Chapter III

The Making of a State Museum: A Case Study of Assam State Museum

3.1 The Genesis of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti aka Assam Research Society

The history of the development of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti also known as the Assam Research Society and later the institution of the Museum in Assam cannot be read as separate from the erstwhile political trends of modernity in the Indian sub-continent particularly in Bengal.

The development of a modern institution of art and cultural scholarship in colonial Assam is understood as being directly influenced by the nationalist fervour of the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal. The scheme to divide the province of Bengal in two parts “Bengal” which included western Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and the other part with “Eastern Bengal and Assam” was formally announced on October 16, 1905 by Lord Curzon. The partition was vehemently opposed by educated middle class of west Bengal and a class of educated Assamese gentry influenced by the nationalist spirit of the ‘bhadraloks’ (educated Bengali elite) of Bengal.

Curzon’s administrative policies increasingly manifested perceptively as ‘anti-Bengalee’ which has been explained by historians as: the rise of the educated Bengali Hindu community to a powerful political class and their dominance in national politics of the Congress. This was a matter of concern for the colonial rulers. The partition therefore was seen by the Bengali and Assamese educated elite as a shrewd tactic of the British administration of dividing the vast population of Bengal on religious and
linguistic lines. However, for Assam the partition meant in plain terms economic gain for the British tea-planters as they could now have the control over the port of Chittagong. It would also have reduced their dependency on the Assam-Bengal Railway for transportation of the finished tea. (Bandyopadhyay, 2009, p. 253)

The Swadeshi movement was an opposition to colonial rule not just through violation of its unjust laws and boycott of British goods and institutions but also through a coveted revival of indigenous alternatives. This revivalist discourse was sought to define the Indian nation in terms of its distinct cultural heritage or civilization. (Bandyopadhyay, 2009, pp. 248-256) Symbols of an imagined golden past were retrospectively reconstructed through a passionate nationalist art history (Guha-Thakurta, 2004). There was a cultural and historical construction which led association in the pride of an imagined Aryan past which was thought to legitimize the right to rule for Indians. Modern Indian historians have written extensively on the central dichotomy of Indian nationalism being expressed at all fronts with the gradual polarization of opinions of the moderates and the extremists. The moderates desired the Indian nation to develop on the lines of a western modernist discourse. This also meant an advocacy of the continuation of colonial rule to at least a certain period. The extremists wanted to oppose colonial rule and therefore had to adhere to a non-Western paradigm (Chatterjee, 1993). Legitimization of distinctly Indian cultural norms began which led to religious revivalism and unrestrained glorification of a constructed and confused past.

The period of the Swadeshi Movement witnessed the rise of various literary and research societies. Amongst them the Uttar Bangiya Sahitya Parishad had significant influence among the intelligentsia in Assam. The Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, a
voluntary organization founded in 1912, is regarded as the nucleus of the Assam State Museum (Choudhury, 1990). The scholar Professor Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinod proposed an idea of establishing a society for antiquarian studies of ancient Pragjyotishpura-Kamrupa. His idea was enthusiastically accepted among a group of individuals having similar scholarly interests. The idea was crystallized into a resolution to form an organization at the April 1912 literary conference of the Uttar Bangiya Sahitya Parishad held at Kamakhya in Guwahati. The resolution was unanimously adopted and the Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti was established. The founders of the Samiti perhaps inspired by the Asiatic Society founded by Sir William Jones held the view that the Samiti should strive towards collecting and preserving artefacts, representing the cultural heritage of the region that incorporated ancient kingdom of Pragjyotishpura-Kamrupa.

The Samiti also known as Assam Research Society began with a donation of Rupees twenty-five by Babu Sasadhar Ray of the Calcutta High Court who presided over the Sahitya Parishad meeting in Kamakhya. Gradually, the Samiti expanded and several prominent personalities associated themselves with it. Chandra Nath Sarma became the founder-secretary and prominent patrons among others included Maharaja Jitendra Narayan Bhoop Bahadur of Cooch Behar, Lt Governor of Orissa and Bihar Sir Edward Gait, Commissioner of Assam Valley Lt Col P.R.T Gordon, Chief Commissioner of Assam Sir Archdale Earle, Raja Prabhat Chandra Barooah Bahadur of Gauripur and many scholars (Banerjee, 2004 p. 26).

