

Chapter - 1

Introduction

An outline of the problem of study

This is an ethnographic explorative study of the Molsoms, a little known tribe in Tripura, a small state in the North East of India. An attempt has been made here to draw an account of the society and culture of the tribe through an extensive fieldwork conducted in the eighties in nine Molsom settlements, of which five were in South Tripura district and the remaining four in North Tripura district. A first hand observation of the economic activities, social organisation and cultural life of the Molsoms helps dispel many of the established and superficial notions about the community. The study underscores the fact that the Molsoms constitute a distinctive community with an identity distinct from similar other tribal communities like the Kukis and Halams. This is, in no sense, a study of the static social and cultural features of the Molsoms; instead, it has set out the social and cultural features in the light of the changing realities and contexts.

No tribal community can afford to live in isolation from the other tribal and non-tribal communities. The tribal and non-tribal communities live side by side in close interaction as they participate in the process of modern state building. In the economic, social-cultural, and political fields these communities cannot but interact with each other at both group and individual levels. This inter-community interaction, which has been always growing in intensity and sphere, is creating a social space where these communities can share each other's cultural symbols and change. It is not always the question of mutual sharing of each others symbols, but sometimes it becomes an interaction of the 'dominant' and 'subordinate'

cultural forms where the earlier prevails over the latter. The 'subordinate' is left with no other choice but to accept the 'dominant' social and cultural forms since the latter possesses larger control over power and resources. The existing mode of control of the forces of production and power and the prevailing democratic arrangements may not facilitate the desired forward movement of the tribal communities. The resultant sense of relative deprivation and backwardness may influence their pattern of interaction with other communities, especially with their dominant communities. It may also affect their participation in the democratic political processes. The tribal communities may look at the developmental packages offered to them by the government and the cultural packages offered by the dominant communities with a great deal of suspicion. In such a situation the tribal communities develop a shell encircling their socio-cultural life and take all efforts to make it immune to external forces of change. Whatever may be the case, these external and internal factors help understand the dynamism in the social and cultural life of the Molsoms. It is generally observed that the tribal-non-tribal interaction creates an opportunity for a mutual exchange of culture traits, but such an exchange can take place only upto a point. The outside culture can penetrate into the tribal life only in certain spheres because the tribals take special care in retaining their core cultural forms which they have developed over generations.

While going through the literature available on the tribes of Tripura, and which has been written mostly by the non-tribal scholars, I have realised that the anthropological tradition of first hand collection of data through prolonged fieldwork by learning the language or dialects these communities speak, and by earning their confidence, has not been given its due importance. As a result, the studies appear to be far removed from the everyday life of the tribal communities. In conducting the present study I have made a sincere effort in drawing a true ethnographic account of the social and cultural life of the Molsoms.

In the literature and in general understanding there are misconceptions about the status of the Molsoms. This prompted me to take up the task of preparing a narrative of how the Molsoms emerged as a distinct tribal community and how they earned a distinct identity of their own. An analysis of the folk-tales and the available stories and literature has helped me in this mission.

An interesting shift is fast taking place in the economic life of the Molsoms. A traditionally *jhumia* tribe, the Molsoms, have been fast adapting to the changing realities. They are making some significant adaptive changes in their cultivation-practices where they are continuing with *jhum* cultivation and in most cases they have abandoned *jhum* cultivation and taken to settled cultivation. The shift from *jhum* to settled cultivation does not have consequence on their economic life alone but it has far reaching consequences on the social life and on the cultural practices. Besides exploring these areas it would be interesting to see the difficulties they face while trying to respond to the challenges of market economy and the occupational diversification they experience in the process.

An intensive study of the house types, food habits and dress patterns constitute an important part of an ethnographic account of a tribal community. The ecological setting, the economic condition, access to technology and resources, tradition and the community's exposure to outside world - all this together condition the house-types, food habits and dress patterns. Any anthropologist coming from outside would be impressed to study these aspects of material culture of the Molsoms. In studying these aspects with great interest I was also keen to look into their logic structure imbedded in their material practices.

