CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The institution of the Museum is an inherently ‘western’ concept. The ‘western’ museum practices have always adhered to the culture of ‘viewing’. The traditional culture of viewing is innately a political act of difference. It separates those who view the exhibit from those who are on display. This act is manifested most in ethnographic exhibits which deny recognising the importance of shared space and time occupied by the cultures of people represented in the exhibit and the cultures of people who are representing them. This is a process which relates to the anthropological construction of ethnographic distance created via colonial ethnographic texts.

The power of the dominant culture to be able to categorize, define and represent ‘other’ cultures within the own surroundings of the other is an immense power enjoyed by the museum especially the government-run official museums. Here, the colonial relations of power that made it possible for one group of people to dominate other sub-ordinate groups resonate in the post-colonial context. In fact, the whole structure of designing exhibits and the narratives of display seems to have been predicated on an ethnographic relation of difference and presumed identities established through colonial ethnographical methodology.

The documentation project of the colonial state was instrumental in classifying, reconstructing and transforming all forms of traditional knowledge. The vast collection amassed by the colonial project were housed in museums which served as the sample
rooms of the Empire. There have been significant scholarships which illustrated the manifestations of the coming of the first colonial museums in India.

The issues concerning ethnography and the representation of communities have been elaborated in Chapter Two under the light of available secondary sources. An attempt has also been made to place these issues in the context of the present study situating ‘the museum’ in Assam.

The coming of the museum in Assam has its own special history. It has been observed that the influence of the Swadesi Movement had a role in the formation of various literary and research societies. The development of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti and the transformation of the same to the institution of the museum in Assam have been discussed in Chapter Three. This Chapter also focussed on the politics of display in the Assam State Museum via the Case study of Assam State Museum and its ethnographic galleries. In this context, the role of colonial ethnography in creating stereotyped, organized classifications of tribes and communities is reflected in an official platform of representation, the museum. It has been found through this study that these narratives become part of the official narratives about tribes and communities. There remains an attempt to represent official histories, narratives for the negotiation of public memory from the official viewpoints of the representatives of official culture.

The history of the formation of the Assam State Museum is elaborated in Chapter Three with an attempt to relate it with contemporary political situation in Assam at that time. It is imperative to touch upon the issues concerning ‘Assamese identity’ i.e, the question of what constitutes Assamese people? The politics of language that shaped a major political discourse in Assam is also touched upon in the present study. The historical complexity of defining Assamese identity came to the public domain with the
Assam Movement and subsequently with the demand for implementation of the Assam Accord. 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. The subsequent politics concerning this issue which was mainly focussed on the linguistic connotation of the term ‘Assamese people’ has also been discussed in Chapter Three with the help of archival sources.

Museums spaces and ethnographic collections have failed to address contemporary realities. On the basis of hypothetical formulations laid down in Chapter One, it has been found through this study that museum practices in Assam still adhere to conventional practices owing largely to the colonial anthropological discourse and the colonial visual markers of ethnic identities to represent contemporary living cultures. Therefore, it can be inferred that the demands for community museums (built structures) and Ethnic fairs and festivals are manifesting themselves as emerging tools of contemporary identity assertions.

It was imperative too look closely at various ethnographic displays in the light of hypothetical formulations in this study. Therefore, museum spaces and ethnographic displays taken as case studies under the present scope of study are categorized in Chapter Four. These categorizations are based on the basis of the museum’s administration, mission and vision, purpose and source of funding. However, there may be an overlapping in the categorisation in terms of the museums purpose and management. The categorization is not based solely on administrative setup and funding agencies. For example, the Tai Museum in Sibasagar, which is a case study, is categorised under Community Museum but is actually run by the Government. An
attempt has been made to briefly touch upon the history of the formation of some of these museums taken as case studies. An attempt has also been made to analyse the type of objects available in these museums, the mission and vision of the museums and the display of the museum.

After the analysis of ethnographic displays in museums i.e. permanent structures under the light of hypothetical formulations, it can be inferred as mentioned earlier that there is a prolonged inadequacy leading to visible discontentment in the way ethnic identities have been represented in museums and recognized by the state apparatus. Therefore, a study of ethnic festivals was imperative as they 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.

After the recognition of Intangible Heritage as a “mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development” by the UNESCO Convention in 2003, the field of Museology expanded significantly to venture outside the vague tangible essence of its collections to non-conventional, somewhat ‘anti-museum’ settings of representation. Therefore, ethnic festivals were taken as important case studies under the ambit of the present study. These have been covered in detail in Chapter Five.

It was also observed during the course of fiedwork for this study 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 witnessed in the study of the festivals of the Karbi community living in the plains.
It holds true that festivals bring out the issues of culture and representation outside the confines of the museum. It has been illustrated through the study of Karbi Youth Festival that displays produced for festival settings are not “objects” in the conventional museological sense of the term but are mostly live performances. The festival area in this context becomes a temporal space with sufficient interpretational attributes of a museum.

The issue of ‘authenticity’ as opposed to ‘fantasy’ in these festivals is elaborated in Chapter Five. The overall narrative and larger metamessages these festivals wish to convey become a ground for museum-like interpretation. The role of the people from the community participating in rituals and other performances in that sense become similar to the guides and curators in museums- to guide and stimulate the audience to experience a world they only know through imagination and therefore at times leading to misrepresentation.

The present study explores the genesis of three of the festivals of the greater Karbi community residing in Assam and one festival of the Tiwa community in Assam. These have been deliberated upon in Chapter Five. Festivals are viewed as yet another public forum in which cultural displays tend to produce contested meanings. In this context, they are viewed as museum-spaces in their own which are open for contestation, invention and fluidity.

The ethnic festivals under the scope of this study have been found to have manifested themselves as sub-nationalist projects of identity assertion. An analysis of the genesis of some of these festivals revealed layers of contestation, invention and fluidity. The assertions of distinct identities through these Festivals are seen as sub-nationalist
projects which have successfully transformed themselves into institutions by themselves.

Another important dimension of ethnic festivals has been revealed through the study of the The Joon Beel Mela, a festival of the Tiwa community in Assam. In the contemporary times, this festival 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. The festival is an example of a space being used for assertion of historic ethnocentric identities.

The present study has attempted to analyse museum spaces and ethnographic representations including fairs and festivals in the socio-political context of the region of Assam. This made it possible to derive an understanding that the colonial initiatives of classifying, documenting and subsequently representing cultures through the western institution of the museum which was inherited by the post colonial state apparatus resulted in a continuation of a lack of vision by the museum in Assam which unfortunately is continuing way into the post colonial times. This lack of vision is in terms of a failure to extend beyond the strict colonial classifications of tribes and communities and a possible adherence to colonial texts by museums which still use certain colonial descriptions variously in the text labels of museum exhibits describing material culture. The politics of representation in the museum in Assam resonates the politics of finding difference (exoticizing) as well as similarity (assimilating) with regards to tribes as opposed to caste Hindu communities.

Failed by the established government platform of representation by means of the museums which were inherently futile in addressing contemporary forms of identity assertions and aspirations of different ethnic communities, alternative platforms with
sub-nationalist leanings in the form of community-run museums and fairs and festivals have emerged. These trends traverse sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously within the ambit of the nationality question in various ethnic movements and contemporary identity assertions in the post colonial times.

---

**End Notes:**

1 The term ‘tribal’ is used in this study to highlight the difference between the caste-Hindu non-tribal community and other ethnic communities.

2 The correct expression may be is ‘Karbis residing in plains’. However, the term ‘Plains Karbis’ is used in common parlance. The term ‘Plains Karbis’ has been retained throughout this dissertation for ease of understanding.