In 1933, J.P Mills writing for the first volume of the Journal of Assam Research Society expressed,
“...it seems to me to be of supreme importance that the old records should not only be translated but interpreted from a strictly objective standpoint—the standpoint of all true scientists. This is important in that most, if not all, of them were not written objectively, but from a Hindu standpoint, and the records of pre-Hindu Ahom days are coloured by later Hindu feeling...such a picture is badly needed, for it will be the only one of a high civilization built up on an animistic religion.” (Mills J., 1933, p. 3)

Mills’ warning seems to have correctly envisioned the manifestations of the pan-Indian Assamese colonial modernity which seems to marginalize the tribes and communities in terms of their representation in various platforms of Assamese culture including the museum spaces.

3.2 The making of ‘the Museum’ in Assam

When the plea to the government to construct a museum for its collections went in vain, the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti decided to construct its own building. Construction began with a generous grant by Rai Bahadur Naput Rai Kedia of Dibrugarh and donations from other philanthropists together with the membership fees collected by the Samiti. On November 19, 1917, the building was formally inaugurated by Lt Col P.R.T Gordon, the Commissioner of Assam Valley and honorary Provincial Director of Ethnography, Assam. The Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti served as a quasi-museum until 1940, when under the initiative of Rai Bahadur Kanaklal Baruah, the Assam Provincial Museum was inaugurated by Sir Robert Neil Reid, the then Governor of undivided Assam. The museum remained a non-governmental private organization till it was formally taken over by the Government of Assam on the 1st of April 1953.
In 1961, under the direction of the Government of India, the Assam Government formed a separate Department of Archaeology and attached it to the already existing State Museum. The Department of Archaeology and Museum was placed under the Director of Public Instruction, Assam State. In 1966, for effective functioning, a separate Directorate of State Museum and Archaeology was established. However, the merger of the two Departments- Museums and Archaeology was not providing results up to the expectations of the Government. Consequently, in 1983, on the advice of the Central Advisory Committee for Museums, two separate Directorates were formed under two different directors- the Directorate of Museums and the Directorate of Archaeology. In January 1984, the then Chief Minister, Hiteswar Saikia opened a new ethnography gallery in the museum. At present, the museum is operating under the Directorate of Museums under the Department of Cultural Affairs, Government of Assam. A museological case study of the display in the Assam State Museum is provided below.

3.3 The Assam State Museum: A museological case study

The exhibits of the Assam State Museum are displayed in different sections as follows:

1. Arms Section: This section displays arms and armour belonging to Ahom dynasty, Koch dynasty and some arms of the Mughal dynasty. The display includes Hangdangs (traditional Ahom Sword), daggers, shields, cannons etc. Besides these, some arms and ammunitions used by the Japanese Army and Air Force during the Second World War are also displayed here.

2. Pre- & Protohistoric and Terracotta Section: This section displays some artefacts of the Indus Valley Civilization originally collected by the Archaeological
Survey of India. Terracotta objects collected from various places of Assam and the northeast are also displayed here.

3. Numismatics and Metallic Sculptures Section: Metal sculptures of Hindu and Buddhist deities are displayed in this section. The section also has a coin cabinet which displays a large number of coins belonging to different periods.

4. Epigraphy Section: Stone and Copper plate inscriptions belonging to different periods are displayed here.

5. Sculpture Section: This section displays stone sculptures roughly from the period 6th to 13th century C.E. In addition, sculptures found in the archaeological excavation at Ambari and some other sculptures received from Bharat Kala Bhawan, Banaras Hindu University are also displayed in the gallery.

6. Manuscript Section: Manuscripts written in Assamese, Tai and Burmese languages are displayed in this section. Apart from that, some Assamese illustrated manuscripts are also displayed in this section.

7. Textile Section: This section displays Assamese silk textiles. Besides, costumes of Ahom royalty are also exhibited here.

8. Freedom Fighter Gallery: This section is a pictography gallery. It includes photographs on the life of M.K Gandhi and some of his associates. In another part of the gallery, a list of martyrs of Quit India Movement who belonged to Assam is displayed along with some photographs.

9. Painting Section: This section displays some paintings by modern painters of Assam.
10. Village Life of Assam Section: This section displays scale models of an Assamese household, a *Naam ghar* (traditional prayer house of the neo-vaishnavite religious fold) and various dioramas depicting the lifestyle of an Assamese village. It also displays various items of everyday use such as fishing implements, farming implements etc.

11. Ethnography Section: In this section, artefacts belonging to some of the ethnic communities of Assam are displayed. The exhibits are divided tribe-wise. The objects displayed include textiles, musical instruments, fishing and farming implements and other objects of everyday use.

