Chapter 3

Ethnicization of Space, People, History and Culture

In the previous chapter I have discussed the trajectory of different social and historical moments to understand the emergence of ethnonational politics in Assam. In this chapter, I am examining how different ethnicities are being articulated in current times through different cultural materials; and how the questions of territoriality and indigeneity are framed and manifested, in the context of the leading ethnonational movements of Assam.

3.1 Legacies of State Protectionism:

In the late 19th century, after annexation of the hill areas of the North-East frontier of India, the British colonial Government introduced the idea of Inner Line (ILP) to the hills. As the hilly tribal peoples were not easy to govern by the modern laws of the British, and their relative inhabitations in primitive and backward areas compelled the British Government to formulate alternative arrangements for them. The alternative came in the form of a specific administrative called the Inner Lines. These Lines demarcated the hills from the plains in one hand and on the other, it prohibited the British subjects in general and the tea planters in particular in acquiring land beyond the line without prior permission. Mackenzie, a Colonial British official deputed in Assam during that time, wrote regarding the introduction of ILP to the hills,

“more stringent control over the commercial relations of our own subjects with the frontier tribes living on the borders of our jurisdiction’, stopping ‘the operation of speculators in cautchouc, and restricting the ‘spread of ” tea gardens outside our fiscal limits.” (Mackenzie, 1884 quoted in Kar 2009, 52).
It was formally legislated through the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873. As per such provisions of the Inner Lines, lines were made in 1882 in Sibsagar, in 1904 and 1906 in the Naga Hills; and in 1884, 1886, 1897 and 1904 in Lakhimpur. In 1919, under the Government of India Act, the hilly areas were converted to backward tracts. This act empowered the Governor General-in-Council to declare any territory of British India as backward tract.

Later, under the Government of India Act, 1935 these tribal areas were classified into Excluded, Partially Excluded and Frontier Areas. The Garo Hills, Mikir Hills and the British portion of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills other than the Shillong Municipality and cantonment area were considered as Partially Excluded area. The principle adopted in the selection of these areas was that where there was an enclave or a definite tract of country inhabited by a compact tribal population, it was classified as ‘excluded area’. Where, however, the tribal population was mixed with the rest of the communities and the tribals were substantial enough in numbers, the area was classified as ‘partially excluded’ (Gassah, 41-42)

On the eve of Indian independence, a sub-committee was formed under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi to formulate further policies for administration of the tribal areas of the North-Eastern part. Bordoloi sub-committee recommended that the tribal institutions should be retained as safeguards on land, forests, law, education and administration through establishment of District Councils in the respective areas. This scheme, which later became Autonomous District Council, was proposed as a separate state scheme of administration because of three factors: (a) the distinct social customs and tribal organization of the different people as well as religious beliefs, (b) the fear of exploitation by the people of the plains on account of the latter’s superior organization and experience of business and (c) the fear that unless suitable financial provisions were made, the provincial government might not set apart adequate funds for the development of the tribal areas (ibid, 43).
This led to the creation of the Article 244(2) of the Constitution of India, called the Sixth Schedule, which is applicable to the administration of the tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. This special constitutional provision was designed to confer considerable amount of autonomy on the tribal people by giving them protection to retain their identity.

These protective regime of the state for preserving tribal way of life has been the most crucial factor in the shaping the identity politics in later times. First of all, this differential treatment failed to bring out a kind of development which was satisfactory to the concerned communities. Dissatisfied with the functioning of the autonomous district councils, several communities of the hills areas began to demand for autonomous states in post-independence times. Secondly, these protective structures provided a kind of legitimacy for the ethnic politics under the aegis of the state itself.

As a consequence of this, demands for autonomy, and even separate states, began to be raised by the different plains tribal groups of Assam under the banner of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), started during the late 1970s. The rise of Bodo movement in the late 1990’s for separate Bodoland compelled the Indian State for necessary modifications of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India whereby limited autonomy was initially offered to the Bodos in 1994 and it was further extended to the other plains tribal groups of Assam viz. the Mishings, the Rabhas, the Deuris, the Tiwas, the Sonowal Kacharis and to the Thenagl Kacharis.

3.2 Indigeneity and Territoriality:

The politics of territoriality and indigeneity are the central questions in discussion of the contemporary ethnic politics of North-East India. In a common parlance indigeneity can be defined as a group of people who settled in a particular place earlier than other groups. It is related, thus, to a particular
territory and time. Also, the idea of indigeneity is having meaning in relation to other groups who settled later. A group which claims itself as indigenous to a particular place considers the particular territory as its own, ignoring historical facts of other groups.

Sanjib Baruah argues that the present perceptions of indigeneity and territoriality have been shaped by spatial orders followed during the colonial regime. The boundaries drawn on the basis of colonial ethnography and administrative interests are now seen to become the walls and fences in the contemporary ethnic demarcations of the state. Baruah offers the example of the operation of census, which is again a colonial legacy, to clarify the issue. Census still counts tribes in their supposed natural habitat. In this line, in metropolitan Guwahati the number of hill population is zero. Similarly the Bodos, who are plains tribe in Assam, have actually considerable presence in the hill district of Karbi Anglong where they are enumerated as plains tribe. Baruah holds, “The colonial spatial order involved the radical subversion of existing social, political and economic networks and property regimes” (Baruah 2008, 16).

The modern cartography practices which are in practice since the colonial rule had brought different communities into a similar administrative platform. However, communities of Assam and the North-East used to live with their own kingdom before the British took over. Sanjib Baruah rightly argues how the “colonial propensity of fixing tribes to their supposedly natural habitats” creates the space-centric identity politics (ibid). He also claims that colonial notions of fixing and identifying some people on the basis of race and their natural habitat and thereby creation of spaces like ‘excluded’, ‘partially excluded’ areas, ‘abode proper’, ‘backward and degraded type’ etc. are responsible for the rising of space-centric homeland politics in the post-colonial situation. He argues, “This notion of ethnicity and the fixing of ethnic groups to particular physical spaces made it necessary to distinguish between so-called pure and impure types to account for those that strayed away from
the assigned physical spaces, i.e., living in the hills instead of the plains or vice versa, or living in the “wrong” hills; or those that did not conform to the ethnic stereotypes that colonial officials had about them” (ibid, 15). The colonial administrative propensity of recognizing and categorizing the different communities in North-East India, as per their habitat as well as cultural and other associated habits, kept them outside to the mainstream colonial modernity. As colonial rule received different kind of experiences in the form of protest and resistance from different communities in the multicultural North-East, that led to separate policies towards those population and spaces. Those areas which were difficult to control were denoted as “disturbed areas” and people as ‘criminal tribes’. It was legalized with the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Inner Line System was created to regard some places as backward which was a line of time in civilizational scale, where it segregated the hills from the plains by creation of binary idea - civilized and wild. Following the ‘uncivilized’ nature of the hilly people they were allowed to be governed by their own customs whereas plains people were governed by the civil laws. Finally in 1935 the hills were given a new recognition as – excluded and partially excluded areas.

