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A Critical Review

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN NORTH-EAST INDIA: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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Introduction

Beginning with the pioneering work by Sir John Lubbock, who reported for the first time the evidence of prehistoric archaeological record from Northeast India in *Athenaeum* of London in 1867, several British administrators have contributed in a great extent into the research in archaeology in the pre-independence era. The first discovery of prehistoric material in this region was made just after 4 years of those well-known first discoveries of prehistoric tools by Robert Bruce Foote in 1863 in Pallavaram, Madras and Boucher de Perthes in 1863 in France. This part of India still suffers from insufficient data for reconstructing the past cultures though it has long history of more than 140 years of archaeological research. The present status of archaeological research is surprisingly poor and it can still be considered as *terra incognita* compared to other parts of India. A detailed review of the research into the prehistoric archaeology of this region shows that the research is confined to basically surface sites and rarely excavated sites of Neolithic cultural period and it is true for even historical sites. In this regard, mentions can be made about the statement by J.P. Mills in the 1930's that ‘the spade, the chief tool of archaeologists had hardly been used in research in Assam’ which is very much valid in the present context too. Is it because of the lack of interest in archaeological research or lack of potentiality in Northeast India?

In the beginning, the nature of archaeological research in Northeast India was centred in collecting and describing the stone artefacts of surface collection and very rarely of stratified context. The British administrators were aware of the importance of the archaeological items, and collected them during their administrative explorations. Slowly these artefacts occupied places in the national and international journals and periodicals and proved the antiquity of prehistoric man in this part of the country. Keeping in mind the long period of history of more than 140 years of archaeological research, an attempt has been made to evaluate the basic issues for problem oriented research into archaeology in this region.

Like the Northwestern corridor of India through which the cultural elements could penetrate to India from the west or vice-versa, the Northeast India can be considered as a corridor for connecting the Indian subcontinent to the Eastern
World. This region lying at the junction of South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asian countries may have played a crucial role in early human dispersal and migration and hence, cultural affinities can be observed throughout time leading to a mosaic of cultural heritage in this part of our country. Medhi rightly referred to this territory as the ‘Great Indian Corridor’ due to prehistoric and protohistoric movements of people to this area from its neighbouring regions.

This region lays between 22° and 29° North Latitude and 89° 40’ and 97° 22’ East Longitude covering eight Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura which are commonly known as ‘seven sister’ states and Sikkim, surrounded by five international boundaries of Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. This region has two broad geological settings, viz. - (1) the plain regions covering the districts located in the Brahmaputra and Barak basins of Assam and Tripura, (2) the remaining states are mostly of hilly geological settings. This region is bestowed with southwest monsoon characterized by wet summer and dry winter. Moreover, Mouchinram of Meghalaya is known for receiving the highest rainfall in the world.

Because of wide diversity of plants useful to man and favourable climatic conditions, this region has been regarded by geographers and botanists to be very important and an ideal place for early plant domestication and food production. As a result of the interests shown by international scholars gathered in the Indo-Pacific Prehistoric Congress held in Pune on 20-23rd December 1978, the following resolutions were adopted regarding the importance of the prehistory of Northeast India.

I. a potential area for the domestication of a number of important plants and

II. a physical and cultural bridge between the body of India and Southeast Asia.

Paddayya aptly highlights the archaeological potentiality of this region in his discussion on the status of archaeological research in India. To express in his own words, “Northeast India, which has in recent years yielded pre-Neolithic cultural assemblages, offer excellent scope for investing diversity in human diversity in human adaptations. Forming as it does a halfway house between the Indian mainland and Southeast Asia, this area probably enabled early societies to develop individual identities of their own”.

Despite the great archaeological potentialities, this region could draw only marginal attention in academic arena due to several drawbacks such as less academic departments dealing with archaeological research, relying on traditional approach; and lack of adequate technical knowledge, multidisciplinary approach, infrastructure and general interests in Archaeology. These are the main factors in limiting problem-oriented research with large-scale
archaeological explorations and excavations with recent developments in the discipline. So, this region is generally left as blank or rarely dotted in the archaeological maps of India and the reason behind this blank space is mainly due to the limited number of well-excavated sites with stratigraphic cultural sequence corroborated with chronometric absolute dates. The archaeological record hardly finds places in the discussions of human origins and evolution and subsequent cultural developments in India. Sharma strongly commented that, "In terms of size, Northeast India is much bigger than a country in Europe, like Great Britain, but archaeological evidence from this vast and one of the most strategic regions of India is still so meagre that any attempt to trace the course of human history, especially of the vast unrecorded past, becomes a difficult undertaking".