The divisions of exhibits of the museum excluding the ‘Village Life of Assam’ gallery and the ‘Ethnography gallery’ seem to have been done according to the type of material- metals, terracotta, textiles, stone, *sachipat* (birch-bark manuscripts), paper, photographs etc. It is in the case of Assamese village life Gallery and the Ethnography gallery that the division of objects is according to the themes of material culture and lifestyle. The core discussion in this case study is centered on the display in these two galleries.

Let us first take the case of Assamese village life gallery. This galley is located on the first floor of the new museum building. A long gallery orientation text at the entrance familiarizes the visitor about the village life of Assam.

“The village has been the basis of Indian culture. Until the advent of industrialization when the village agriculture, along with handicrafts and handloom had been the major factors for economic growth…” (Gallery text, Assam State Museum)
The next paragraph mentions the effects of industrial and market economy on the village and its repercussion on traditional culture.

The paragraph that follows conveys:

“The Assamese culture has also derived its essence from its numerous villages scattered all over Assam. A village is generally developed along a road on its either side. Often several villages together make an elongated and continuous settlement pattern where one village is indistinguishable from the other.” (Gallery Text, Assam State Museum)

“Households are situated on either side of the road in single rows. Sufficient spaces are always maintained... Paddy field surround the villages.” (Gallery Text, Assam State Museum)

The text goes on to highlight the importance of the naamghar in the villages of Assam as a platform for the discussion of the social and administrative issues of the village.

The gallery text concludes as:

“In this gallery an attempt has been made to give the viewers some idea about the material culture of the Assamese people.” (Gallery Text, Assam State Museum)

Now, let us imagine that a ‘tribal’ villager visits the gallery and reads this description. Will he be able to locate himself and his village in this narrative? Will he find a sense of belonging? His village may not be situated along a plain road. His village may not be surrounded by a paddy field. The people in his village may not even practice agriculture. His people may have been practicing shifting cultivation or horticulture. This is because the description of ‘village life of Assam’ here is essentially of a caste-
Hindu village. The visual imagery explicitly excludes the ‘tribals’. The ‘tribal’ in this gallery is the ‘other’ who is denied presence in the collective selfhood of an Assamese village. The geographical imagery in the text seems to exclude hills and forests from the national imagination of an Assamese village. The ‘tribal’ here is seen as a different entity, not belonging to an Assamese village and pushed to the hills and forests where his imagined primitiveness is thought to be best suited. This brings forth an essential question in front of a visitor. The question is what constitutes Assamese people? And to extend the scope of the question further brings another important question, what is Assam?

When one enters the gallery, one is greeted by a wooden Garuda (a legendary bird or bird-like creature in primarily Hindu mythology. He is variously the vehicle mount of the Hindu god Vishnu) sculpture placed on the right. Just in front is a scale model of a Naamghar. Around the gallery, on three sides, glass cages displaying various objects of everyday use- fishing implements, agricultural implements, musical instruments, puppets, and dioramas depicting sericulture, textile making, pottery making and dioramas depicting glimpses of the traditional life style of caste-Hindu community of Assam are placed. There is an interesting walk through exhibit of a traditional caste-Hindu household which has been scaled down. Here, different spaces of what it seems to be a caste-Hindu Assamese household are skillfully provided an animated presence, complete with hays on the scaled down courtyard.

There is an absolute absence of any artefact generally ascribed as belonging to the ‘tribal’ cultures of Assam in this gallery. This exclusion may invoke a feeling of dissonance among various ‘tribal’ communities residing in the region. It should also be mentioned here that there are many ‘tribal’ communities residing in the plains of
Assam. Also, there are many villages in Assam which have a very heterogeneous mix of different communities both ‘tribal’ and ‘non-tribal’. The Dimoria development Block under Kamrup (Metropolitan) district is an apt example of such an area. This also reminds that in spite of the presence of a separate textile section, textiles belonging to ‘tribal’ communities are not displayed in the textile gallery.

The under-representation of ‘tribal’ communities in the museum is somewhat addressed by the Ethnography Gallery. However, the very presence of this gallery as a separate section and also its ‘tribe-wise’ display projects the communities represented in it in contrasting opposition to the village life of Assam. The positioning of the gallery away from the ‘village life of Assam’ resonates the continuing practice of providing visual endorsement to the ‘other’ within the own surroundings of the long-created colonial ‘other’. In addition, confining the communities in the glass cages is a visual denial that their cultures are in transition, in contrast to the village life gallery which more interactive and alive.

