesis of the celebrated Karbi Youth Festival (KYF). The motive was clear: unity and mobilization of Karbi youth without attracting violent suppression from the state apparatus. The State government could not oppose forcefully such cultural activities of the youth in-spite of knowing well that the Karbi Youth Festival would be used as a platform for mobilization and assertion of the distinct ethno-national identity of the Karbis.

The Karbi Student’s Association (KSA) took the leading role in organizing the festival till the year 1977 when the Karbi Cultural Society (KCS) was formed in Diphu in the month of January. From 1977 onwards, KCS has taken the responsibility of organizing the Karbi Youth Festival under their tutelage.

The KYF was not only limited to the town of Diphu. Field interviews revealed that the festival was organized at different places of Karbi Anglong during its early years. It was a real community festival in the sense that individual villages in different areas of Karbi Anglong used to host the festival in their respective villages. Each year a new village would volunteer to host the festival. This was a great opportunity for promoting unity and cultural camaraderie. From the beginning of the 1990’s, it was increasingly felt that the reach and popularity of Karbi Youth Festival should also be extended to the different areas of Karbi Anglong. Zonal units of KCS began to be formed in youth clubs, schools and colleges and got recognition, encouragement and support by the respective local population. From 1992, Zonal Youth Festivals began to be organized at different zones. Generally, the festivals in the zones were organized in the month of
September or October around the same time when Durga Puja was celebrated in Assam.

From the year 1986, ethnic communities other than the Karbis were also allowed to represent themselves in the KYF, now, a well-established platform of representation. This policy of inclusion was an important political move. It allowed the Karbi leadership to extend their attempt to integrate the minority groups namely, Bodo, Paite, Rabha, Dimasa, Tai Ahom, Rengma Naga, Tiwa, Garo, Kuki, Mantai speaking communities and other ethnic groups who were residing in Karbi Anglong not necessarily into the Karbi identity but the shared imagination of a hills identity.

The emotional reach of Karbi Youth Festival was huge. A section of Karbi leadership proposed that a permanent space for organizing the KYF was needed. The villagers of Taralangso near Diphu town donated their land for this sole purpose. The present massive permanent venue of the KYF, the Karbi People’s Hall was acquired and the festival is being celebrated here since 1994. Significant infrastructure development has also taken place here since then.

With the participation of youths from different Zonal Committees of the KCS, the KYF is a spectacle comprising traditional dance competitions, traditional games competitions, traditional lifestyle competitions like rice grinding, weaving etc. The festival also includes commercial and traditional fairs, food stalls, fashion shows, modern dance, western music competitions and the like along with the stalls of different Government departments working under the administrative control of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council. The Festivals also provides a platform to the Lindokpo (traditional king), Pinpomar (traditional council of ministers), Habe
(traditional territorial governors) etc. to relive their bygone identities within the festival space.

Nowadays, the KCS allots spaces to representatives of various ethnic communities for constructing respective traditional dwellings. People of the community stay in these specially constructed dwellings for the days of the festival and enact a traditional lifestyle of their respective communities for the audience. These ‘living people’ in the traditional huts perform a demonstration of their presumed historical lifestyle for 3-4 days of the festival. They are observed to have reflected to the audience an identity consciousness and a proud embodiment of their traditional tribal lifestyle. These performers become living museum specimens for 3-4 days during the festival. Objects of material culture belonging to different communities are also showcased in these traditional huts with an attempt to contextualize them in their traditional setting.

5.3 Joon Beel Mela

Scholars have pondered over the issue of the lack of compelling historiography explaining the impact of changes in the colonial period in the consolidation of the people of Assam in general and the tribes in particular. More specifically it has been felt that there have been unanswered questions in the context of the tribes in Assam. Significantly Barbora observes:

“How did the re-drawing of boundaries and the incorporation into a new economy affect the tribes of Assam? Were they to share the same fate as the dispossessed indentured workers from the central hills of the Indian sub-continent? Were they going to be placed in an increasingly hierarchical relationship with those who controlled the economy?
Indeed, it would seem almost axiomatic within this scheme to see the “end” of traditional systems and the “emergence” of new classes within the colonial mode of production.” (Borbora, 2005, p. 7)

In the light of the current discussion, it is also important to understand the loss of socio-political status of various tribal chieftains in the new formation of classes and dismantling of pre-colonial structures. Rajen Saikia opines that “within the lifetime of a single generation, old ruling classes, including vassal chiefs of Beltola, Rani, Dimoria, Gobha etc. ceased to exist… (their world) vanished without a trace” (Saikia, 2000, p. 40)

The Joon Beel Mela in the contemporary times is found to be a reaffirmation of bygone identities of vassal chiefs. Within the temporality of the festival space, the customary king of the Tiwa community engulfs the identity of his ancestors. This is another example of a festival space being used for assertion of historic ethnocentric identities.