Apart from several drawbacks indicated above, there are certain physical problems in archaeological research in this area. Some of the main obstacles are:

1. The extensive valleys of the river Brahmaputra spreading in entire length of Assam is flooded almost every year and huge amount of sediments are deposited each year, which finally might have covered the earlier deposits. The Pleistocene deposits, if existed, might have been covered by the present Holocene deposits in most of the areas of Brahmaputra valley.

2. The hilly area of Northeast India has its own problem of extensive covers of thick vegetation. The fast growing vegetation cover does not allow in prospecting archaeological objects scattered on the surface.

3. This region falls under Tropical Rain Forest Zone and moreover, the long duration of rainy climate becomes unfavourable and a difficult task to archaeological exploration and conducting field work.

4. As most of the areas are inaccessible due to the insurgency problem, the area covered under scientific explorations so far in Northeast India is very less.

5. Most of the areas in the hilly tracts of Northeast India are covered by slash and burn cultivation, which is prevalent very extensively among the present day inhabitants in the hilly areas. In this kind of cultivation, the jungles are cleared and burnt and then the surface is used for cultivation, which affects the surface soil-cover resulting displacement of the context of the archaeological material. These cultivation fields are shifted from one hill to another frequently affecting more soil surface areas and possibly the archaeological contexts.

6. Another problem is due to the high levels of groundwater creating problem during excavation and prevents establishing the whole stratigraphical sequences, i.e. the same problem occurred during the excavation of the historical site at Amabari in Guwahati.
7. Scanty evidences for archaeological reconstruction is due to the poor preservation condition of the archaeological material in this region owing to the great humidity of the climate, as all objects other than stone perish very fast in humid climate.

So, serious attempt for developing an apposite and relevant methodology to confront the drawbacks and the problems is very much in need, without which the archaeological potentialities of this region will never be explored and we will be far from understanding the role of this region in shaping the Indian subcontinent from the east with concrete evidences.

Earliest Human Occupation in Northeast India

Few attempts have been made to establish the earliest human occupation in Northeast India. In recent years, it is observed that establishing the earliest human occupation is one of the major research issues in Paleoanthropology and Prehistoric Archaeology that is evident from various attempts made by different scholars in different parts of the world. Beginning of this trend of research can be assigned to the well-known debate on the 'early human occupation in Europe' developed during a workshop held on Nov. 19-20, 1993 at the Centre European de Recherches Prehistoriques at Tautavel, France. This ongoing discussion regarding this new academic trend of understanding the early human dispersal in the old world from Africa, the cradle of humankind has developed into the theoretical issue of 'short and long chronology'. Since then, much of the research is addressing the crucial questions about the earliest hominids and their adaptive and dispersal strategies in Eurasia. Moreover, research addressing the earliest antiquity in regional level also contributed greatly to understand the dispersal pattern and the possible route of migration. Such discussion resulted the 'out of Africa' model which implies early Homo species stepping foot outside Africa and disperse to different parts of the old world. The analysis is based on the recent evidence of early human presence in the form of hominid remain itself or the traces of their cultural activities in different sites. Recent data with absolute dates authenticate human presence in the Early Pleistocene time or even in the Late Pliocene outside Africa in Spain, Ubeidiya in Israel, Riوات, Pabbi Hills in Pakistan, Isampur in India, Java in Indonesia, and Longguopo Cave in China.

However, there is growing body of evidence regarding an alternative explanation for the early hominid colonisation indicated by Dennell and Roebroeks. The 'lack of evidence' suggested by them leaves room for alternative models, including Australopithecine migrations to Asia, the evolution of Homo ergaster within Asia, and dispersals back into Africa. Such hypotheses put even greater stress on considering the actual possible paths taken in space and time. It questions the basic paradigm of Paleoanthropology with the new
evidences of possible human presence in greater Asian landmass in the time, far earlier than previously believed. This alternative explanation further indicates the uncertainty regarding human evolution in the Pleistocene period and leaves room for sudden surprise with time.