The ethnography gallery is located on the Second floor of the new building. Within the sad ambience of a square-shaped gallery, thirteen ethnic communities are allotted glass cages. The objects are strictly classified according to the particular tribes they belong to. There is a diorama which attempt to depict the festival of the Rabha community. Another one tries to depict the settlement pattern of the Karbi community. But, one is confused at seeing stark similarities among the objects of everyday use displayed in the gallery. The text labels for each tribe describe the linguistic affiliation, occupation, the territory, family and marriage system, and religion. The communities represented in this gallery include: Boro, Dimasa, Rabha, Tiwa, Mishing, Hajong, Sonowal Kachari, Kuki, Jemi Naga, Hmar, Khelma, Karbi and Deori.
Let us examine a few text panels to get a sense of the descriptions of different ‘tribes’ in the gallery.

**Karbis**

“They constitute an important ethnic group in the hill areas of present Assam. Racially the Karbis belong to the mongoloid group and linguistically they belong to the tibeto-burman group. The Karbi follow the patriarchal system of family structure. Clan exogamy is strictly followed and although monogamy is the prevailing practice, there is no bar to polygamy. From the point of view of religions, the Karbis can be regarded as animists. Agriculture is their primary occupation, in addition to the handloom industry which is very much common to all the Karbi families." (Text label, State Museum)

**Dimasa Kachari**

“They are an important ethnic group confined mainly in the North Cachar hills district. The Dimasa Kacharis belong to the Boro group of people and are linguistically affiliated to the tibeto-burman group…The most outstanding characteristic of their social structure is the existence of female clans almost parallel to male clans. Monogamy is prevalent among the Dimasas and their religious (a spelling mistake) is a mixture of their traditional religion and Hinduism.” (Text label, Assam State Museum)
Boro-Kacharis

“The Boro Kacharis of Assam is a branch of the Indo-mongoloid family falling within the Assam-Burmese language section. They are now largely concentrated in the Kokrajhar district followed by the northern belt of undivided Kamrup and Darrang districts. They are agriculturists by occupation and are characterized by the patri-lineal line of descent. These tribals are influenced by Hinduism and their society has been found to be strictly following the rule of clan exogamy and monogamy in their material relationship.” (Text label, Assam State Museum)

Ivan Karp (1991) argues that “the politics of producing the image of the other requires a poetics not just of difference but also of similarity” (p. 374). In museum’s these politics and poetics of display takes shape by two different strategies of exhibition which Karp calls as “exoticizing” and “assimilating” (Karp, 1991 p. 375). On one hand, the ‘other’ is portrayed as lacking the cultural qualities of the dominant cultural group. On the other hand, the ‘other’ is measured in terms of the cultural concepts familiar to the dominant group.

By putting the text labels in this gallery under the scanners of Karp’s argument, it is observed that the ‘other’ here is measured and portrayed by using cultural concepts familiar to the dominant group such as ‘agriculture’, ‘patriarchy, monogamy/polygamy’ and most important of all, the degree of assimilation into the Hindu religion. On one hand the various tribal communities represented in the Ethnography gallery are provided with an exhibit which resounds difference with the dominant culture of caste-Hindu Assamese there by producing the exoticized ‘museum effect’ (Alpers, 1991). At the same time, cultural concepts such as Hinduism,
patriarchy, agriculture etc. which are the cultural markers of caste-Hindu Assamese are used to measure up the acceptance of a particular community in the collective selfhood of the Assamese nation and the Indian nation-state. This binary of cultures created within the museum is a continuation of colonial ethnography and yet reflective of the politics of differentiation and hierachisation within Assam.

Ethnographic displays in museums have always failed to address contemporary realities (Hudson, 1991). It is recognized that cultures are always in transition. But, when it comes to museums, it is observed that ethnographic displays attempt to provide tangibility to the intangibility of identity, as if the various ethnic communities represented in the museum have continued and would continue to live their lives as displayed in the ethnographic exhibit.

Interviewees narrated many incidences during the course of fieldwork for this study in the Assam State Museum when visitors belonging to different ethnic communities had complained that there has not been ample representation of their community in the museum. Some question why they have not been represented at all. Others claim that the objects belonging to their community has been wrongly put in the glass cage of another community. It is felt that these conflicts could have been avoided to a certain extent if the display in the ethnographic gallery would have been done according to themes (such as textile traditions, musical traditions, beliefs and rituals etc.) rather than adhering to distinct ‘tribes’.