Many tribal communities are there in Tripura as well as in other parts of the country whose life and culture have not been studied, although the government agencies have undertaken many developmental programmes for them. Since the first five year plan, after independence, many

programmes have been taken up for developing the economic condition of the tribal people. In Tripura too a wide range of development programmes have been initiated by the government agencies for the development of the Molsoms, along with other tribes. The general understanding is that the benefits of these programmes are swallowed in the middle of the way and do not reach the target groups. One of the objectives of the present work has been to make an assessment of the tribal development programmes undertaken in the area of my study.

Since their emergence as a community, the Molsoms, like all other tribes, had the problem of order. Over the ages and generations these communities have developed their own method to resolve the inter-personal quarrels and inter-group disputes relating to sex behaviour, land management and so on. Every tribal community therefore has its own authority structure and a set of norms, customs, and mode of punishment attached to it. The tribal authority structure has developed independent of the tribal kingdoms. But the rules, regulations and institutions require adjustments with the changing social, economic and political contexts. With the introduction of the democratic processes, and the Panchayati Raj in particular, the tribal communities living in remote places now get the opportunity to actively participate in the larger political processes. As a consequence it may be possible that many of the functions of the tribal panchayats have been taken over by the Panchayati Raj institution. Apart from drawing an account of the traditional panchayat, its constitution and functions, I have tried to see how the traditional tribal panchayat copes with the challenges thrown out by the Panchayati Raj institution and what adaptive changes it makes in the process.

An important component of an ethnographic account has to be the study of social organisation or the social structure, i.e., the way the community is constituted with its major groups and institutions. In order to have an idea of the social organisation of the Molsoms I have studied their family in terms of its structure and functions, the kinship structure and the

functioning of the kinship networks, a study of the genealogy, the clans, and the marriage practices.

The unique and unknown areas of tribal religion have always drawn the attention of the anthropologists. Although the Molsoms mostly claim to be Hindu, if asked about their religion, and they are recorded as Hindu in the official documents, one has to examine the nature of their religious beliefs and practices in order to understand what kind of Hinduism they practice. A discussion of the unique features of the religious practices of the Molsoms will reveal whether these can be located in-between Hinduism and animism.

An important part of the present work has been the study of the *rites de passage* and the elements of social control involved thereupon. It has been fascinating for me to go through the various significant ceremonies that the Molsoms perform with all seriousness and integrity at various stages of their life, i.e., at the time of birth, in childhood, attainment of puberty, at marriage, and till the time of death.

Man has never been satisfied with a situation which ensures only survival; he has always looked for a good living, a better living. Amidst impoverishment and daily struggle for survival all tribal communities have found time to build up a strong colourful culture of music, dance and games. They practice all these with a sense of collective solidarity and collective participation, and they have programmes for the people across all age-groups. It is but natural that their economic life, their moments of sorrow and happiness will be reflected in these cultural forms and the Molsoms will have some degree of resemblance with other tribal communities in these cultural practices. I have tried to look into some of these areas while studying the music, dance forms and games of the Molsoms.

The economic and cultural activities of a community are closely interconnected. Hence, to implement any new scheme or to frame any scheme for developing the tribal communities, it is of great value to have knowledge about the life and culture of the smaller unknown communities concerned. Besides Tripura, other states of North Eastern India and some other parts of India have been facing disturbances so far its communal harmony and ethnic relation is concerned. And among other things, the lack of knowledge in the decision makers about the socio-cultural life of a community is one of the major reason for the problem. Without a proper knowledge about the life and culture of the tribal or other communities, the members of the dominant community will fail to develop a relationship of mutual trust and harmony with these communities, which is an essence for the development of Indian nationhood.

In Tripura, broadly, there are two groups of people, the tribals and the non-tribals who constitute the total population of the state. The non-tribals constitute about 69 percent of the total population and mainly reside in the plain lands which constitute about 40 percent of total areas of the state. The tribal population constitute about 31 percent of the total state population and mainly reside in the hill areas which constitute about 60 percent of the total areas of the state. The relation between the tribals and the non-tribals of the state had generally been friendly and cordial. A close interaction was prevailing between the people of two these broad groups. Before it merged with the Indian Union on 15th October 1949, Tripura as being ruled by the tribal kings. The most of the non-tribal subjects belonged to the Bengali linguistic group and practiced Hinduism or Islam. So far as the record goes, the demographic configuration of the tribal and the non-tribal subjects had the same in the first part of the 20th century. In the Census of 1901 the percentages of the tribals and the non-tribals were 52.82 and 47.18 respectively. But the rate of increase of the non-tribal subjects was higher. Thus as early as in 1931 the non-tribals became the majority in the state, and this happened when the tribal kings

