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Publication:

Khumtai

Souvenir published on the occasion of the 28th Conference of the Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha

Khumtai, Golaghat 2009 (230-238)
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Introduction

Northeast India (22° and 29° 18' North Latitude; 90° 40' and 97° 22' East Longitude), including the popularly known ‘Seven Sister’ states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and recently included Sikkim is known for its rich natural and cultural heritage. Due to rich and diverse flora and fauna, this landmass has always been a centre of attraction for scientists dealing with biological sciences. One of the most attractive National Parks of India is the Kaziranga National Park, a ‘World Heritage’ site situating in the central part of Assam. Moreover, this region has got unique identity for its geographical settings, covering the mighty Brahmaputra and Barak River and their several tributaries, surrounded by the eastern Himalayan mountain range and several other hills. This entire region is surrounded by five different international boundaries of Nepal, Bhutan, China, Burma and Bangladesh. In a broader sense, Northeast India geographically connects South Asia with East and Southeast Asian countries, allowing movements of people leading to cultural connections from the prehistoric past within these regions. These prehistoric and historic connections in the form of both material and non-material culture can be visualised in every aspect of society and life of the present inhabitants. These age-old connections of different groups of people with different cultural background finally shape the rich cultural heritage of the present day inhabitants of Northeast India. Medhi (2003) refers to this region as the “Great Indian Corridor”, for the prehistoric and proto-historic movements of people from and to its neighbouring regions.

The nature of the archaeological record of this region reveals that they possess unique values in reconstructing prehistory/history of the Indian Subcontinent. Looking at their great values as cultural heritage and as source material for reconstructing our past, everyone wants them to be properly preserved and protected from damage of natural and human factors. Here, we shall look at the role of
common people in preserving and protecting the archaeological heritages. There are international conventions and national laws for their better preservation and protection, but without serious concern of the common and local people, it is not always possible to preserve them. This present paper aims at addressing the archaeological material as heritage in Northeast India and the role of the common people in better preservation and protection.

Archaeological Heritage

The discipline of archaeology deals with the past human cultural material in its totality in a general sense. In other words, archaeology is nothing but studying the traces or evidences of past human activity. Earlier the discipline of archaeology was confined in collecting archaic looking materials out of curiosity, enthusiasm and as a common habit of collecting them as prestige goods. But, in the present context, archaeology has emerged as a more advanced scientific discipline, which is not just confined in studying the past cultures, but also understanding the importance of these cultural materials as a base of our ‘Cultural heritage’. This cultural heritage includes everything related to human culture which we have inherited from the past and continuing in the present (not always) and expected them to be continued in our future. The term heritage is defined as ‘anything which someone wishes to conserve or collect’. So, the archaeological materials are the heritage of human society, and primarily related with the public concern and interest. Presently, the ‘Public Archaeological’ issues have gained considerable popularity due to the emerging importance of preserving and protecting cultural properties, and their management. Moreover, these cultural heritage sites have been used as an attraction for tourist further contributing towards the economic growth of the region.

Prehistoric Archaeological Heritage of Northeast India

As far as the archaeology in Northeast India is concerned, it has a history of almost 140 years of long duration of research starting with the discovery of stone tools by Sir John Lubbock, reporting the evidence of prehistoric culture from this region in *Athenaeum* of London, in 1867 for the first time. Subsequently, several British administrators and Assamese researchers have reported many prehistoric stone implements from different parts of Northeast India in the pre-independence era. After the establishment of the Department of Anthropology at the Gauhati University, many scholars has explored the archaeological potentiality and contributed towards understanding the past cultural background and development of this region.

Looking at the recent developments in ‘World Prehistory’ and discoveries the evidences of early human presence and his activities in
different geographical areas of the old world, it can be argued that Northeast India might have acted as natural passageways for various early human migrations (Hazarika, 2007). This region may have acted as a possible mid-way from Africa to Southeast Asia through South Asia for the eastward dispersal of early humans, possibly by Homo erectus/ergaster (First Out of Africa) and Anatomically Modern Homo sapiens (Second Out of Africa) during the Pleistocene geological age (roughly within the time bracket of 18 lakhs to 10 thousand years before present) with Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) cultures. In this period, our ancestors were mainly hunter-gatherers, and they were mainly dependent on hunting wild animals and gathering and collecting wild plant foods for their subsistence. They were living in caves, rock-shelters, under the trees and had to face different obstacles, such as rain, flood, wind, danger of wild animals etc. They were using tools made of stone, bone and tree branch etc. for their various activities such as digging tubers, hunting animals, cutting meat, scraping, cracking bones by marrows etc. Due to the perishable nature of organic materials such as tree branch, bone etc. used by our early ancestors to make tools and implements, we hardly get their traces in present day landscape. As stone is a hard material and damages comparatively slowly, we find huge amount the tools made on stones by our early ancestors in a prehistoric archaeological site. In fact, stone tools are the main source of knowing the life ways of early man. On the importance of stone tools of the prehistoric period V. Gordon Childe comments that “Even the simplest tool made out of a broken bough or a chipped stone is the fruit of long experience- of trials and errors, impressions noticed, remembered, and compared. The skill to make it has been acquired by observation, by recollection, and by experiment. It may seem an exaggeration, but it is yet true to say that any tool is an embodiment of science”.