The space centric identity, fixing people in their habitat through the creation of Inner Lines in colonial period stopped the traditional interactions between hills and plains. There were numbers of institutions e.g. pocha, duars, fair (Jonbil mela)1 which show the affinity of plains and hills, but subsequently delimited.

1 Pocha: annual tributary of the Nagas to Ahom kings.

Duar: Foothills areas of lower Assam, through which annual tributaries were exchanged between Bhutia kings of Bhutan and Zaminders (big land holders)

Jonbil mela: A fair held every year in Marigaon where the hill communities like the Karbis, the Khasi come down and exchange goods with the plains Tiwas.
In present context even many nationalist organizations demanding extension of Inner Line permit to plains also$^2$.

Such kind of colonial intervention in defining and classifying the spaces and communities was, however, not a unique case in the context of the North-East India. Rather it has been documented in increasing number of literatures that this was a common phenomenon experienced in other various locations in Asia, Africa or Latin America where the European colonial masters ruthlessly imposed their schemes of dissecting and classifying the spaces and the communities. In the context of the colonial intervention in South Africa, Mahmood Mamdani (2001) has demonstrated that race and ethnicity are the political identities created by the colonial institutions. Mamdani historicized the root of ethnicity in the South African context where he dealt with the institution of law. The colonial rulers divided the population in the line of ethnicity and race where races were governed through civil law implies they were members of ‘actually’ and ‘potentially’ of civil society. Ethnicities were governed through customary laws. Civil laws speak the language of rights, but customary laws speak the language of tradition of authenticity. To confine the language of rights and thereby to set the limits of power the colonial government made a horizontal division between the natives and non-natives, where the customary laws varies from ethnicity to ethnicity. “For civic power was to be exercised within the rule of law, and had to observe the sanctity of the domain of rights. The language of custom, in contrast, did not circumscribe power, for custom was enforced. The language of custom enabled power instead of checking it by drawing boundaries around it. In such an arrangement no rule of law was possible” (ibid, 654).

$^2$ Inner Line permit is required to Indian citizens to visit the state of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram of North-East India. All Assam Students’ Union (AASU), one of the influential civil society organizations of Assam, is demanding ILP to visit Assam by outsiders to check the immigration issue. Moreover, many civil society organizations of Meghalaya are also agitating for implementation of ILP in Meghalaya. It calls frequent strikes for the same.
Coming back to the situation in Assam and the North-East, such kind of colonial schemes of dividing the space and its people has now become the foundation for articulating ethnicities. Even after independence till today, the Indian state has been continuing the colonial arrangement of diverse spatial recognition and ethnographic nomenclature. Plains and hills are still the spatial categories whereas tribal and non-tribal are the racial labels. Similar to African situation, the plains people are governed by modern civil laws and the hills people are subjected to their respective customary laws.

Thus, the very idea of indigeneity and territoriality, in their present-day usages, are having lineages to their geneses. The massive migration that took place in Assam during the colonial period, as a result of the various colonial policies for exploiting natural resources like tea, petroleum, mines and forest produces or due to the policies like ‘grow more crops’ formulated due to the sectarian interests of local state government during colonial times – led severe demographic changes where many of the earlier settlers were minoritized in Assam. This resulted in a kind of xenophobia on the part of the Assamese caste Hindus which later got extended to the other ethnic communities also. It thus brought in the binary of the *indigenous* and the *outsider*. The increase of Muslim population, as some scholars claim, is a horizontal growth rather than vertical.\(^3\) However, from all practical senses, the issue of illegal migration seems to be an unsettled ideological paradox between the nationalists and the others.

The claims of indigeneity are seen to be articulated in actions of various intensities. It is triggered by the passionate demonstration of possessing a territory for the exclusive existence of a community where the *others* are sought to be minimized in terms of quantitative as well as qualitative presence.

\(^3\) Some scholars argue that as the Muslims in Assam are an agrarian community, wherever they find waste land they occupy it for cultivation. The close affinity to the family or home-sick attitude is not much visible among them for which the population is distributed everywhere. This is why spreading of the community is more a horizontal growth, not necessarily a growth in *size* of the total population.
Such politics of an exclusive homeland leads to ethnicization of spaces which often leads to conflicts amongst the stakeholder groups. The Hutu and Tutsi conflict in Africa, Nellie massacre in Assam, 1983; Bodoland conflict, 1996, 2008 and 2012; frequent conflicts in Karbi Anglong etc. are some of the handy examples related to the question of indigeneity and territoriality.

The on-going politics of ethnicity in North-East India in general and Assam in particular involve the ethnicization of history and imagination of exclusive homeland – which is indeed a more forceful mobilization grounded on the colonial schemes of space-centric categorization of peoples. The movement and mobilization of people in ethnic line in the region shows a process of ethnicization of history by construction and reconstruction of history. It is interesting to note that while the ethnic claims pertaining to the issues of territoriality are largely shaped by the colonial spatial hierarchies, the appropriation of the cultural contents to become indigenous often involves imagining cultural inheritance since pre-colonial times.

Most of the ethnic groups of Assam do not have their own script and did not have the tradition of documenting the past. In the height of ethnonationalism, the communities are constructing history of its own by bringing in new oral evidences and their fresh interpretations. Many oral accounts are negated which are not useful in valorizing the past. Creating an appropriate past and its glorification is invariably an effective mechanism for mobilizing a community. The medieval Ahom dynasty on the other hand, had the rich tradition of the same those scriptures popularly known as *Buranjis* where glimpses of accounts found about different communities of the region. However, the new ethnic consciousness of the Tai-Ahoms is seen to be subjected to fresh narration of their past and their distinctive cultural connection with the South-East Asia. As such, contemporary ethnonationalism in Assam has become a vibrant site of ethnicized narratives which involve re-creation and re-interpretation of oral as well as written texts.
An extended part of this process is the attempts for consolidation of exclusive ethnic spaces. Bringing the temporal accounts of the ‘glorious past’ as a historical fact and a contextual necessity, it has become customary to claim such spaces as their own territory by multiple claimants. Such dissonant claims by different ethnic communities about their ownership of the same space are articulated through their respective ethno-historical narratives. Some of such examples are illustrated in the following paragraphs.