Joon Beel is a large historically famous water body just in the middle of Jagiroad town and Jagi Bhakatgaon of Mayong Revenue Circle of Morigaon District of Assam. From the time immemorial, Joon Beel Mela, a traditional haat (fair) of Tiwa people of both plains and hills is being organized on the bank of the Joon Beel under the patronage of the Tiwa king of Gobha Kingdom. The haat offered the opportunity to the people of Assam particularly to the Tiwas of middle Assam and the hilly areas of present day Meghalaya to collect their basic minimum essentials of the household through ‘barter system’. At present, though the barter system is not economically viable, the Joon Beel Mela has taken the shape of an inseparable socio-cultural event of the Tiwa community of Assam which symbolically exhibits the traditional barter system.
The JoonBeel Festival popularly known as the Joon Beel Mela, a three-day long fair is being organised every year after one week of Assamese *Magh Bihu* festival (Makar Sankranti) from Thursday to Saturday with due royal permission of *Gobha Deo Raja* (Customary Tiwa king) of Tiwa community. It is important to have an idea of Gobha Kingdom to understand the traditional Joon Beel Mela better. There is a scarcity of literature on the territorial and administrative history of the Gobha kingdom of the Tiwas. However, from whatever available in historical sources together with a compilation of the views of social commentators of Assam and with the folklores available among the tiwa people; it may be construed that the Tiwas settled over a vast area of Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. It also included areas of Khasi and Jayantia hills of present day Meghalaya on the southern bank of Kapili river. G.C Sarmathakur opines that initially, the Tiwas had an independent kingdom. But, gradually by the passage of time, due to political instability, severe economic crisis and repeated natural calamities the Tiwas had to surrender to the Jayantia king (Sharma Thakur, 1985, pp. 1-2). It may be safely assumed that the Tiwas (also known by the colonial term *Lalungs*) had entered Assam in groups through various directions at various times and had settled at various places. However, it holds true that a major population of the Tiwas were living under the tutelage of the Jayantia kingdom. The Tiwas at a later stage established the greater Gobha Kingdom in Marjong and Gobha areas. In this context, the *sachipat* manuscript of Gobang Lalung is mentioned by historians as a source. The Gobha Kingdom was later partitioned into three sub-states namely Neli, Khala and Sahari.

The Gobha king had a conflict with the Jayantia king during the reign of Ahom Sargadeo Jayadhwaj Singha, and on the request of the Gobha king, Jayadhwaj Singha
established the Gobha king in Khagarijan of Nowgaon district (Gait, 1994). The Gobha kingdom was a protectorate of the Jayantias. It was also a strategically important area as it provided the gateway to Jayantia kingdom for the Ahoms. Later the Gobha kingdom paid tribute to the Ahom kings in kinds. It may be assumed that from the time of Jayadhwaj Singha, the Gobha Kingdom was beginning to become a trade centre for Ahoms, the Jayantias and the neighbouring petty kingdoms. It is agreed that the Kacharis and Jayantias were powerful competitors of the Ahom Kingdom. Both these kingdoms were under the strict vigilance of Ahoms through the officials Rahial Barua of Raha, Jagial Gohain of Jagi Chawki and the Baruas of Kajali Chawki.

Under the historic treaty of Yandaboo in the year 1826, Assam had gone under the British rule. According to legend, in the year 1835, the Gobha king Chatra Sing captured four Britishers and sacrificed three of them. In consequence, Captain Lister of Sylhet Light Infantry was sent to bring Gobha kingdom under British domination. In the year 1947, after independence, the Gobha kingdom was converted to Gobha Mouza under Government of Assam.

In the year 1606, Yash Narayan, the Jayantia king established a friendly relation with Ahom king Pratap Singha by arranging the marriage of two of his daughters with the Ahom king. After this gesture, the Jayantia king, king of Gobha, and the petty kingdoms of Neli and Khala requested the Ahom kingdom through the Jagial Gohain for establishing a *haat* (traditional market) for trade in these areas. Agreeing to the request, the Ahom king established a haat in Fuloguri on the bank of Kalang river and permitted the Ahom subjects to trade with the Tiwas. Thus, the Fulaguri haat was the precursor to the Joon Beel Mela.
Popular lores ascribe that the haats were either closed or their sites were changed due to various politico-administrative reasons of the Ahom kingdom. In the later years, the site for the haat was ascribed to be at Hatiamukh on the southern bank of Kolong river which was about 2 kms away from the site of the present Joon Beel Mela. It is not known for how long the haat continued at Hatiamukh or when it was transferred to be organised in the present site of Joon Beel Mela.

After the treaty of Yandaboo, in the year 1826, the Ahom kingdom came under the British rule. However, the kingdoms and vassal states of Gobha, Neli, Khola etc. enjoyed relative independence till around 1835.