were at the helm of affairs in the state. As per 1931 Census, the percentage of the non-tribal subjects was 50.31 and that of the tribals was 49.69. But at that time this demographic change did not strain the relationship between the two groups of people. In fact, such an increase in the demography of the non-tribal subjects had no detrimental effect on the economy of the state. The tribals too were not affected much since the non-tribal subjects mostly preferred the plain areas for their settlement whereas the tribal subjects did not know the utility of those stretches of land for agricultural purpose since they had been practicing shifting cultivation on the slopes of the hill at that time. But later, having adopted the methods of settled cultivation, the tribals gradually started utilising the plain lands. The productivity of the plain land cultivation is higher than that of land extensive shifting cultivation, and, as a result, a good number of the tribal subjects took to settled cultivation. In course of time, most of the plain land, a large part of which remained fallow earlier, came under cultivation. The increased land-man ratio in the hills, the resultant paucity of *jhum* land and cut-down in *jhum*-cycle also made the tribals disinterested in shifting cultivation. It was a major problem to rehabilitate the tribals, who adopted the technique of settled cultivation, on the plain land because the land in the plains had already been captured by the non-tribals and those tribals who adopted the technique of plain land cultivation even before 1947. Unless we keep this historical reality in mind we would not be able to understand the present tribal-nontribal conflict in the state in a proper light. An understanding of the life and culture of the Molsoms would also help understand the shaping of ethnic sentiment in the tribal mind.

The present ethnographic account of the Molsoms of Tripura has been arranged in the following sections:

1. Land and people of Tripura; the Molsoms of Tripura; the origin of the tribe and its demographic profile.

2. Settlement pattern, house types and food habits of the Molsoms.
3. The economic life of the Molsoms.
4. The social organisation of the Molsoms.
5. The authority structure.
6. The rites of passage and social control
7. The religious life
8. Music, Dance and Games among the Molsoms.

Each of these sections will constitute a chapter. Besides portraying a descriptive account of what I have seen in my first hand observation on various aspects of the society and culture of the Molsoms I have tried to put across the possible interpretation of what I have seen and tried to place in an analytical frame, the changes the Molsoms are experiencing in all these areas.

A brief review of literature

In the existing literature no in-depth study on the life and culture of the Molsoms is available. However, some studies are there on the life and culture of some other tribes of Tripura and the tribes of other North Eastern States of India from which we can have some idea of the socio-cultural, economic and political aspects of the life of these people.

The book by J. Shakespear titled *The Lusai Kuki Clans* (1912) deals with various aspects of the life and culture of the Lushais and Kukis. In six chapters, the author provides valuable information on the habitats, appearance and physical characteristics, history, affinities, dress and ornaments, artifacts, economy, domestic life, laws and customs, religion, folklore, language of these tribal group. This provide us one of the classical ethnographic account of the tribal life in the region.

Kaliprasanna Sen edited *Rajmala* (1926) (in Bengali) is one of the most useful and oft quoted document on the history of the Tripura kings and their subjects. Original *Rajmala* was written by Sri Kaliprasanna Sen in 1458. He was patronised by the King Dharmamanikya in this task. Subsequent additions have been published updating the original *Rajmala*. Some doubt have been raised by the scholars like Suniti Kumar Chattarjee and D.C Sarkar about the historical value of the documents produced in *Rajmala*. However, description of some of the tribal communities of the Tripura is available in the document.

The book *Udaipur Bibarani* (in Bnegali) by Dutta (1930) gives some valuable information about Udaipur, the then capital of Tripura. It provides us the important fact that the first Bengali immigration from British India took place in that part under the direct patronage of the Tripura kings. The early batch of Bengali immigrants who were adept in settled cultivation, or belonged to some artisan castes like the barber, washerman and so on, were given settlement in Hirapur, Joshpur, Rangamati and some other nearby villages.