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 several animals and plants under their control, which finally lead 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 the new ways of life with new stone tool technology related to food production, more specifically agriculture. Northeast India plays a major role in the developments of these early agricultural communities, and Hazarika (in press) have recorded several plants and animals which are
very likely to be domesticated in this part of Indian subcontinent, plants such as rice, citrus, banana, mango, yams and taro etc. and several animals such as cattle species, elephants, pigs, silkworms etc. Looking at the great varieties of wild, intermediate and domesticated rice found in this region (Hazarika 2006a and 2006b), it is very likely that early domestication of rice might have occurred in this area and this region might have been very important area for emergence and development of early farming communities based on rice agriculture. The archaeological record of this period, specifically the shouldered celts and the tanged axes and the cord-impressed potteries found in different localities of Northeast India indicate close affinities with the material found in South China and Southeast Asia. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the Neolithic polished axes are regarded as the sacred Vajrashila, (axe of Indra, the Hindu deity) or thunderbolt by many communities and it is believed that these axes posses the power of curing disease and used as an medicinal properties and objects of charm. So, besides their importance given by the archaeologists, as the most important archaeological record for understanding the Neolithic culture of Northeast India, great value is also paid to these objects and considered as cultural heritage by the common people.

Another interesting cultural phenomenon of our early ancestors is the tradition of erecting stone megaliths. These megalithic structures are present in many parts of Northeast India and acts as rich archaeological heritage. More, interestingly this practice is a still living practice among many communities and closely associated with their social-cultural and religious life. This tradition of erecting stone (also in wood) in the memory of personalities or major events, indicating respect of a particular society to the past, can tell us the artistic manifestation of past memories of a particular society, besides acting as source material for historical reconstruction.

**Historic Archaeological Heritage of Northeast India**

The ancient period of Assam witnesses emergence of several political and cultural centres (Borah 2007) in different parts of Northeast India. The archaeological remains have gained considerable importance in the recent years in reconstructing the 'Ancient history' of Northeast India. The explorations and excavations at the sites of Ambari (Dhavalikar 1973) and Guwahati, the ancient centre of Kamrupa kingdom (Das, 2007), Dhansiri-Doyang valley (Dutta 2000-2001), Arunachal Pradesh (Ashraf, 1997-98), etc. reveals rich archaeological heritage with art and architectural pieces, ancient settlements, religious sites, potteries etc. The inscriptive, 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 internmixing of two different racial elements of Aryan (from the west) and Mongolian (from the east), for which this region is often referred as a melting pot of various cultures of different racial background.

During the ‘Medieval period’ of Assam, one can observe tremendous developments in art and culture under the patronage of the Tai-Ahom rulers. The best known six hundred years of rule in Assam by this Tai group of people coming from Yunnan, East Asia in the beginning of 13th century contributed in a large extent in constructing / re-constructing most of the cultural heritage properties, such as temples, tanks, fortified cities, palaces, ramparts which are seen today in standing position. One of the very interesting and important aspects of the Tai-Ahoms is the tradition of constructing Moi-dams, the holly burial ground, comparable with the magnificence of the pyramids of Egypt. The sacred hillock of Charaideo has several tombs of Tai-Ahom Kings and Queens with their unique architectural splendour. There are many of these Moi-dams scattered in many places of Assam indicating respects to the ancestors and the tradition of preserving the past. Again, it is interesting that this is a still living practice among many of the Tai-Ahom families of Assam. This is one of the very unique tradition which to be recorded and preserved / protected not only due to its importance as a cultural property, but also as an indication of continuing of our age old practice of respecting our past.

Water tanks, popularly known as 'pukhuri' in Assamese language, play an important role in the society and life style of the people of Assam. Basically, the water tanks are meant for preserving and storing water, found throughout entire Assam. There are community tanks dug in most of the settlements, especially near the Namghars, the Assamese community prayer halls, temples, which are considered as sacred water tanks. These community water tanks are named as 'Rajohua pukhuri' and are used only for communal ceremonial purpose as the name indicates. Some of the water tanks has very long historical background and were dug during Ancient and Medieval period. These water tanks are popularly known as 'Raja dimia pukhuri' (water tanks of king's age), and sometimes they are named in relations to a specific historical events and specific king or dynasty. The Dighali pukhuri near the famous archaeological site of Ambari in Guwahati is one of the well-known water tanks, and is believed to be connected with the Brahmaputra river in ancient time and can be considered as a source of history of
water conservation and management during the ancient period. The water tanks dug during the Ahom rule are very well known for its high volume and the historical background. The Shivasagar pukhuri, near the Shiva Daul, Jayasagar pukhuri near Jaya Daul etc. are important sources of Ahom history and serves as very attractive tourist spots. There are several water tanks related to the life and culture of Srimanta Sankardeva and Sri Madhavadeva, great neo-vaishnavite saints of Assam. The water tanks became a part and parcel of the Namghar and Satra premises, communal prayer halls and monasteries of Assam. The tradition of constructing water tanks is also a unique cultural heritage of Assam and need serious concern of the academicians as well as common people for better preservation and protection.