### 3.4 The question of Assamese identity: A crisis

As mentioned earlier the new Ethnography gallery in the Assam State Museum was opened in January 1984. One may ask why a decision to open a new ethnography
gallery was taken at this time. The answer to this question is not simply an official administrative one. There is a requirement to probe a little deeper. The multilingual, multi-ethnic society in Assam was already positing the eminent problem of defining Assamese identity. The question, what constitutes ‘Assamese people’ was however never posed in the public domain until the Assam movement which raised the issues of foreign nationalism, citizenship and voting rights. The movement ended with the signing of the Assam Accord on August 15, 1985. The Assam Accord in one of the clauses unfolded the historical complexity of Assamese identity to an extent that “a clear definition of Assamese people” was sought in the subsequent years as a requirement for the implementation of the Assam Accord, 1985.

It is also important to understand that the intense emotional reach of the Assam movement was already proving to be possessing immense potential in creating a winning political rhetoric in electoral politics. The then ruling Congress Government saw this as an immediate hindrance in their already inconspicuous chances of winning the next elections. It is also pertinent to mention that the election of 1983, where the Congress was victorious happened amidst incidences of violence and mass protests to boycott the elections by the All Assam Students Union. Therefore, there is ground to believe that the opening of the new ethnography gallery in 1983 by Chief minister Hiteswar Saikia during the heyday of the Assam movement had a hidden political agenda.

Clause 6 of the Assam Accord, 1985 provides that “constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people”. (Assam Accord, 1985)
The various indigenous groups in Assam who do not use Assamese as their mother tongue found it difficult to accept the linguistic connotation of the term ‘Assamese people’ in the Accord and a clear definition of term ‘Assamese people’ was sought. These groups claimed that each ethnic group in Assam has their own identity as each group has distinct history, culture, language and heritage. Therefore, the term ‘Assamese people’ and thereby the question of Assamese identity needed to be discussed seriously.

Various definitions and elaborations of the term ‘Assamese people’ were discussed at different levels by different organizations. In 1989, the State Cabinet put forward the following definition:

“The term Assamese people shall include all indigenous Tribal, Non-tribal and local linguistic population living permanently within the four boundaries of Assam and the people who are permanently residing within the four boundaries or all genuine citizens who have accepted the local language and culture of Assam as their own.” (Home and Political Department, 2008)

The Legislative Department put forward the following definition:

“The term Assamese People shall mean and include all indigenous tribal, non-tribal and other linguistic population of Assam living within the four geographical boundaries of Assam and all genuine Indian citizen who have permanently settled within the four geographical boundaries of Assam and accepted, practiced, propagated and patronized the local language and culture of Assam as their own.” (Home and Political Department, 2008)
The All Assam Student’s Union (ASSU) opined that:

“Persons enlisted in NRC 1951 and their descendants are Assamese”

(Teron & Engti, Definition of Assamese People- An Approach Paper, 2008)

The Asom Sahitya Sabha further elaborated on the definition and provided that:

“Persons enlisted in NRC 1951 and their descendants are Assamese, provided that their mother tongue is Assamese or any of the indigenous languages of Assam. To settle any discrepancy that may arise in this regard, due importance would be given to the Electoral Roll of 1952 and 1957” (Teron & Ingti, Definition of Assamese People : An Approach Paper, 2008)

However, none of the above-mentioned definitions were officially accepted. The Government of Assam in an attempt to involve all the literary organizations of the tribes/communities in arriving at an acceptable definition of the term ‘Assamese people’, held two important meetings in 2005. Held on September 06, 2005 and October 1, 2005 respectively, these meetings were attended by representatives of various communities of Assam which included Assam Sahitya Sabha, Boro Sahitya Sabha, Tiwa Mathanlai Tokhra, Karbi Lamet Amei, Mising Agom Ke’bang, Deuri Sahitya Sabha, Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha, Hmar Sahitya Sabha, Nikhil Rabha Sahitya Sabha and Char Chaporl Sahitya Parisad.

The meeting on September 06, 2005 was convened by the Home and Political Department, Government of Assam at C Block, 3rd Floor, Assam Secretariat, Dispur. In this meeting discussions were held with special reference to the definitions put forward
by the AASU and the Asom Sahitya Sabha. A solution could not be obtained in this
meeting and the decisions were postponed to the next meeting scheduled on October 1,
2005. In the meantime, however, there were several interim discussions happening both
internally within the literary bodies and also between the organisations.