Deb Burman's *Census Biborani* (1933) (in Bengali) mainly gives an analysis of the information taken from the 1931 Census of the state of Tripura. Some important matters like demography of different tribes, statistical information on the religion, language etc. are available in the book, which are of vital importance for understanding the demographic profile of the state at that time.

In Economic Problems of the Jhumias of Tripura (1969) J.B. Ganguly gives an economic profile of the *jhum* cultivating tribes of Tripura. The book mainly deals with the traditional agricultural methods namely shifting cultivation of the tribals of Tripura. In this study, Dr. Ganguly analysed the economic aspects of the Tripura tribals highlighting the relation between the production and the consumption pattern of the tribals.

B.P Misra's study on the *Socio-economic Adjustments of the Tribals -- case study of Tripura Jhumias* (1976), conducted mainly on the socio-economic adjustment of the Tripura tribals in the settlement colonies of the Tribal Welfare Department of the Government of Tripura, discusses the problems the tribal communities in the state were facing while trying to adjust with the requirements of settled cultivation. The book also gives information on the life and culture of some Tripura tribes.

S.M.Dubey edited book *North East India : A Sociological Study* (1978) contains 33 articles which are presented in three sections, namely, Social Structure, Stratification and Change, Political Development and Modernization, and Sociological Aspects of Economic Development. Along with 33 articles on various aspects of tribals and non-tribals of the North East India, a glimpse of the history of the studies conducted by various scholars is available in the editor's article titled "North East India : A Sociological Perspective". The article of J.B.Ganguly entitled "Problems And Prospects Of Economic Development Of Tripura" gives some valuable information on the topic.

Saigol's book *Tripura -- Its History and Culture* (1978) provides information about the royal history of Tripura kings and the cultural heritage of the royal palace and also gives an account of the condition of the tribal subjects. The book gives some case studies related to the culture and economic status of the Tripura tribes. The book based on the personal experience of the author who worked as a high official under the Tripura Government.

Bhattacharjee, in study of the *Jamatias of Tripura* (1983), traces down the origin of the Jamatias, and provides valuable information about their relation with the kings of Tripura, their religious practices, chieftainship, economy, settlement patterns etc. According to the study the Jamatias were one of the Kokborak speaking tribes that had served in the army of the successive kings of Tripura. In another study (1983) Bhattacharjee has collected information on the Kolois - a Kokborak speaking tribe of Tripura. The Kolois have been classified as a sub-groups of the Halams. The latter is of a Kuki-chin linguistic origin. The Kolois are not listed as a scheduled tribes in Tripura. However they get the government facilities equally with the other scheduled tribes of the state since they are considered as a sub-group of the Halams.

Bose, in his book titled *Glimps of Tribal Life in North-East India* (1980), has dealt with some tribes of Assam (of early thirties). The volume gives an analysis of the dual organisation in Assam, cross-cousin marriage, levirate, tri-clan and marriage classes in Assam, the *nokram* system of the Garos and the laws of inheritance found among the Garos. The book also gives an analysis of the geo-political background of the North East India and the descent system prevailing among the Dimasas. Though the title of the book is Glimpse of Tribal Life in North East India, the study is limited only on some tribes of Assam.

Chaudhury, in his book *The Khasi Canvas* (1983) gives a social and cultural account of the Khasis living in some of the states of the North East. The Khasis constitute one of the scheduled tribes in Tripura. They are mainly concentrated in Meghalay state of North East India and are well known for their matriarchal pattern of society. Chaudhury, in his book, has given an in-depth information and analysis of the Khasi matriliney, their traditional religion, indigenous games, economy, social customs, ceremonies etc. Among the tribes of North East India, the technology of iron smelting could be found only among the Khasis, the book informs. Besides, the indigenous methods of irrigation on hill tops developed by the

Khasis have been narrated in the book. The book titled *The Tribes of Tripura*, by Deb Burman (1983) gives some primary information on nineteen scheduled tribes of the Tripura. The book mainly deals with the sub-groups of and the interrelationships between these scheduled tribes. In the chapter on the Halams the Mulsoms (Molsoms) are included as one of the sub-groups of the Halams. It seems that the author is not prepared to accept the Molsoms as a distinct tribe.