Dimapur, one of the important cities of the state of Nagaland was merged into Nagaland after its creation as a separate state of India in 1963. Dimapur once happened to be the capital of Dimasa kingdom in medieval period. The names of different places justify such claims. Diphu, the adjoining area of the earlier Dimasa kingdom Dimapur and district headquarter of Karbi Anglong nowadays mostly dominated by Karbis, is a Dimasa name. The other towns of the tract Lanka, Hojai etc. too are Dimasa names. The invaders pushed the Dimasas from their old kingdom Dimapur to the present habitat of North Cachar and Karbi Anglong. The Dimasa nationalist organizations as well as the militant groups are now demanding the Dimapur area under its map of Dimaraji. Many Dimasa populations living in this areas claim continuous threat from the Naga population especially from the Naga insurgent groups. Similarly the state of Nagaland as well as Naga militant groups are also demanding a larger Nagalim claiming their ownership over different border areas of present day Assasm, Manipur, and Arunachal; which is creating tensions in the borders of the concerned states. The Indian state has already set up numbers of commissions to resolve the border disputes but the recommendations of such commissions are yet to be accepted by the concerned states. The creation of the excluded and partially excluded areas by the colonial Government was the policy of exclusion and inclusion- creation of binary between hills and plains. Traditionally the foothills were the meeting points for the ‘brothers’.

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4 James Scott looks the continuum of interactions between plains and hills. He regards the plainsmen as brothers of the hill people in his book *Art of not being Governed.*
But the rising demand for a separate and ethnic territory gave momentum to other groups residing in those areas. In case of the North Cachar, presently Dima Hasao, different tribal communities are standing against the demand of the Dimasas for an exclusive Dimaraji. The non-Dimasas formed the *Indigenous Peoples Forum*, claiming to be the more indigenous people of the area than the Dimasas. The debate here is who is more indigenous in Dima Hasao District: the Dimasas or the other communities. The IPF is also demanding for creation of Haflong (the Headquarter of the district) as a separate district which would be out of Dimaraji or the Autonomous District Council of the Dimasas. Similar demand is also coming up in the Karbi Anglong, where a committee named as Bokajan District Demand Committee is formed for demanding exclusive district for the non-Karbis. Thus, in the multi-ethnic context of Assam, ethnonationalism is seen to be spreading like a chain reaction where the demand of one community induces other communities for similar demands. The reason behind such counter politics is the question of basic political rights and land questions; where the other groups in a particular set up feel that once autonomy or separate state is given to the dominant group the minorities will lose their land right and other political benefits provided by the state.

The Bodoland Movement started in 1986 came up with the demand of “divide Assam 50-50”. Although, in the proposed map of Bodoland a substantial number of non-Bodo people are living in those areas from a considerable time. The colonial history, labour history, show the coming and settlement of these populations in there, who nowadays subsequently opposing the Bodoland- the exclusive Bodo territory. More emphatically another ethnic community of the region Koch Rajbanshis who is also demanding Kamatapur, a Koch Rajbanshi land for its people whose map overlaps to the greater Bodoland demanded by the Bodos. Above all, it has demanded six other districts in the proposed Kamatapur from the state of West Bengal. The demand for an exclusive territory for the Bodos creates concern to the non-Bodo people living in Bodoland, who are scared of the basic political rights, land rights and so forth.
The Bodoland has witnessed numbers of ethnic violence in last couple of years. The Bodo-Adivasi conflict in 1996, Muslim-Bodo conflict in 2008 and 2012 claimed death of more than 100 people in each violence. Many people argue that this violence is a part of Bodo Chauvinism and a systematic process of ethnic cleansing for an exclusive Bodoland. Although, Bodos are said to be the autochthons of Assam, claimed by the Bodos as well others, but many scholars argue that most of Bodos migrated from Bhutan, Nepal and present day Bangladesh. Moymansing, name of a place of Bangladesh is a Bodo word which means a place where paddy grows well. Such examples can be multiplied. In recent years, many non-Bodo organizations have come up to counter the Bodo nationalistic trend. In Bodoland, nowadays the O-Bodo Suraksha Mancha (Non Bodo Protection Forum) is a strong organization who is demanding to review the BTAD accord as well as against the demand of divide Assam 50-50. It is also demanding to cut the non-Bodo villages from present BTAD. In such situation, it is experienced in Assam that due to its

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5 In ABSU’s clarification on Bodoland Statehood Demand (divide Assam fifty-fifty) published in 1987, prepared in Question-Answer format, some points were mentioned as follows:

Question no 23: The Chief Minister of Assam Prafulla Kr. Mahanata has said that he would “never allow” further division of Assam. So, how can we hope that Assam can be divided further?
Answer: In fact, the Assamese people have no moral right to rule over the tribals-the sons of the soil. Tribals are the original masters of Assam. On the other hand, the chief Minister of Assam has no proper authority whether or not to divide Assam, because it is not a state subject, but a central subject instead. Moreover, Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta has no moral right claim not to divide Assam further as he is not the original master of Assam but originally an outsider from Kanouj.

Question no. 44: Who are the original masters of Assam-the Assamese or the Tribals?
Answer: The Assamese are not the original masters of Assam. They introduced into Assam only in the 13th and 14th century. The tribals, the Kacharis, and the Mongolians are the original masters of Assam.

6 In a discussion with this researcher, Dr. Chandan Kr. Sharma, a scholar on the Bodo Movement, argues that hardly any oral account is found in Bodo oral tradition regarding the conflict, war and fight of the Bodos with the Mughals. The Mughals attacked Assam several times from West where Bodos reside. This shows that they themselves migrated in the recent past.
multiculturality, whenever any ethnicity is strengthen to check such nationalism the counter politics also emerged strongly. Similarly in Rabha Hasong (territory of Rabha Autonomous Council) also the non-Rabha organizations are also demanding for curving out of non-Rabha areas from the said territory. Here also series of ethnic violence are seen in recent past. The Rabha-non Rabha conflict is quite common in Rabha Hasong area. In 2011 in Garo-Rabha conflict a considerable section of people of the both communities lost their lives and property.

With the demand of Bodoland by curving out of the 50% of the Assam’s existing territory, similar demands started coming from other groups like Karbi, Dimasa, Tiwa, Rabha, Mishing and so forth. Such demands were tried to be neutralized by offering limited autonomy and inclusion of them in the 6th Schedule of Indian Constitution; first to the Bodos in 1993 which in 2003 it was converted to BTAD. Similarly Mishing, Rabha, Deuri, Tiwa and finally Sonowal and Thengal Kachari autonomous councils were offered to the respective groups. Thus Bodos got the territorial council where other groups got satellite autonomy in due time.

