

Understanding **North East India**

Contemporary Cultural Perspectives



K. Jose SVD

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K. Jose SVD



in Collaboration with *SANSKRITI-NEICR* (SVD)
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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
1. Introduction: The Cultural Spectrum of North East India	1
2. Religions and the Sense of the Sacred in North East India	8
3. Social Exclusion and Conflict in North East India: Cultural Perspectives	19
4. Tribal Cultures and Christianity in North East India	30
5. Resource Management in North East India for Sustainable Development	40
6. Tribal Development in Assam: Stakeholders, NGOs & Government	48
7. Understanding <i>Rabha</i> Culture through the Prism of <i>Baikho</i> Festival	66
8. Migration to the Tea Plantations of Assam: Socio-Cultural Implications	77
9. Cultural Symbols of Assam: <i>Japi</i> , <i>Sarai</i> and <i>Gamocho</i>	94
10. Cultural Change among the <i>Nyishi</i> of Arunachal Pradesh	102
11. Shifting Cultivation in Arunachal Pradesh	116
12. Post Script: Pathways to Peace and Development	125
<i>Index</i>	132

Foreword

It is indeed with a sense of joy and satisfaction that as the first SANSKRITI Foundation Fellow of North Eastern Institute of Culture and Religion (NEICR), Guwahati I am writing the FOREWORD of a book authored by Fr. K. Jose SVD, the Founder Director of NEICR. This institution is young but has begun to have big dreams. Towards the realization of those dreams they have started moving in a modest way with a handful of associates, all being sincere in their efforts. As an anthropologist I agreed to write the Foreword for his book essentially because Jose is a friend of long standing and in the years of our association I have never failed to be impressed by his originality, sincere efforts and insight. However, I am grateful to him and his institute for this honour. It gives me an opportunity to acknowledge my own personal gratitude to NEICR also. Keeping the ethno-cultural profile of a vast territory called North East India, I take the latitude of introducing the area that makes it distinct from other parts of the country.

The North East India, the land of seven sisters and one brother, crisscrossed with a host of mountain ranges, is buttressed by a number of rivers and rivulets. With its unique landscape and varied human surface encapsulating immense hospitality in the lush green cover, today it comprises eight states that have only one per cent border with other state of India and the rest fringes with Bangladesh, China, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. These eight states comprise about five per cent of the geographical canvas and eight per cent of the human surface of our country. Ethnologically and linguistically

the North East India has historic links with southwest China and the Mon-Khmer group of peoples in Myanmar and Thailand. Encompassing almost two hundred and some odd ethnic groups with varied background of language families and dialects, the area is marked with varying degree of cultural practices and religion. Since the dim ages of the past a host of tribal groups have carved out a special position in this land due to their traditional cultural affiliation and their social commitment in the culturally rooted age old customs, culture and heritage. Since time immemorial they have led secluded life in isolation not only from the remaining landmass and population surface of the country but also from each other in many respects. For the last few centuries' large-scale migration and immigration into their territories have brought fissure in their traditional mode of life affecting their society and culture. In the entire area there has been transcendence of parochialism over nationalism, sub-nationalism and regionalism. This has in a way affected the level of tolerance among each other and the people took time to adjust to the avenues meant for them through planned development.

Ethnologically the Mongoloids formed a most noteworthy racial element in the population of North East India. The history of the arrival of the various Mongoloid groups, speaking dialects of the Sino-Tibetan speech family, into India is not known, though it appears that their presence in India is noted by the tenth century B.C. The result of their participation in the history and culture of North East India has been just their assimilation and absorption, in civilization and language, accompanied by mixture in blood with other peoples. Where there has been no occasion of racial admixture, the Mongoloid types have remained unaltered, although the language may have gone and the culture is that of the Brahminical Hinduism. With the single exception of the Khasi and the Jaintia of Meghalaya, the Mongoloid peoples are all speakers of languages and dialects belonging to the Sino-Tibetan speech family.

Linguistically the ethnic groups in North East India are classified under the Tibeto-Burman groups comprising (1) the Himalayan group of dialects spoken in Sikkim like the Newari, Magar, Gurung, Murmi, Sunwari, Kiranti, Lepcha and the Toto all of which are pure Tibeto-Burman; (2) the North Assam group of Tibeto-Burman speeches like the Aka or Hursso, Miri, Abor, Dafla and the Mishmi; (3) The Assam-Burmesse group comprising the Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Kachari, Tipra and a few more; (4) the Naga dialects like the Ao, Angami, Sema, Tangkhul, Songtem, Konyak, Lotha, Mao and the Kabui; (5) the Kuki-Chin speeches of Manipur, Tripura and the Lushei Hills, the most important of which is Meithei or Manipur, which is quite an advanced literary speech. The Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan speaking tribes appears to have formed an area of dispersion in tracts to the west and north of Tibet from where they began to spread towards the east and the south. It seems probable that some of these Tibeto-Burmans had penetrated within the frontiers of India, either along the southern slopes of the Himalayas, through Assam or by way of Tibet.

Comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura the entire area forms the canvas of north east India accommodating a host of ethnic groups most of which contribute to tribal ethnicity. A host of myths, legends and folk tales supplement their origin of creation to this land. Though almost a considerable number of these demonstrate indigenous narrations, yet a few affiliate themselves with greater Sanskritic canopy, particularly with the Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The probable reasons behind such affiliations might have been due to the growth of elitism among a few communities where there was state formation and there was a historical necessity to affiliate themselves to Hinduism through the process of Sanskritisation, finally ascribing the achieve a social berth with the other Hindu kings of rest of India. This ascription also gave them an opportunity to create marital links with other

Royal families of the country as well as of other neighbouring countries like Nepal and Myanmar. This continued over centuries in erstwhile states like Tripura, Assam (then Ahom) and Manipur all of whom identified themselves as Hindu kings shedding their indigenous tribal identities. Though it was an ideal situation, yet it did not affect the entire bulk of communities in actual practice who rather retained indigenous identities. The latter groups probably consolidated their position in the tribal world of north east India where cohesiveness and corporateness stabilized their ethnic identities with core cultural markers maintaining unique life styles. During the period between the fifteenth century and the twentieth century a number of feudal principalities had flourished all along north east India. With the achievement of national independence in 1947, the princely states got merged with the Indian Union and there were no more kings in feudal states and they were treated as commoners. Though many of them maintained the title of kings, which is still in practice even after more than six decades of independence, yet in reality they get the privilege and access to the country's resources as a common man gets in this soil.

The national government of independent India brought new challenges in the arena of tribal world with particular emphasis in North East India. Special policies were framed for the tribal people with the intention of bringing them to the mainstream of the society. The thought that germinated more than half a century ago seems to be still dormant even after so much of globalization in all affairs in this country. Much water has flown along the Brahmaputra but many of the questions have remained unanswered. The avenues for protection of socio-cultural and religious practices of various ethnic groups have remained unattended. They should have been given an effective way in running their own institutions. There were legitimate fears of loss of identity and the demands of various ethnic groups for increasingly more autonomy continues even today which needs to be addressed at the pan Indian level in a very pragmatic way. The local

culture, language and social ethos need to be respected without being ethnocentric. The region needs to have proper governance to come out of this painful transition.

Of late, the Government of India had been able to promote tourism in the northeast and the attention is drawn towards the Ministry of Development for North East India to look after the affairs of the North East India. But what prompts the government to think of this region for promoting such ideals? What had been the state of living of the people of this region for centuries together? What had been the developmental attributes meant for them since independence? Probably there are many facets to these queries, which may give birth to a lot of paradoxes.

Ethnically speaking probably no other endeavour could integrate the tribal world with importance to their customs and practices except the influence of Christianity. The history of Christianity is only few centuries old in this region. But this has created a landmark in the ethnic mosaic of the region. This was the first major step towards the development of indigenous communities. The breakthrough created emergence of academic institutions, social profile groups and so on that have a bearing on the communities. The way Christianity penetrated here respected local social customs and manners and many of the local rituals were adhered to. Religion only acted as a canopy for the people for social protection and each community had the access to pursue their social customs and manners.

In the parlance of social science traditionally a tribal community subscribes to animism. The other major religions that have engulfed the tribal form of animism are Hinduism and Buddhism. Almost in all states of North East India one finds the presence of all the said religions. For Hinduism one can easily ascribe it to 'Hindu method of tribal absorption' as has been rightly said by the famous Gandhian anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose about seven decades ago. For Buddhism it was a partial proselytization under the influence of

neighbouring countries either through immigration or through induction.

Despite all such processes of social change, the communities in North East India retained their unique cultural way of life subscribing to any religion they preferred to adhere to. It was never a religion that brought fissure among communities here, rather religion and culture formed a cohesive bond to identify themselves as a part and parcel of North East India. Under this backdrop, the stewardship of K. Jose has taken an initiative to understand the life and culture of people living in this part of the country. A part of his endeavour is maintained through the SVD initiatives for promoting education and fostering peace and the other part ties to decipher the culture and customs of the people through anthropological initiatives as initiated a century ago by Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt SVD. Today it is no denying a fact that *SANSKRIT-NEICR* has not only emerged out as a nodal research centre for conducting anthropological researches in North East India with a pan Indian identity but also one can find noteworthy contributions from scholars belonging to the rest of the country. Of late, it has gained an international media coverage which speaks of the ethos, values and practices of a small region that had been neglected so far by many as an inaccessible region. Probably the entire canvas of North East India still stands as a unique example of unity amidst diversity where the rhythm of unity echoes with the tunes of flute, reverberate with the melodies of nature, and murmurs with the spontaneity of gentle cool breeze.