Deb and Lahiri wrote a book on *Lusai Custom and Ceremonies* in 1982. This book deals with the customs and ceremonies of the Lushais of Mizoram. Social organisations of the Lushais, their religious practices, traditional political organisations etc. have been discussed in the book. The Lushais are also found in Tripura and are considered as one of the scheduled tribes of the state. Though, there is no reference, in the book, to the Lushais of Tripura, yet we find some information about the life and culture of the Lushais who are also known as the Mizos.

Dutta, in his book *Tripurar Lushai Kukider Etikatha* (in Bengali), (1983) portrays the interrelationship that historically developed among the Lushais, the Kukis, the Tripura kings and the British rulers. This book also gives an account of the battle that took place between the kings of Tripura, the British rulers and the Kukis in 1777.

Gan Chaudhury, in his book *The Riangs of Tripura* (1983), gives some information regarding the environment, ecological and natural status of the state along with the socio-cultural and politico-religious aspect of the Riangs.

Sailo's book *The Bongcher* (1995) is one of the recent books on the culture and history of the Bongcher tribe of Tripura. The study gives information about the origin, migratory roots, religion, traditional self government, folktales and some other aspects of the Boncher tribe of Tripura. The Bongchers, as the study reveals, belong to the Kuki-chin linguistic origin.

They migrated to Tripura from the Lilichamphai area of present Mizoram. Their migratory roots, as per the study, have got some similarities with that of the Molsoms of Tripura.

S.B. Saha's *Socio-economic Survey of the Noatia Tribes* (1986) gives information about the culture and economy of the Noatia – a Kokborak speaking tribe of the Tripura. According to the study, the Noatias have similar cultural and social practices with that of the Tripuris. They are, in fact, a part of the group of the tribes which have newly assimilated into the Tripuri communities of the state.

Tribes of North-East India, a collection of twenty one essays edited by S Sengupta (1994) covers the biological and cultural aspects of some tribes of North East India. The book opens with an article with a brief description on some tribal groups of each of the North Eastern states. While giving description on the Tripura tribes, Kar, in his article "The Tribes of North-East India : An Overview", has observed that, of the various tribes and clans (of Tripura tribes) only the Durlongs, who came from eastern Burma some three centuries ago via the Mizoram Hills and now confined to Kailashahar, claim to be indigenous to Tripura. But our experiences do not confirm this observation. The Darlongs in Tripura are not treated as a separate tribe so far as the official records are concerned. They, however, are considered as a section of the Kukis in Tripura. Their name, in fact, is not included in the list of the scheduled tribes in Tripura although they get the facilities meant for the scheduled tribes since they are treated as one of the sub groups of the Kukis. The old Darlongs use the term Kuki after the surname (i.e Darlong Kuki).

According to some official documents published by the state government (Menon 1975: 150; Deb Burman 1983: 8; Dutta 1980: 1, 58) the Halams are in fact a part of the Kukis who were in constant conflict with the ruling princely family of Tripura. One section of this tribe surrendered themselves to the princely family, who incidentally

belonged to the dominant Tripuri tribe. That section of the Kukis later came to be known as Halams. These documents, however, do not provide any information as to when this had happened.

Ramaprasad Dutta's book (1980) gives an account of the battles between the Kukis on the one hand and the princely family and the British on the other, which occurred around the year 1777 (ibid:11). Hence we can presume that the Halams came to be known as a separate tribe during this period.

It is not clear as to what is the exact number of sub-tribes of the Halams. *The Tripura District Gazetteer* (Menon 1975) notes that the Halams had twelve sub-groups which later split into sixteen. However, in another government publication (Deb Burman 1983) it is mentioned that the Halams have seventeen sub-groups. In both the books the Molsoms are included as a sub-group. The above information reveal how little is actually known about the Halams or about the Molsoms.