3.3 Cultural Expressions:

The contemporary academic scholarship is divided in theorizing the phenomenon of ethnicity (such as, primordial and situative-primordialist theories discussed earlier). But scholars belonging to these diverse schools of ethnicity do agree in one point that ethnicity, in one sense, is articulation of ‘culture’. Ethnicity is articulated with the help of culture which a person acquires as a member of a community. Hobsbawm believes that the root of nationalism needs to be traced in the proto-national bonds. He defines proto-national bonds as where certain variants of feeling of collective belonging in macro political scale were suited for the modern ideas of nation and state. These proto-national bonds may be religion, tradition, culture, shared memory
and so forth (Hobsbawm 1990, 46). The phenomenon of ethnicity, and its cultural expression, can be seen as vigorous continuation of similar political exploitation of cultural forms but in the local scale.

The invention and exploitation of tradition and culture involve the authentication of the desired identity of a group by associating it with the past. Tradition thus has the potentiality to connect the present with the past; and imagine the future of an individual or of a group. T. S. Eliot (2005) in his popular essay ‘Tradition and Individual Talent’ holds that traditions having a ‘historical sense’ the “perception not of the pastness of the past but its presence”7. Eliot claims here that tradition does not have only link with the past rather having link with present also. Eliot’s claim has become much clearer by now almost after a century: only that past is invoked in the name of tradition which is suitable for the present in order to move towards a desired future.

In the context of the political usage of the oral traditions and folkloric resources, Roger D. Abrahams argues that in “giving voice to values and entering into the celebrations of ethnicity, oral traditions are a major component in establishing the boundaries and contours of an ethnic group.” As ethnicity or nationalism creates boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’- the different folkloric genres are exploited in the process. For construction of ethnicity and thereby to negotiate political claims- culture, tradition, and heritages are the tools for mobilizing people. New cultural symbols are created, olds are revived- folkloric forms and cultures are standardized. Temporal and spatial historical forms become the points of reference in re-narrating the ethnicity.

Partha Chatterjee looks the influence of the inner domain in the formation of Indian nationalism specially the role of family. Although, people of India

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7 Despite the distinction, perceived in academic fields, between tradition and culture, the two terms are used synonymously in their popular usages.
adopted colonial modernity, but the community did not want or allow the ‘outsiders’ to intervene the cultural domain of it (Chatterjee 1993). Thus, it helped to preserve their cultural practices and past. Out of it a new kind of patriarchy arose, but the role of family and women of the community to preserve the national culture is found in a great extent during the colonial period. In ethnic or nationalistic politics woman is a symbol of pride and honour of the community. Culture defines the masculinity and femininity and their role in the social relations. As per the behaviour it ensures who belongs to the collectivity and who are not. An individual does not have a single identity rather always having multiple identities. But in identity politics the individual identity is equated with the group identity. Culture, the key element for identity construction is considered as pristine and sacrosanct. But the ‘sacrosanct’ or ‘pristine’ cultures are framed in a definite form or power relations. As Hall argues “culture is the critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled”. The unsettled power relations are the social capital for ethnic and cultural politics with the help of which hegemony is circulated to the masses. The hegemony thus resolved the dichotomy between ‘I’ and ‘we’, and reduces ‘I’ to ‘we’ and ‘they’ in such political rhetoric.

Anderson holds, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson 1991, 6). Though, identity is not a single layer phenomenon, identity politics transforms the individual identity and interests into a collective one, reducing the individual self. The members of a community is not homogeneous- it can be divided in terms of class, category or in party line. The identity politics acts like an authorized discourse over the internal differences in terms of class, ensuring a hegemonic consent of the masses in favour of a common and collective identity. Interests and problems of individual or vulnerable groups are thought to be resolved (or many times it is not even addressed or ignored) through a holistic model – may be ethnicity or nationalism which speaks community development. Identity politics thus becomes a cover story,
overlooking the internal differences, to make the individuals think that all are in the same place. Individual identity is henceforth equated with the identity of the group by hegemonic power relations. The politics of presentation and representation – where one represents the rest – ignores such questions.

In the context of this ethnicity edifice in Assam, we will try to locate the rise of certain groups, their political articulation as well as the expression of cultural forms in multidimensional sphere. The ethnicization of spaces claiming themselves as indigenous posits a serious academic question- What are the criteria to be an indigenous or who is (not) an indigenous?

A Karbi myth relates to a common progenitor of different communities of the hills and plains by narrating these communities to be born out of an egg laid by a mythical bird (Datta 1994, 27). Similar narratives are found among the Tarao, Mishimis, Singphos, Wancho, different groups of Nagas, Dimasa, Deuri, communities of Arunachal Manipur and so forth. Another oral narrative illustrates not only such common origin but also tries to give an explanation for the illiteracy of the tribesmen. All knowledge was, as this story goes, first written on animal skins which were distributed among all the communities. While the non-tribals were clever enough to preserve their knowledge, the hungry tribal people ate up their skins and thus they became illiterate. Therefore, the other groups became capable of reading and writing scripts (ibid, 17). Such kinds of narratives, which manifest the converging forces of integration, can be seen as the products of the romantic utopia of Indian nationalism which probably culminated in the conceptualization of categories like Bar Axom and ‘seven sisters’.

In the absence of the written accounts, folklore is a handy tool for constructing history. In recent times, to construct the history of marginalized groups (e.g. gender history), oral resources are widely used and appropriated in contextual historiographical practices. The recent experimentations on history look the written documents in certain power relations. Fredric Jameson argues, “history is not text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it
is inaccessible to us except in the textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious” (Jameson 1981, 35) Constructing of history from the oral as well other alternative sources is a distinct marker of the pursuit of current historical scholarship. As mentioned, most of the ethnic groups of the region were illiterate till the early 20th century, hardly any written account is found among them. The Ahom Chronicles, as well some occasional travel writings as few exceptions, offer some information. The different groups in recent times are constructing its own history from folklore, myth and other oral narratives towards a history of glory and distinctiveness. This in turn helps to produce the desired ethnic identity in the present. The dominant historical accounts, through which community can’t be glorified, are negated. Thereby, alternative histories are created. Thus, in the height of identity questions, communities are engaged in a more ethnicized history rather than of an ethno history – in the academic sense of the phrase. Even many historical facts, where the pride of the community can be at stake, are ignored in such memorizations. Assamese nationalist discourse, for example, overtly ignores the Nellie massacre by maintaining an uneasy silence on it. Similarly Bodo nationalist discourse never talks about the killings of more than 200 Bodo people by the Bodos who were supporters of PTCA movement.