There is very rare emphasis on establishing a datum for early human occupation in Northeast India. On circumstantial evidence, Northeast India as it connects Indian Subcontinent with East and Southeast Asian landmass may have acted as a possible mid-way from Africa to Southeast Asia through South Asia for the Eastward dispersal of early hominids. Many early Palaeolithic sites are found in neighbouring Southern China dated to early Pleistocene geological period. If Northeast India has acted as a corridor for these dispersals, great possibilities occur to have many unexplored sites dated to the early Pleistocene age.

Existence of Palaeolithic Cultural Remains

Presence of Palaeolithic cultural material in Northeast India is a debated issue in Indian Prehistory. On the basis of tool typology, several assemblages have been placed within the context of ‘Palaeolithic’ in this region. One of the main problems with these Palaeolithic materials is that they occur in relatively younger deposits and mostly in the surface with Neolithic stone tools and potteries. Garo Hills in Meghalaya provide the largest amount of Palaeolithic stone tools, but the chrono-stratigraphic context of the material is still not well-understood. The prehistoric tools from Garo Hills are studied by various scholars like Goswami and Bhagabati, Sharma, Medhi, Sonowal and Sharma. Sharma has divided the prehistoric cultures in to Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic culture. In 1969, Sankalia visited Garo Hills and observed that the Palaeolithic elements might be present in the area. But Ghosh has strongly contradicted the occurrence of Palaeolithic in Garo Hills and termed the artefacts as ‘neolithic debitage’ and he further argues that the climate was not favourable for the early man and they failed in adapting in the Garo Hills. Medhi observes that the Palaeolithic materials occur in sub-recent terraces and weathered rock surfaces of late quaternary period. He terms these artefacts as ‘Pre-Neolithic’. On the basis of further research on the stone artefacts and their context in Garo Hills, he further points out that the tools are not found in stratified context, and the chipped stone artefacts are not simply ‘neolithic debitage’ as expressed by Ghosh, but purposefully knapped artefacts.

Bopardikar of Archaeological Survey of India with a multidisciplinary team explored the Daphabhum area of Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh and brought to light evidences of Palaeolithic material, but similar problem occurs with well-dated stratigraphic context. Similar claims has been made in other states too in different sites, but failed so far in establishing an undisputed chronology for the prehistoric cultures prior to the Neolithic. Due to absence of
established context, these evidences of Palaeolithic cultural material are always neglected and generally not considered in the discussions on Indian Palaeolithic. Moreover, Northeast India is referred to as inaccessible region during the Palaeolithic due to dense forests, hilly terrains and climatic conditions and interpreted as a geographical barrier for early hominid migrations and dispersals and unfavourable for their adaptations.

### Origin of Food Producing Cultures

Coming to the human evolution in the last 10,000 years BP (before present), which is geologically termed as the Holocene period, witnesses a revolutionary change in the history of human being. During this time, early man acquired slowly the knowledge of taming and bringing the animals and plants under their control, which finally led to the early domestication process. Due to this change in the economy from hunting-gathering to food producing stage, this stage of human culture is known as the Neolithic (New stone age) culture of human prehistory, meaning new ways of life with new stone tool technology related to food production, more specifically agriculture.

Domestication generally occurs in a region where the wild species are found. For the understanding of domestication process of plants and animals, it is very important to recognize their wild progenitor species, and identify their natural habitat. Wild progenitor of some major crops has been identified through morphological, biochemical and genetic studies. Northeast India is a part of the Vavilovian centre of biodiversity and origin of many important cultivated plant species and some domesticated animals. Wild counterparts of many species of domestic plants and animals are to be found in this region. Hazarika has recorded several plants and animals which are very likely to be domesticated in this part of Indian subcontinent, viz. plants like rice, citrus, banana, mango, yams and taro etc. and animals like cattle species, elephants, pigs, silkworms etc.