Fieldwork

Since no comprehensive study was available on the Molsoms I had to depend almost exclusively on the primary data collected through an intensive fieldwork. At first I did a survey on the location of the Molsom villages. Inquiries were made at various Block offices, Tribal welfare offices and with some knowledgeable persons to locate these villages. I also inquired with the Molsoms of one village as to where the other Molsom could be found and what would be the possible population composition of those villages. After compiling the data which I collected

from the government sources and from the Molsoms, I found that most of the Molsom villages were situated in different parts of the South Tripura and North Tripura (present Dhalai district) districts with larger concentration in the former district. There were roughly forty Molsom villages detected in the state and I visited eighteen of them to finally select nine villages for the purpose of an intensive study. I did this on the basis of the geographical location and population concentration of the villages. Of these nine villages, five were situated in interior hill areas and four were closer to some small townships.

At first, in November 1983, I went to a few of the market places where the weekly markets locally known as *haat*, were held. I felt that this was safer because people from different villages would gather in these *haats*. I made contact with some Molsoms who had come to these *haats* and I spoke to them about my proposed study. Most of these people showed interest in my study and they invited me to stay in their villages. These people were generally very hospitable. They even assured that no harm would be done to me. This should cordially dispel the fact that I had no previous acquaintance with them and I met them in the *haats* for the first time. The simplicity and warmth that the Molsoms had shown to me at the first meeting gave me a lot of confidence in undertaking the fieldwork. It may be mentioned here that while selecting the villages I had been advised by the officials of the Tripura Police department not to visit some of the villages in the interior areas because of the risks involved. At the time of my fieldwork the rural areas of Tripura were disturbed as a result of the ongoing extremist movement by a tribal organisation. But I did not always pay heed to their advice and fortunately I did not have to face any problem from the extremists in particular. All I had told the people whom I met in the *haats* was that I wanted to write a book on their life and culture and they offered me all cooperation. I even had selected three trouble prone villages for my study.

I went to Raipasa Molsom Bari in the first part of 1984. I stayed there for ten days to get some primary information on their life and culture and at the same time to build up some sort of rapport with the villagers. During that period I was residing in a township called Ambasa which is situated about seven kilometers away from Raipasa. I was unable to get accommodation at Raipasa then. I used to visit the village in the morning and return in the afternoon. Initially, I had absolutely no idea about the life and culture of the Molsoms. So I used this opportunity to familiarise myself with their life style. I was also able to make an arrangement for my stay in the village for fieldwork in the next phase. Unfortunately, when I planned to return to the village for my intensive study, a riot occurred in the village and its surroundings. Some criminals from the non-tribal population around this village attacked the tribals to take revenge for an earlier attack on some Bengalis in Ambasa by some members of the TNV (Tripura National Volunteers). The leader of the TNV, Mr. Bijoy Hrankhol, incidentally was from a village close to Raipasa. The main victims of that riot were the Molsoms. Raipasa Molsom Bari was a deserted village as all its inhabitants fled to the interior forests for safety. Their houses had been squandered and many were burnt. A few Molsoms were killed. Under that circumstances I decided not to cover the Raipasa Molsom Bari for the collection of quantitative data. I then made a pilot survey of some neighboring Molsom villages and decided to cover Patabiri Molsom Bari, Dhanchera Molsom Bari and Shibbari. After selecting three other Molsom villages I came back to Udaipur sub-division of South Tripura district to begin an intensive study there. I left Ambasa for the time being because the situation in Molsom villages at Ambasa was still tense as the memory of the terrible riot was still haunting the villagers. However, the circumstances became normal when I came back to Ambasa after conducting studies on the villages of South Tripura.

In South Tripura, I started my study from Kalabon Molsom Bari, a village situated near Tulamura bazar of Udaipur sub-division which consisted of forty-two households. At that time I was residing at Udaipur and was visiting the village every morning and returning in the evening. At first I began my study by having conversations with the elders about their life, customs, norms and ceremonies. These people were very enthusiastic in telling me whatever I wanted to know. In this regard it should be mentioned here that the little knowledge and experience which I gathered from Raipasa regarding their life and culture helped me in establishing rapport with the people of Kalabon Molsom Bari rather easily. The Molsoms in this village were especially excited that I was going to write a book about them. After a week, I was able to make an arrangement for my stay in the village. I then was also able to collect information in a more friendly and homely atmosphere. Soon I found that the village people started to refer to me as Itihas Babu, that is, a person who writes history. I, of course, took care to check whatever I was told were facts and not exaggerations. It was possible that since they were conscious of the purpose of my visit, they would give a different picture of their activities. Therefore I cross-checked everything I was told with others in the village and also in other villages to find out how reliable my information was. I was able to establish a better rapport with the youths because of my interest in music. I learnt some of their songs which I used to sing to them. This made me more friendly with them. They were especially impressed at the fact that an outsider and a non-Molsom could sing their songs. I also participated in their activities by trying to dance with them in their ceremonies. In this way I was able to get closer to them and soon a close bond of friendship grew with many of them.