8 The massacre was held in the height of Assam Movement. More than 1600 Muslim people were killed in a single day at Nellie, a small town nearby Guwahati, considering the Muslims as Bangladeshis. Not much debate or discussion can be seen on it in the Assamese public sphere. Makiko Kimura, a Japanese researcher, did an extensive study on Nelli massacre. However, when she came for a presentation in a seminar at Guwahati on the Nellie massacre, she was not allowed to do so by the Assam Government.

9 The PTCA demanded for a separate tribal state in late 1970 and got enormous popularity. All Bodo Students Union joined hands with PTCA leaders. Once PTCA reduced the demand of separate state to Autonomous council conflict started. More than 200 Bodos were killed in the conflict. In 1991, Samar Brahma Choudhury, a PTCA leader and ex-Member of Parliament along with his son was killed at Kokrajhar.
Such kind of selective memorization can also be noticed in the cases of the ethnicity formations of the other communities in Assam, where different folkloric forms are used to glorify their specifically desired pasts. Such kind of narrativized memories are adequately tailored for claiming an exclusive homeland in the present context. Some of the telling examples are given below:

The Sonowal Kacharis memorize the following folksong to claim their golden past.

*Uri gal pokshi,*  
pari gal pakhi  
*Kirati oi kachari oi*  
*Halali rajyare basi*  

*The bird has flown,*  
feathers has dropped  
*O kirati, o Kachari*  
*You are inhabitant of Halali Kingdom*

Contrary to the written historical accounts about the Sonowal Kacharis, this kind of folksong has the capacity to posit them as the descendants of their desired past in the present.

Among the Bodos, folksongs are found which speak about their bravery and courage. Some of them are mentioning below.

*Zohalo zalia gothophor zon*  
*Zonlay raokhoubo gia gia*  
*Dahal thungriano zonni*  
*gelegra mua mua*  
*Zuhalao....gia gia*  
*Sorba suthura gaglab phobia raizaoao*  
*Dangon sugan gaogon*  
*Zonlay raokhaabou gia gia)*

*We are the sons of heroes*  
*We know no fear*  
*The sword and the shield*  
*Are our playthings, our toys*  
*Should any enemy invade our land*  
*They will be cut in pieces.*  
*We have no fear and we do not pause*  
*We will cut them in pieces*

(Brahma: 1960 quoted from Sarmah 2006, 87)
How lovely is the dear motherland
Beautifully created by god
Oh, you awake not
But lie fast asleep
Awake, awake mother dear
And arouse the sleeping country. (Boro 2007, 12)

Drive fast your steed
A hero you are,
The Bhutiya soldiers are marching
Tighten the rein and use your spurs
Drive your steed fast, Bashiram
Look, here they come (Datta et. al 1994)

The golden past is reflected in other folk song of the Bodos:

Borono jaigaya gougou Dimapur rimouunson
O’ aiphor Dimapur rimouunson Maibong
Kacharo Boroni rajadongmounnou Boroa
goudounou garna phaidamounnou
Dimaphur rikhon
Thangdnnou bungblabou jaigaoumanou
O’ aiphor Dimapur rimouunson
Binikhainou, bongphaao dathianou dalai
nangou jatikhou daikhagnou lekha
nangou Harikhou daikhagnou raja nangou
O’ aiphor jong thanai jaigaya
gongarnisounou Goudoni abou aboianou
bungladou Aiphor adaphou siri thadou
Khousoi jananoi raijou jadao. O’ aiphor
Raijon jadau

Dimapur was the kingdom of Bodos
O listeners, was the kingdom of Bodos;
That Maibong was the capital of that Kingdom.
Bodos had to leave all these.
To climb a tree branches are needed,
To lead the nation on the shiny path
Education is needed
To lead, a king is needed
So said our forefather.
O’ listeners, arise!
Unite and build the society
(Sharma 2006, 89).

In the Karbi oral narratives, similarly, different genres of folklore materials are widely circulated to glorify an unambiguously Karbi past. The intelligence, bravery and sacrifice of Rongpharpi Rongbe are widely cited in the various
oral repositories soaked in the Karbi nationalist consciousness. The case of the Karbis will be discussed in details in the next chapters.

In addition to such oral narratives, the process of ethnicization has also been extended to other genres of material and expressive cultural forms, leading to the emergence of diverse cultural iconographies of the different ethnic communities in Assam. The process of expressing regional identity through material cultural symbolism heightened during the Assam movement when the cultural objects like *gamosa* (literally a traditionally towel, regarded as a sacred piece of cloth), *sorai* (traditional platter), *japi* (a decorated farmer’s cap, invariably found in the South East Asian traditional societies) etc. were made the identity markers of the Assamese nationalism. However, as mentioned earlier, this Assamese-language-based identity later began to be challenged by the constituting ethnicities; but the same model of cultural iconography was seen to be followed in their respective ethnic expressions. This has resulted in a multi-ethnic iconographic regime in Assam where each and every ethnic group is seen to come forward with their exclusive and distinctive cultural assets in the forms of food, dress, music, ritual, festival and various other cultural genres. This ethnonational fashioning of culture is not limited to the official or institutional discourses but also has percolated down to the popular level. Another aspect of this cultural politics of distinction is that this celebration of cultural differences has been noticeably appropriated in the cultural market, specifically in the tourism sector and the leisure industries. The roadside restaurants with traditional cottages and menus of ethnic cuisines, ethnic textile products in various types of clothing and decorative goods, local festivals which are being added in the annual calendar, performance packages freshly recreated in the forms of music or dance – all are seen to be multiplied in number in recent times. This ethno-cultural iconography is not merely limited to the real life experiences, but also extended to the virtual world of media and the cyberspace.

This ethnicization of history and culture, as a process, involves a different kind of inter-community political dialogue, a site of ethno-cultural one-upmanship
amongst the various communities in the multi-ethnic context of Assam. Many often, such ethnicized texts overlap with one another and lead to conflicts. According to Anthony Smith, the dominant group in the multi-ethnic hierarchy becomes the *pace-setter* in the process of *setting standards* of this ethno-political articulation:

> In a multi-ethnic context, where the pasts of different groups overlap and interact, we typically observe competition and convergence in the articulation of the pasts of the several groups. Superiority in terms of number, control of resources, solidity of social and political institutions, cultural continuity, will often put one group in a position to impose its own version of the past, and other groups will react either by developing oppositional narratives, which will then tend rarely to go beyond the boundaries of the group, or by adapting their views of the past to those of a dominant group. In this case, the memory of the dominant group will function as a sort of pace-setter, also in chronological terms, for instance in setting standards for the depth of an acceptable ethnic past. (Smith 1986a, 178)

The Assamese nationalism, which began to flourish since the 19th century and got its peak during the Assam movement in the 1980s, can be identified as the dominant pace setter in the context of ethnic nationalism in Assam. The cultural and political dominance of Assamese language-based identity became an alibi for the various ethnic groups to articulate their respective identities; and also to distance themselves from the homogenizing notion of Assamese nationalism.