Botanists base their evidence of the origin of rice, a food crop of immense importance, largely on the habitats of the wild species; it is because of the presumption that the cultivated species have developed from certain types of wild rice. There are various species of wild rice in Northeast India, such as Oryza rufipogon, Oryza officinalis, Oryza perennis, Oryza meyeriana, Oryza granulata, Oryza nivara, which are found in different ecological habitats like swamps, marshes, open ditches, rivers, swampy grassland, and rice fields. It is estimated that at least 10,000 indigenous rice cultivars are found in this region. In this regard, Glover writes, “India is the centre of greatest diversity of domesticated rice with over 20,000 (over of 50,000) identified species and Northeast India is the most favourable single area of the origin of domesticated rice”. Intermediate forms such as Tulsiboon, Bogiboon and Kekuabaon are also observed in case of deep-water and waterlogged rice ecosystem. Considering
the great varieties of wild, intermediate and domesticated rice found in this region. Hazarika, argues for an early domestication process of rice in this area. The different methods of rice cultivation in the lowland areas of the Brahmaputra valley over different seasons of the same year further shows a very strategic year-round cultivation process in the flood zone. He further claims that this region might have been an area of great importance for the emergence and developments of early farming communities based on rice agriculture. So far we don’t have direct palaeo-botanical remains of cultivated plants in this part of India till date, but there is ample evidence of Neolithic ground and polished stone artefacts found in entire region in varied frequency confirms a full-fledged food producing culture.

Chronology of Megalithic Tradition

Another interesting cultural phenomenon of our early ancestors is the tradition of erecting stone (also of wood) megaliths. The megalithic tradition have persisted in the manner of disposal of the dead in certain old customs and beliefs till today. After cremating the dead, the ashes and the uncalcified bones are deposited in a stone chamber and a memorial stone is erected in many parts of Northeast India. Interestingly, this is a still living practice among many communities and closely associated with their social-cultural and religious life.

Several British administrators contributed with valuable writings in their observations on the rituals related to the Megalithic structures. Roy described the funeral rites of erecting Megaliths among the Khasis of Meghalaya, and many other early scholars recorded the megalithic structures and classified in different groups based on their ideological significance. The megalithic tradition here is not directly similar to that of the Iron Age Megalithic Cultures of the peninsular India. This tradition of erecting stone in the memory of personalities or major events is poorly understood in terms of the origin and chronology in this region. Rao concludes in his discussion on this problem that one has to pay attention into the social and ideological aspects of different megalithic cultures before aiming at establishing affinities and common origin. Several early scholars (mentioned in Rao) wrote on the relationship between the megaliths of Northeast India and Southeast Asia, but these has to be confirmed more precisely with absolute dates for the understanding of the chronology shedding more light on the neolithic-megalithic relationship.

The Question of Prehistoric Cultural Affinities

As we have mentioned earlier, Northeast India interconnects the areas of South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asian countries, naturally and culturally, and hence, it is worthy to presume cultural affinities within these regions from
the earliest time. The systematic study done by Dani on some of the prehistoric stray-finds suggest that the Neolithic stone artefacts have morphological similarities with that of Southeast Asia and China. The occurrence of high percentage of shouldered celts in Garo hills of Meghalaya links this region with Southeast Asia. Again, this type of celt is also present in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa of Eastern India. Various excavated sites like Daojali Hading, Sarutaru, Farsi-Parlo, and sites in Garo Hills, and Manipur and many surface sites have yielded numerous potsherds, basically of Cord-impressed ware and other hand made wares. The Cord-impressed pottery, the predominant ceramic ware of Neolithic Northeast India, has similarities with the potteries of East Asia and Southeast Asia, which are remarkably alike, and includes simple forms of cord-marked, combed, fingertip-impressed or incised vessels, often on tripods and pedestal. The overall homogeneity of the archaeological record makes it easy to visualize a common ancestral culture, located quite close in time, from which all the descendant cultures of the Yellow river basin originated. This kind of pottery is found in many eastern and central Indian Neolithic sites like Koldihawa and Mahagara, and even in Nepal. At the site of Nongpok Keithelmanbi of Manipur with Neolithic tools and cord-impressed pottery, a charcoal sample (BS-523) from the Cord-impressed ware stratum has been dated to 4,460 ± 120 year B.P. The cord-mark in ribbed or criss-crossed impressions and the general decoration patterns like checkers, parallel lines, circles and square or diagonals can be compared with the Lungshianoid ware decoration pattern of the South China. Considering at the archaeological record of this period, specifically the shouldered celts and the tanged axes and the cord-impressed potteries found from different localities of Northeast India, we can infer close affinities with the material found in South China and Southeast Asia.