I did not know their language though I tried to pick up some words. Most of the Molsoms knew Bengali and I had no problem in communicating with them. In a sense most of the Molsoms are bilingual as they speak their own language as well as the local dialect of Bengali. I compiled a

glossary of Molsom words with their English equivalents which is added at the end of this dissertation.

I stayed for one and a half months in Kalabon Molsom Bari. I gained a lot from my stay there as this is the village from where I collected the basic data. I could use this as the basis of my study in the other villages. Since I had developed close relationship with the village folk they had no hesitation in allowing me to attend many of their ceremonies. One of those was the puberty initiation ceremony. Usually no outsider is allowed to witness this ceremony as this is a highly private affair. I was interested in witnessing one such ceremony as this would give me some first hand knowledge.

Sri Swaran Kumar Molsom of Kalabon Molsom Bari one day invited me for dinner at his house which I attended with a great deal of curiosity. Some elderly Molsoms of the village were also present there. They offered me *rakzu*, the local alcoholic drink, which I, along with them, enjoyed since it was one of their customary ways to honour a guest. In that gossip session Sri Swaran Kumar told me, "Dada, since you are writing our cultural history you should know one of our social ceremonies about which we generally do not discuss with any non-Molsom person because this is considered a private matter in our community". After that, as an exception to their established practice, they gave me a detailed description of the puberty initiation ceremony and granted me the permission to witness one such ceremony.

I was so far being given only descriptions of the puberty initiation ceremony which is an important rite of passage for the Molsoms. Initially there was some hesitation in allowing me entry but after a few weeks of my stay I was not only allowed to witness one such ceremony but was also permitted to photograph it. The people requested me not to take photograph of the girl when she was unclothed. I respected their sentiments.

During interaction with the Molsoms in their villages I noticed that they were giving some special importance and attention to me based on their understanding that I had a keen interest to know about their culture. As they reported none had made such an attempt before. In this regard I remember one incidence that took place at a time when I started writing the dissertation. One day I met some Molsom youth at Agartala who had come to the Tribal Welfare Department for some official works. In course of discussion they informed me that *khoser* would be worshipped the next week (in July 1985). I decided to witness the ceremony. And accordingly I started for Kalabon Molsom Bari of Udaipur. Unfortunately I could not reach the village a day before the day of worship. It was the worship-day and it was known to me that during the day of *khusher* worship no outsider, not even the villager who may have gone out for some business, is allowed to enter the village, because that is taken as a serious offense. Seating on a stone under a tree just outside the village I was waiting and thinking what to do. Some children of the village saw me and reported to other village people. After a few minutes, some young men of the village came to me but stood inside the village boundary. Seeing them I stood up, narrowed the gap and apologised that I failed to come in time. They requested me to wait there and went back to the village. After about half an hour they came back and informed me that they had discussion with the village priest and elderly persons who specially considered the case and allowed me to enter the village on condition that I pay a fine of twenty-five bottles of *rakzu* and five hens. I entered the village and conveyed my sincere thanks to the village priest and others. Just before making payment for the fines imposed on me, there was another round of discussion between the youths and aged persons. The youths were arguing that since I was to record their culture I should not be made to pay such a "heavy fine". At last, it was decided that only an amount of Rs.50 would be taken from me for *rakzu* and hens. I paid the and observed the ceremony freely.

After collecting information on their life and culture—their rites, rituals, ceremonies, customs etc., I started conducting the household census. I framed a schedule which sought information on the household composition, sex, clan, religion, occupation, level of education, land holding, pattern of land use, type of marriage, age at marriage, place of birth etc. Some of the questions sought information on more than one generations, the present and past generations. After completing this I decided to take up one more from the selected villages and followed the similar sequence of techniques to study it.