### 3.4 Empirical illustrations:

Ethnic awakening is a common visible trait in all the communities, both tribal and non-tribal, of Assam. Each of these groups is seen to be engaged in the politics of distinction, by appropriating respective memories, iconographies and narratives, so as to make each one different from the other. In addition to
the visible tribal communities, like the Mishings, the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Deuries, etc; various non-tribal caste-Hindus are also seen to be streamlining their identity discourses by such kind of appropriations. It is also important to note that six communities in Assam have been demanding to be recognized as Scheduled Tribes by the Government of India.

In the following texts, cases of four such communities are taken for discussion to illustrate the processes of ethnicization in present day Assam.

3.4.1 The Thengal Kacharis

The Thengal Kacharis are a relatively newly-invented tribal group of Assam, mostly concentrated in the districts of Golaghat and Jorhat. This group belonged to the larger Bodo stock, but later intermingled with the Assamese caste society, adopted the Neo-vaishnavism and lost their language.

The Thengal Kacharis got autonomy in 2005 after a series of democratic protests and movements. The case of the Thengal Kachari ethnicity is an example of how the opening of constitutional provision for limited autonomy to the plains tribals created renewed ethnic consolidation. M.S. Prabhakar in his essay ‘Invention, Reinvention and Contestation’ describes the strange story of how the community suddenly came up in 2005 with the formation of Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council Demand Committee. The community itself is relatively recent formation, as in all the post independent censuses till 2001 the Thengal Kachari peoples were never enumerated. The Tribal Research Institute, a Government organization based at Guwahati, which published numbers of monographs, ethnographic work and carried out research on various issues of tribal problems never mentioned or published any monograph about the existence of a tribal group in such name (Prabhakar 2010).
The Thengal Kachari peoples reside mostly in the districts of Jorhat and Golaghat; they got the Autonomous Council in 2005 only after six months of the formation of the demand committee. The total population of the community is still not known. Even in the different official documents, Government records there are no mentions of the population called Thengal Kachari. People claim that in different census operations these people were enumerated with the Sonowal Kachari population only. To occupy the political spaces provided by the State to the Tribal population of North-East popularly known as the 6th Schedule and other positive discrimination practices the community suddenly came-up with a new identity called Thengal-Kachari.

Initially the Sixth Schedule provision of the Constitution of India was offered to cover the hill tribes only. With the creation of BAC (Bodo Autonomous Council) in 1993 after long years of agitations by the Bodos, the provision of Autonomous Council extended to the plains tribal also by amendment of Indian Constitution. In so far, by 1995, 3 other tribal plains tribal communities Mishing, Rabha and Tiwa got the Autonomous Council without proper boundary of it. The success of these tribal communities of self-determination gave the boost to other tribal groups also. Subsequently by 2005, Sonowal Kacharis, Deuri and Thengal Kacharis got the similar councils. The population size of these communities is too small. Most of the groups leaving their tribal way of life adopted Hinduism, as well left different cultural practices and even language too. Sonowal Kacharis, Thengal Kacharis, Deuri, Tiwas can be mentioned in this regard. The articulation of ethnicity in this sense is to enjoy the political privileges offered by the State machinery. The Thengal Kacharis, as mentioned hardly is having any historical records as Thengal Kachari (from Government records to Census report). As an invented phenomena Prabhakar writes, “Who are the Thengal Kacharis and where do they fit into in this universe of the plains tribal of Assam? The simple answer is: nowhere, as they are identified by their habitation, such as it is and their name. The Community has never been separately enumerated in any of the five census operations
(1951, 1961, 1971, 1991 and 2001) conducted in Assam since independence. The published details about ST population in the first four of these censuses make no reference to the Thengal Kachari” (ibid, 286-287).

However, in recent times, a distinctive set of cultural resources of the Thengal Kacharis is being made visible in the public sphere of Assam. The assertion of Thengal Kachari ethnicity is particularly visible in the revival of selected traditional performances and festivals:

The community revived a festival known as Tora Chinga Bihu or Bali Husari in March 2009 (‘a festival of tearing a wild cardamom leaves for making ropes for the cows’). In past, they observed this festival in natural setting for more than a month. In past they celebrated ‘Chot Bihu’ on first day of the month of Chot (Chot is the last month of Assamese Calendar; mid of March); “Rati Bihu” performed under banyan tree at night, and it was going on till ‘Chot’s Samkranti’ (junction of two Assamese month Chot and Bohag (Bohag is the first month of Assamese Calendar). Now-a-day this Bihu is known as ‘Maiki Bihu’ (female Bihu) or ‘Gabharu Bihu’. Elderly womenfolk and “Pat-Gabharu” (a girl about to attain puberty) girl’s also perform Bihu separately from house to house. After the harvest is collected the young lad severed ‘Nara’ (stable of paddy) to again cultivation by singing Bihu Song. This Bihu is known as ‘Nara Siga Bihu’. Besides the traditional dances of the Bihu festival, they also try to show all the ceremonies associated with it. (Borah 2014, 254)

It is worth-mentioning that Bihu was an agriculture-based ritual practice, observed and performed by the different communities in Assam involving music, dance, food and other ritualistic traits. This pastoral ritual became the most vibrant site of Assamese nationalism in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. This nationalization of bihu also involved standardization of the bihu tradition into stereotypes of clichéd numbers of songs and dances. The Thengal Kacharis have chosen Bihu as a site of demonstration of their distinctive identity, by
reviving their own versions of the Bihu. It is to be noted that this ethnicization of Bihu not only means the change in the songs and dances, but also changes in the dresses and other relevant material goods, ritual itineraries and, above all, the process of meaning-making.

3.4.2 The Sonowal Kacharis:

Like the Thengal Kacharis, the Sonowal Kacharis are another ethnic community of Assam belonging to the larger Bodo stock; intermingled with the mainstream Assamese society by accepting the language, surname, culture and so on. They are mainly concentrated in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat in upper Assam. As per 2001 census total population of this community is 235,881. The official religion of the Sonowal Kacharis is Hinduism but traditionally they follow Baithowism. With the influence of the Neo-vaishnavism of Sankardeva in the medieval Assam a substantial section of the population of the community became the followers of the said sect. Leaving the tribal way of life, significant changes in the material domain and in the expressive cultural practices occurred among the community. Thus, it became a part and parcel of the Assamese society. Although a vernacular colloquial language was developed out of the Assamese language admixture with its own among the common people. But in the present context, keeping in tune with practice of ethnicity formation, the group is reviving and reinventing most of the traditional cultural practices and forms strongly. The political elites are reviving the traditional surnames or asking its population to adopt the same. The community though did not have the practice of documenting history yet various accounts are found in Ahom chronicles and histories about them.