Preservation of Archaeological Heritage: The Role of Common People

Comparing the growth and development of archaeological research with other parts of India, Northeast Indian situation is far from satisfactory. And we still lack a full-fledged academic department of archaeology at university level in entire Northeast India, which we believe to be one of the main causes for limiting archaeological research further effecting the important issues of protection and preservation of our archaeological heritage of Northeast India.

Most of the cultural properties of the ancient period are not in standing positions and most of these archaeological sites are under threat of different ways of decay. Most of these ancient monuments were collapsed due to tectonic activities, as this region is one of most tectonically disturbed zone. There can be many causes of decaying these archaeological monuments such as;

(1) Climatic causes: rainfall, wind, floods etc.
(2) Geological causes: earthquakes, land-slides etc.
(3) Biological causes: effects of different bacteria, fungi, insects etc.
(4) Man made causes: vandalism, pollution, thefts etc. and moreover the neglects toward the cultural heritages by the common people.

Most of the archaeological monuments in standing position were built during the Ahom rule in the medieval period and most of them are under the protection and preservation of the Archaeological Survey of India and Directorate of Archaeology, Govt. of Assam.

Most of the people think that archaeological materials are some specific things such as ancient temples, monuments, coins, art and architectural pieces etc. So, very less attention is paid to the other materials related to man and his past activities such as potteries, stone tools, ramparts
etc. From the very definition of archaeology it is clear that all the material remains relating to past human activities come under the domain of archaeology and all are the part and parcel of our cultural heritage. So, starting with the stone artefacts made by our early ancestors, pottery fragments, iron implements, megalithic tombs, moat-dams and outstanding historic buildings are very important for understanding our heritage. In this regard, one has to remember that there should be political and administrative support in protecting these archaeological heritages and on the other hand, the concern of the local people is very important particularly in the Indian context and has a major role to play in this regard.

The following initiatives can be taken for promoting and developing awareness for our cultural properties:

(1) As children are the future of a nation, initiative should be taken for building respect and affection to the cultural properties among them. To aware them about these heritages, school teachers can bring the students to the archaeological sites and explain the value and importance on the site.

(2) Some kind of 'Heritage Walks' (guided walks covering archaeological sites) can be conducted through time to time by which interested people can be benefited and these heritage walk can be included with 'packaged tour'. It can increase the scope of attracting tourists and develop the region too.

(3) Depending on the situation, site museums can also be build and even a small museum can be build at the local school and college premise itself.

(4) Permanent exhibitions can be organised presenting the local heritage at the site museum.

(5) As we all know, recording the cultural properties is very important aspect for understanding the cultural landscape of a region, and we need to record the archaeological heritage of each and every region of Northeast India, so that further research and preservation can be done. In this regard, college teachers can take an initiative to give assignments to the students for recording and bringing out different material remains of prehistoric / historic importance. It can tremendously contribute not only to the subject, but also to the cultural heritage of the region and as well as it will act as a tool of increasing awareness among the students.

(6) There are many cultural properties related to the Ahom period in almost every villages of Assam and these are with the descendants of the Ahom royal family, officers and in many cases with the common people. In most
of the cases these cultural properties are kept at their household just for the shake of keeping them and for just a simple reason “they are from their forefathers”. This simple-looking reason has a great value, and it can serve our basic need of preservation and protection. But, in many cases, we observe that in course of time, these cultural properties are damaged due to carelessness and natural causes and lost forever. So, the organisation such as Tai Ahom Sahitya Sabha (in other areas of Northeast India the related organisations) can initiate awareness programmes and explain the value of these cultural items to the local people and properly record in regional basis (as we have such organisation in regional level) and ask help for conservation and protection from the concerned departments.

In many cases, it is observed that if these cultural properties are found in a private land and belongs to a specific family, the owner feels them as his / her personal properties and not interested in giving any information about the material. Here, initiatives to be taken to let him / her understand the value of these materials as cultural heritage of the entire region and take care in scientific ways.

In a geographically large country like India, it is not always possible to protect and conserve each and every material by the Government departments. So, the local people and local society has a great role to play for better preservation with scientific treatment of conservation with the help of professional and Govt. bodies. The materials can be kept at their own household too with scientific treatment. The Directorate of Archives under Department of Culture invites applications for funding for projects on on-site recording, conservation and preservation of ancient texts, manuscripts etc. and there are several schemes of the Archaeological Survey of India and Govt. of India on these preservation and conservation issues.

Looking at the uniqueness of our archaeological heritage in Northeast India, it's our duty to understand its unique values for our own identity as we all know that the identity of a nation is largely based on the past culture and civilization. So, we should always remember the fact that archaeology and archaeological heritage is not only for the Archaeologists, but they are the common cultural properties of a nation and the common people has the major role to play in maintaining, preserving and protecting our rich archaeological heritage.
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