Ramesh brought to light some artefacts made on silicified fossil wood from number of sites like Teliamura, Sonai Bazar area, Mohanpur, Sonaram area etc. in west Tripura. The assemblage is comprised of pocked and ground axes, adzes, grinding stones, points etc. The use of silicified fossil wood as a raw material for making artefacts were recorded by Goswami and Sharma in Daojali Hading of North Cachar Hills, and recently there are many sites yielding fossil wood artefacts in Lalmi Hills and Chaklapunji area of Bangladesh which may be considered as a sign for cultural links of this region to the prehistoric cultures of Burma, and Bangladesh. In fact, this entire region might have undergone similar cultural developments in the late Pleistocene and early Holocene period.

Another interesting feature of the Holocene period is the discovery of Hoabinhian artefacts, which may again imply connections with the Southeast Asian Holocene cultures. The excavator at the site of Nongpok Keithelmanbi of Manipur observes a Hoabinhian stratum below the Cord-impressed ware layer. Again, some artifacts similar to Hoabinhian artifacts are found in Garo
Hills of Meghalaya\textsuperscript{25}. The Hoabinhian techno-complex\textsuperscript{24} is defined purely on the basis of tool categories comprising pebble tools, utilised flakes, and a small proportion of edge-ground tools and bone tools, and in the later period pottery and fully ground axes and adzes also occur. The Hoabinhian sites are spread over a broad region from Southern China, North Vietnam, Malaya, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Sumatra, Taiwan and Northeast India\textsuperscript{25}.

Transitions from Neolithic to Early State Formation

There is virtually no evidence of any Chalcolithic and Bronze or Iron Age in Northeast Indian context. The reason behind the absence of subsequent cultural developmental stages from Neolithic to the emergence of early States or Kingdom is yet to be addressed. The ancient period of Assam witnesses emergence of several political and cultural centres\textsuperscript{26} in different parts of Northeast India. The archaeological remains have gained considerable importance in the recent years in reconstructing the 'ancient history' of the region. The explorations and excavations at the sites of Ambart\textsuperscript{27}, Dhansiri-Doliyang Valley\textsuperscript{28}, Arunachal Pradesh\textsuperscript{29}, reveals rich archaeological record with art and architectural pieces, ancient settlements, religious sites, potteries etc. Sharma\textsuperscript{30} made a study on the settlement pattern history with a 'regional approach' addressing the crucial questions such as site formation process, context and cultural links etc. in Dhansiri-Doliyang Valley. He has successfully brought out an important hypothesis that the earliest state formation in the region was not necessarily due to the inflow of the Indo-Europeans into the soils of Assam, but was a result of the intermittent trade relations between the mainland India and the southern Chinese territories, in which the Tibeto-Burman speaking communities played a crucial role. Recently, Das\textsuperscript{31} has brought out the importance of Guwahati region in the history and archaeology of early and medieval Assam. The inscriptional, iconographic and numismatic evidences of early Assam need more careful attention for understanding the emergence and development of different kingdoms in different parts of Northeast India. Detailed analysis and comparison of the archaeological record of these early sites can be very useful in understanding the early connections and intermixing of two different racial elements of Aryan (from the west) and Mongolian (from the east) in early state formation process and the transitional or developmental stages from the Neolithic period.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that we have archaeological record belonging to different cultural periods, but due to the lack of absolute chronometric dates, we still have very flimsy scenario of the various cultural phases. The earliest human occupation and the Palaeolithic artefacts are not
undisputedly identified till date. Though we have the Neolithic artefacts from various parts of Northeast India, the settlement and subsistence pattern is not properly known. Moreover, the transitional stage from food gathering to food producing with domestication of plants and animals are yet to be authenticated with palaeo-botanical data. The developmental stages within the Neolithic culture still persist as unknown fact. The Megalithic tradition is still practiced among various communities of this region and has remained as an integral part of their socio-religious life. Till now, there is no evidence of either copper age or Iron Age in Northeast India and hence the transformation from the Neolithic cultural period to the historical period is also not understood. Moreover, overall picture of the cultures, lifestyles and cross-cultural relations are not clear and visible, and the reconstruction of the past is still lacking the human adaptations, man-land relationship, subsistence and settlement pattern with a process oriented scenario of the New Archaeological approach. Due attention has to be paid for multidisciplinary approach with more dating attempts for revealing the prehistorical and historical background of Northeast India.

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