It can be assumed that the principal reason for the opening of the Joon Beel Mela was to meet the economic needs of the people and to maintain cordial relations between the Ahoms and different vassal states: Jayantia, Gobha, Neli, Khala and other petty states. The economic aspect of the Joon Beel Mela provides a glimpse into the importance of the Gobha kingdom. The Gobha kingdom spread over a huge area of undivided Nowgaon district of Assam was rich in agricultural produce. Also, its forests were rich in valuable timbers, wild animals, birds, medicinal plants and spices. Fish were in abundance in its rivers and numerous water bodies. The rich resources of the region provided a scope for the development of small-scale crafts industries of bamboo, cane and ivory products. The region also produced endi, muga and cotton textiles. Because of the extremely limited use of money economy and the prohibition of the usage of their own coinage among the vassal states of the Ahoms, the haats were very important for exchange through barter system. In fact, the barter system was the only means of trade exchange.
It is also important to mention that the Gobha Kingdom was not established purely on the historically understood concepts of kingship. The kingdom had no standing army, the king was chosen from among the people. Legends also ascribe that the Joon Beel Mela was established on the coronation day of the Tiwa king, Langbor. The coronation of Langbor was held in Fulaguri after a week of Makara Sankranti. Although the coronary anniversary of Langbor was held in Fulaguri, from the days of King Joon Singh, the water body was named as Joon Beel and the ‘mela’ (fair) came to be known as Joon Beel Mela.

It is pertinent to mention that the system of community fishing in the water bodies is a social custom of the Tiwas. There are several large and small water bodies in the areas of Gobha, Khala, Neli and Dimoria. These water bodies are deeply involved in the socio-cultural life of the Tiwas. The names of the water bodies are found in folk songs, oral narratives and even in prayers. It is also posited that the Tiwas, Karbis and Khasis do not celebrate the Assamese Magh Bihu of the plains. However, these communities celebrated their own festivals and rituals around that time in the month of Magha (tenth month of the Assamese Calendar). Therefore, the barter system of the Joon Beel Mela was very important especially to the people living in the hills as the mela provided the opportunity to collect necessary items for their rituals.

The mela can also be historically understood as a tax collecting (in kind) feast of the Ahoms and Jayantia kingdoms. The other participating vassal states were Dimoria, Gobha, Neli, Khala, Sahari, Khairam etc. The common feast of all the kings was also a platform for collecting their taxes in kind from the mela as per their entitlements.

Presently, the politico-ritualistic aspect of the mela is the barter system which has a symbolic and traditional importance rather than being economically viable. On the first
day of the mela, the people of the hills assemble in the mela ground and start erecting makeshift shelters for their stay during the three days of the mela. Some go to the nearby villages and find homestay there. As revealed by respondents, this had always provided the scope to establish long lasting friendships between the people of the hills and the people of the plains. Traders from different parts of Assam come with their items for sale and establish stalls in the designated areas. Merry making with songs and dance happens during the night.

The Mela begins at early morning on Friday, i.e the second day. The people of the hills and the plains begin to exchange various items through barter system from early morning. The king organises a puja and arranges for community fishing and feast on the bank of the Joon Beel. In the evening, cultural shows are organised.

On Saturday, the third day, the barter system does not happen. The kings of the participatory erstwhile states assemble on a temporary hall and collect taxes from the traders. Fishing on the Joon Beel is made free on this day for people of all castes and religions.

The Joon Beel Mela in contemporary times has transformed into an important annual event for the Tiwa community of Assam. It has manifested as an ethnic festival which serve as a temporal space for the assertion of Tiwa identity. At the same time, it is also just like any other commercial fair which is influenced by popular culture. The festival space is used for voicing concerns and demands to the government.

Fairs and festivals as temporal spaces have their own special problems. Ivan Karp opines that “the more important festivals become, the more the tension between politics and control manifests itself in their history” (Karp, 1991, p. 284). This has been
witnessed quite significantly and also has been revealed from field interviews during different festivals. Another significant problem of “living displays” as witnessed in the traditional huts of the Karbi Youth Festival is that often the folk activity performed by the respective performers is not an indigenous performance genre. It seems quite obvious that a traditional everyday craft which was a part of traditional lifestyle is forced into the round hole of show-business. This takes the legitimizing agenda of a particular community to unforeseen forms often acting as tools of contemporary identity assertions and thereby become integral part of identity movements. The political tension over the control of the festival space has also been revealed in the field interviews. Another issue that emerges is the issue of ‘authenticity’ as opposed to ‘fantasy’ in the cultural politics of the festivals. The role of the people of the community participating in traditional performances, traditional games, and the livid enactments of the performative symbols of traditions extends much beyond celebrating an identity. The role of the participants is also largely to guide and stimulate the audience to experience a world they only know through imagination. The festival therefore manifest as major platforms of representation and over the time have become institutions by themselves.