I collected qualitative data in the initial stage of my fieldwork because I thought that the village people would be less interested to respond to the objective type questions like how many children you have, how much landed property you possess, in which class do your children read in etc., which were a part of my census schedule. However, they gave me all such information after a period of twenty / twenty-two days when I was able to earn their full confidence.

The next village I went to was Manithang Bari of the same sub-division which had thirty-eight households. My visit to Manithang Bari was followed by visits to Thali Bari (thirty-three households), Atharobhola Boro Bari (forty households), and Raia Molsom Bari (thirty-two households) villages. I spent about a month in each of these four villages. My experiences in Kalabon Molsom Bari made me familiar with the ways of life of the Molsoms and hence it did not take much time for me to establish rapport with the people in these villages. In fact the people of these villages were astonished when I explained to them some of their culture traits. They wondered how an outsider knew something about their culture. For instance, when I asked a person what clan he belongs to—whether Deorai, Mapu, Achep or so on, they gave me strange looks. At the same time, however, they were glad that I knew the name of their clans. Thus in the villages of South Tripura I conducted studies in a friendly and favorable atmosphere. I gathered some sort of experience during my

fieldwork in the villages of North Tripura (present Dhalai) district. In Kamalpur sub-division of North Tripura district, in the second phase of my visit, at first I went to Patabiri Molsom Bari (thirty-six households), which was followed by visits to Dhanchera Molsom Bari (thirty-nine households) and Shib Bari (thirty households). I had to finally drop the study of the Raipasa Molsom Bari (thirty households), the first Molsom village where I had been to, since intercommunity riots took a heavy toll on the people there. Most of them had abandoned their houses and settled elsewhere because they were under constant threat of attacks from non-tribals. The government was trying to ensure peace and encourage the people to return to their houses. But during the time of my fieldwork this process was going on. I therefore could cover three of the selected villages especially for quantitative data. I however, managed to collect some qualitative information from the aged persons of that village.

I conducted the household census in eight villages and collected qualitative information on different aspects of their lives from nine villages. Most of my information collected in these eight villages matched with what I had collected in Kalabon Molsom Bari. There was some variations on songs especially in love songs. The content of these songs were different though the tunes were the same. There are of course differences in some aspects of the quantitative data which I collected from the eight villages.

I started writing the draft of my dissertation after the analysis of the data. I made a few trips to these villages again in order to cross-check some points or to clear some doubts.

The terrorist activities of the outlawed TNV (Tripura National Volunteers) had started in the month of June 1980, which is popularly known as *juner danga*. Though at the outset, I was advised by the officials of the Tripura police department not to visit the tribal village of interior areas because of the risk involved. I, fortunately, did not face any problem from the TNVs. On

the contrary, through middlemen, the villagers gave me the assurance that there would be no problem from them if I resume fieldwork since it was a purely academic study and it had got nothing to do with politics. They were pleased that their life and culture would be highlighted through my study. The TNVs problem came to an end in 1988, after the Rajib-Hrankhol (Bijoy Hrankhol : president TNV) agreement. After 1993 the situation deteriorated remarkably when another extremist group, namely NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura), started terrorist activities with much vigour. Besides killing they started kidnapping the civilians with an intention to earn money and spread terrorism. With a similar intention they started to collect annual / monthly 'taxes' from the employees and common people of some interior areas. Under the circumstances, it become a major problem, especially for the people belonging to townships, to visit interior tribal villages. It was therefore almost impossible for me to visit the villages selected for the present study. However, through an intimate interaction with the Molsoms, which was possible because of the fieldwork since 1984, a strong bond of friendship had grown with the inmates of the Molsom villages. The village people when visited my office or residence informed me about the condition of the villages and their inmates. I also paid trips, although occasionally, to some of my sample villages as and when I got an opportunity. But since the last part of 1997 the conditions deteriorated to such an extent that even my friends in Molsom villages were not confident in welcoming me to their villages. No Molsom was supporting the activities of the NLFT yet people of the sample villages requested me not to visit their villages because of the deteriorating inter-ethnic relations. With deep sense of regret they said that the NLFT extremists were constantly threatening those who had been in touch with the non-tribals..