As mentioned above Sonowal Kacharis got the Autonomous Council in 2005. Interestingly, the Thengal Kachris were enumerated with the Sonowal

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10 *Baithow* is the invocatory God of the community, hence the religion is known as *Baithowism.*
Kacharis people. In the movement for autonomy also, initially the State Government tried to offer one Council named Sonowal-Thengal Kachari Council to the both groups. But the proposal was rejected by both, and finally separate Autonomy was given. However, the Sonowal Kachari ethnicity formation shows reconstructions of history through oral narratives. The constructing and reconstructing history is a practice for the elites of an ethnic group to make an ideological boundary and also a homogenous history which may be the catalytic force for ethnicity formation among the individuals of a group. In this process, the dominant historiographies are negated where the community may be seen as or marginalized and henceforth their own version is constructed with the glorification of the community. It starts right from the nomenclature of the community of Sonowal Kacharis.

A popular account about the history of the Sonowal Kacharis which was endorsed by academic historians was that the name of the community Sonowal had been derived from the Assamese word son, meaning gold. According to this narrative a branch of the Kacharis were engaged in the trade of gold washing in the river Subansiri during the Ahom Rule. The Kachari people who were engaged in this particular activity were known as Sonowal Kachari (Singh 2001). The Ahom dynasty maintained stratification in terms of occupation. As such, the Sonowal Kachari community is the outcome of this stratification. The different historiographical accounts also maintained the similar aspects regarding the name of the community. Interestingly this particular discourse is also in popular believe and is largely subscribed by the folk society of the community.

In sharp contrast to the above-mentioned discourse, the insider elites however put forward another version for the term ‘Sonowal’ where they hold that there were twelve groups of Kacharis earlier, known as,


Out of these twelve groups of Kacharis, Bādusunla Yān established Hallali kingdom (now Sadiya) at about 13th century A.D. Bādusunla Yān, the brave men community (Badu--brave, sun--purush or son, layan--community or caste) later through some changes such as ‘Bāsunray’, ‘Sunlay’ ‘Sunbar’ ‘Sunuwal’ and ultimately gave rise to the word ‘Sonowal’ and the people are known as Sonowal Kachari (Ibid).

Moreover, there is a third narrative believed by a section which holds that according to an anecdote, during the time of Ahom King Godadhar Singha, a Gosain, (a religious head) came to Sadiya. Believing that the Gosain has some supernatural power, some Kacharis of upper Assam became the disciples of him by offering certain quantity of gold and silver. Those Kachari who offered gold as a token are known as Sonowal Kachari from then.

Apart from this, the Sonowal Kacharis, since the early years of last decade, are trying to revive their traditional rituals, festivals and other cultural activities for strengthening the ethnic belongingness. As mentioned above, the community almost converted to neo-vaishanite faith. Haidang Geet, an annual ritual with music, song and dance has been revived and performed in different places of Sonowal Kachari concentrated areas to memorize and promote their old heritage. Along with such ritualistic practices, Sonowal Kachari Bihu, Sonowal Kachari dress pattern are some other sites of cultural revivalism.

3.4.3 The Adivasis:

The Adivasis (although they are not the aboriginal population of Assam) were brought by the Colonial Government in the 19th and 20th century to work in the newly established tea-gardens of Assam from different states of north and
eastern India like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand etc. The population is not homogeneous in nature, comprises of different tribe and caste groups viz. Ho, Munda, Santhal, Oran, Tati, Kurmi etc. Many groups were brought under indenture system. Once the agreement was over, most of the people did not return to their home places and settled nearby the tea-gardens and identified as ex-tea garden labours. Thus ‘tea’ became one of the identity markers of these different communities. These heterogeneous sets of people are known as Tea-Tribes in all official and popular literatures. But nowadays, leaving the official recognition of tea-Tribes these people sought a new identity called Adivasis.

The Schedule Tribe status is another bargaining point of many groups in Assam nowadays. The affirmative action policy provided by the Constitution of India to the ST populations and specially to the people of North-East (the 6th Schedule and other positive discriminations), which in turn many groups in Assam, fighting to gain the ST status. To achieve such political benefits many communities who adopted the culture and language of Hindu society and also merged into it, to some extent reviving their ethnicity. Till date six different communities of Assam viz. Ahom, Moran, Matak, Chutia, Koch-Rajbanshi, and Adivasi are demanding the Schedule Tribe Status and for the same going through different agitations. Although what ‘tribal’ means in anthropological or sociological or more widely in academic sense are not practiced in India. This is more political construction than academic. The groups who are demanding for the ST status are being considered as Other Backward Classes in Assam. The conglomerate Adivasi community is also the composition of many caste and tribal groups. But whenever these groups go for agitation or protest in Delhi or in Guwahati to show the ‘tribalness’ many protesters paint their body with different tattoos as well wear leaves, which converts them to a ‘real tribal’ – a popular image of a tribesman. The Adivasis use bow and arrow as to show their primitive practice in popular agitations.
The ethnicity formation of the Adivasis in Assam is an interesting case. In 1880 a pocket of Santhal people were brought to the Guma Mauza of the then undivided Goalpara district of Assam under the auspices of Indian Home Mission for Santhals. By 1931 the total population became 60000\(^1\). Hence, two kinds of identity are given to these two different sets of people a) tea garden labours b) Adivasi. But nowadays many educated elites of the community strongly oppose the naming of the community as tea-garden labour or tea-tribes. For them, this is the part of the colonial conspiracy and thereby the internal colonialism continued by the ‘power hungry Assamese middle class’ where a community is named after a commodity (Tanti 2010). As there is no community found in the world which is named after a commodity. Hence, clubbing all the communities brought in the colonial period a newer kind of identity is sought by them is called as Adivasi. A colloquial language popularly known as ‘Sadri ‘unites the different caste and tribal groups of the Adivasis, although many of them having their own language and dialect. The important feature of uniqueness is the social condition of the populace. Almost the entire population is backward in the sense of education, health, and economic condition. In the colonial period the workers were put in the labour line under strict rules, less wage and torture. Such kind of exploitation and torture brought the different tribal and caste groups to a similar social condition. No significant changes occurred in the post-colonial situation. The social and economic conditions that brought them closer helped in the later phases to assert as a distinct group. The Adivasis nowadays is agitating strongly for Schedule Tribe status. Most of the groups in their original habitat are considered as tribal. Hence, this populace is also demanding the schedule tribe status in Assam.