The Boro Sahitya Sabha posited that:

“The house has observed that in spite of assimilation, some communities
are still living with their distinctive language, culture, tradition, rituals
and historical background at the most. Under the circumstances the
house comes to a unanimous decision that the Assamese are those whose
mother tongue is Assamese and those who disregarding their own
language and culture accepted and assimilated with the Assamese
language and culture, but the communities like Boro, Mising, Karbi,
Rabha, Tiwa etc. having their own identity with distinctive language,
culture, heritage and historical background do not come under the
purview of Assamese. Rather they are indigenous inhabitants of Assam
and not the Assamese.” (Dutta, 2012, p. 126)

Similarly, other literary bodies also passed resolutions firmly stating that the
communities they represent are not ‘Assamese’ but ‘indigenous people of Assam with
their own heritage, tradition, language and culture (Dutta, 2012, p. 126).

On 30th September, 2005, a joint meeting of the literary bodies was held at Hagjer
Bhawan in Guwahati under the aegis of Bodo Sahitya Sabha. Sri Brajendra Kumar
Brahma, President, Bodo Sahitya Sabha presided over the meeting as President.
Presidents and representatives of the Boro Sahitya Sabha, Karbi Lamet Amei, Mising
Sahitya Sabha, Rabha Sahitya Sabha and Tiwa Sahitya Sabha were present in the meeting. Two resolutions were passed.

Resolution No.1 was proposed as:

“since the ethnic groups like Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa etc. have their own identity with distinctive language, culture, heritage and historical background, the word ‘Assamese’ in the Clause No. 6 of the Assam Accord 1985 is too ambiguous to include the communities mentioned above in it, therefore, the word “Assamese” be replaced by the phrase “Indigenous People of Assam” (Brahma, 2005)

Resolution No.2 stated that the meeting felt the necessity to form a common platform of the Sahitya Sabhas.

“…felt the necessity to form a common platform of the Sahityas Sabhas of Indigenous People of Assam with a view to promote, develop and protect the language and cultural heritage of Indigenous People of Assam” (Brahma, 2005)

In this regard, it is pertinent to discuss the important issue regarding the definition of ‘Assamese people’. The debate on the definition of Assamese people didn’t seem to have resolved till date. However, there is little doubt that this has resulted in strengthening the feeling of alienation among various ethnic communities from the collective selfhood of Assamese identity.

At this juncture, it brings attention to the emerging trend of demanding a museum in the Chartered Demands of various ethno-centric movements witnessed in the region. One case is examined here.
From 1970’s, a group of people residing in the present Kamrup (metropolitan) district 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 of Karbi Anglong) however refutes these claims as baseless and regards that such separatist tendencies would only weaken the long struggle of the Karbis residing in the plains of Assam to fulfill their demand of being accorded the ‘Scheduled tribe’ status. The Chartered Demands of Amri Karbi National Council includes a demand for a museum and that is where the attention is drawn. The point is quoted as:

“11. Set up a special Museum in order to preserve the antiquities, historical evidence and cultural heritages of Amri Karbi tribe.”

(Bordoloi, 2013, p. 108)

The claims and counter claims of the fractions of Karbi community residing in the plains are briefed upon in the study of the festivals of karbis residing in the plains which are analysed in Chapter Five.

It has always been difficult to represent living traditions and cultures in transition in the ‘heterotopic’ space of the museum. However, it seems that museum displays of ethnographic collections through their representation provide a far greater impact on the understandings and misunderstandings of ethnic cultures. Therefore, scrutinizing museum and heritage practices still remains an important agenda. The people of Assam have always complained peripheral alienation by the government at the centre and this has been understood as the main contributor for the emergence of secessionist
tendencies in the region. The museum’s role here remains crucial. Micheal M Ames (1986) provides a view in this regard which deserves attention:

“The purpose is not to preserve craft technologies or tribal customs as living museum curiosities. This is a static view of the tribal cultures that some museums and ethnologists fostered in the past, perhaps with good intent but to the detriment of the peoples concerned. While it is the business of museums to provide old artefacts and to recover the past, it is not their business to preserve living peoples in an ethnologically reconstructed image of the past. It is just as natural for artistic and craft traditions, and a peoples’ interpretation of their own social history, to evolve over time as it is for language, kinship or economic patterns”.

(Ames, 1986 p. 77)

The institution of museums manifests the encounters of both the ‘colonial’ and the ‘national’ memory building projects. Rather than adhering to the discursive practices of these forms of knowledge, it is felt that the institutions of museums would be more meaningful if they attempt to represent the history of these projects. This may broaden the museum’s scope for tolerating and representing diversities and multiple interpretations.