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\(^{11}\) Census report of Assam 1931.
3.4.4 The Bodos

The Bodos are one of the aboriginal ethnic communities of Assam, residing mostly in the Western part of the state. The Bodos belong to the Indo Mongoloid origin racially; and linguistically belong to Sino Tibetan language family. Their major concentrations found in the districts of Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Baksa, Chirang (These areas are called Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts), Sonitpur, Darrang, Lakhimpur, Goalpara, and Karbi Anglong. Considerable sections are also found in West Bengal. Their traditional religion is Baithou, where a major section has already adopted Hinduism and Christianity. The Constitution of India recognizes them as plains Schedule tribe.

The Bodo movement for a separate Bodoland is one of the early movements in the divided Assam. The root of the same goes back to the PTCA (Plains Tribal Council of Assam) movement which demanded a tribal state including all the tribals of Brahmaputra valley popularly known as Udayachal. The Bodo started asserting politically after the formation of Bodo Thunlai Afad (Bodo Literary Society) in 1952. Along with the formation of Bodo Thunlai Afad, subsequently the formation of All Bodo Students Union in 1967, as well as formation of the PTCA later; the demands became more crystallized for a Separate Bodoland. The Bodo Literary Society, right from its inception, opposed the expansionist attitude of the Assamese nationalist hegemony, reflected in the acts like imposing of Assamese language as the medium in the College, schools and offices in the later year of 1960’s decade. The Society also demanded to establish Bodo as a medium of instruction in Bodo dominated areas. The post 1960 decade was the decade of conflict and division of Assam on ethic lines. The adoption of Language Bill in 1960 was largely responsible for such kind of ethnicity discourse in the state. In 1959, the Asom Sahitya Sabha gave an ultimatum to state Government to recognize Assamese as the state language. Consequently the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee also in 1960 adopted a resolution and demanded to recognize
Assamese as the State language. Subsequently the State Assembly passed the Bill in 1960, which dissatisfied many indigenous communities as well as other hill tribal population and the Bengalis. All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) was formed which opposed the Language Act and later on demanded a separate state for the hills. Similarly the Bengalis of Barak valley also opposed it, where the Bodos joined too. After formation of Nagaland in 1963, broke out of MNF in Mizoram (the then Lushai Hills), as well as the announcement of reformation of states of Assam by the then Prime Minister, the plains tribal also asserted who formed PTCA (Plains Tribal Council of Assam) in 1967, who demanded a separate state for the plains tribals of Assam named as Udayachal (Narzary 2011, Chaube 1999, Sharma 2006, Das 2012).

With the demands of propagation and preservation of Bodo language, the people entered into series of agitation program like Script movement in 1974 where 18 people died. Simultaneously in 1967, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) was formed and emerged as the most influencing and powerful civil society organization among the community. In the same month of its establishment it organized a convention on 27th February where raising the demand of autonomy for the plains tribals of Assam PTCA was formed. As a political organization PTCA in 1973, demanded the tribal state called Udayachal, where side by side ABSU demanded for a Union territory. During 1974 the Script movement of the Bodos started where Roman script was demanded for the Bodo language. In such juncture the PTCA movement for an exclusive tribal state became diluted. Moreover political turmoil started in entire India due to the emergency in 1975. As such, the demands also remained subdued for quite some time. Once normalcy returned, the PTCA suddenly reduced the demand of a separate state to an autonomous council, which brought lots of misunderstanding between PTCA and ABSU. In so far, fratricidal killings were also started. ABSU considered Samar Brahma Choudhry a PTCA leader as “the most treacherous, opportunist and crooked (with devil master mind) fellow” for the act. Many PTCA leaders, supporters specially from Bodo community were killed in the entire Bodo movement.
The vertical split came in the party itself, where the youth section of the PTCA was confined in separate state only. But during the last couple of years of 1980’s decade Assam Movement started and the PTCA movement also became neutral. The PTCA leadership however, joined in the electoral politics and Charan Narzary, Samar Brahma Choudhury elected as MP and MLA. But, for reducing the demand of a separate tribal state to an autonomous council dissatisfied the majority section of the Bodos. As a part of it in 1991, Samar Brahma Choudhury was killed along with his son in Kokrajhar, when he came back during the time of 1991 election. Although, the youth section of the then PTCA led by Binay Kr. Basumatari formed UTNLF, but it failed to mobilize the Bodo population. However, with the broke out of Assam Movement and subsequently formation of AGP government turned the demand of Bodo Movement from Union territory to a full-fledged state. The PTCA became weaker and ABSU emerged as the most influencing and powerful civil society body among the Bodos. During the Assam movement, some of the deeds of the movement made skeptical to the tribal leaderships towards the Assam Movement. In Gahpur, Phulung Chapori many Bodos were killed in the name of eviction from Government land. The Nellie massacre also can be referred here. Though, the massacre was led by the leadership but later on the entire blame was shifted to the local tribal people. Moreover, once the Assam accord was signed and AGP came to power, it adopted some steps which considered as anti-tribal stance of the dominant Assamese sections. For example, in 1986 through a circular SEBA (Board of Secondary Education of Assam) ordered imposing of Assamese language in all non-Assamese medium schools as third subject. Moreover, at the same time the then Assam Government made compulsory the knowledge of Assamese language for jobs in Assam. Such expansionist and hegemonic attitude of the Government made angry the different tribal people and its leadership. Though, through the process it was tried for a more inclusive society but the imposition model worked reverse and exclusion started. Thus the demand of a separate state became more strengthen. By 1987, through a widely circulated booklet ABSU, justified the separate Bodoland answering 53 questions and came up with the popular
demand ‘divide Assam 50-50’. The booklet prepared in question-answer format, where the issues of chauvinist, anti-tribal, expansionist attitude of Assamese people, and a separate state are the solution for economic, cultural development and progress of the tribal people.

Along with the democratic protest and agitation the Bodo political discourse added the insurgent activities in late 1990’s (Ibid).

In Bodo nationality formation, different oral, material cultural genres are exploited. In one of the previous discussions, I mentioned different folk songs which speak the glorious past of the Bodos. The story of establishing the statue of Daimalu is already mentioned in the previous chapter. A news item that published in almost Assamese daily regarding the decision of a college Authority of a college of lower Assam, where it decided that students of the college must wear uniform in the college premises. Particular dress code was also decided for male and female. Against the decision, many Bodo organizations came out in agitation demanding that 

* dakhana * should be dress for Bodo girl students in the college premises, though they didn’t talk about the dress of men. Such activities of the Bodos adhere to the widely held, and often criticized, perception of the ethnicity as a gendered discourse which reduces women’s bodies into material sites for celebrating identity from male subjectivities.