While penetrating into the outer shell of the North East India, the author has framed colonnades and chambers of the cultural spectrum of North East India, religions and the sense of the sacred in North East India, cultural perspectives of social exclusion and conflict in northeast India, tribalism, Christianity, resource management for sustainable development, tribal development in Assam, *Baikho* Festival of the *Rabha*, socio-cultural implications of migration to the tea planters of Assam, cultural symbols of Assam like the

Japi, Sarai and Gamocha, cultural change among the *Nyishi* of Arunachal Pradesh, shifting cultivation in Arunachal Pradesh, and pathways to peace and development as a post script.

As I understand Jose's examination of ideas and interest relating them to the social background and intellectual history is probably a necessity to make the work more objective. For the very awareness of subjectivity—and the areas and forms in which the ideas have occurred—his present attempt is a step forward achieving greater objectivity. Jose has indulged in an intellectual problem; partly as a moral one: an intellectual effort to sum up sufficient willingness of the people whose lives are involved in these facts. In hope his work will not only be useful to researchers and students of social science, but also it will help planners, administrators and policy makers others who have a bent of mind to understand North East India.

Dr. Gautam Kumar Bera

Sanskriti

Foundation Fellow,

North Eastern Institute of Culture and Religion,
Guwahati

Preface

The present book, based on a prolonged reflection on various facets of land and people of North East India, is a gift to young friends of scholarly fraternity. In scribbling these lines a number of acclaimed scholars have ignited my mind. They made me to think, see beyond the reach of my eyes. This is a tribute to them and their undying spirit of optimism, courage and perseverance in the arena of academic pursuits.

When the SVD (*Societas Verbi Divini*) International Society (of which the present author is a life member), founded *Anthropos* in Germany with a mandate to do Anthropological researches on the people and cultures around the world, the founder director, late Prof. Wilhelm Schmidt SVD exhorted the collaborating fraternity to know academically and scientifically the people with whom they lived and worked. They were requested to keep memoirs of important events consisting of cultural significance in its various ramifications. As years rolled by their meticulously scribbled manuals formed a wealth of data on the land and people whom they have known for a prolonged period of time.

Much later, in India, when the Institute of Indian Culture, Mumbai, began its preliminary research and documentation works under the great doyen of late Prof. Stephen Fuchs SVD over the last 25 years and more that Institute, which is affiliated to the University of Mumbai; stands tall with a considerable number of original publications, and a rich

library, accommodating a large collection of priceless books, manuscripts and journals.

It was a similar story when *Sanskriti* - Centre for Applied Cultural Research, Indore, under the directorship of late Dr. S. Lourdasamy SVD, pitched its tent among the indigenous people of central India to collect primary data with special reference to their folklore. Eventually, they were translated and published for the posterity of knowledge. Indeed, it was a rare initiative in a largely unfamiliar land of Madhya Pradesh, inspiring further new stories to grow along its line.

The land of North East India with a great expanse of geographical stretch filled with vibrant and colourful people paints owe inspiring spectrum of cultures in its own uniqueness. Yet, it has passed through some of the most turbulent years in its history. There were times when human spirit seemed to have collapsed under the weight of pessimism, lethargy, hopelessness defeat and despair. There were also times when things seemed impossible to redeem - probably those were occasions when we focused on the corrupt and unruly, weak and profane. But we realized sooner than later that we cannot merely observe the world with detached pessimism, we need to look beyond the clouds and make efforts to paint a rainbow ourselves.

How do we understand a nation, a people, for that matter a region of immense divergence and convergence? North East India has a very vibrant culture and history, so fascinating on one hand and so bewildering on the other. Observing the course of events and interpreting them in the right perspective is a daunting task to say the least. A cultural integration of a people, a healing of painful memories, appropriating a brave heart to chart out a new destiny calls for valour not merely an intellectual one but an awakening of the inner genius in individuals and communities.

High cultures have to emerge out of the folk wisdom, indigenous literature, symbols, myths and deep sighs of aspirations which find expression in song and dance, festivals

and religious observations. So the cultural confluence in the region or country is enriched by a number of factors in a society. We are invited to understand the soul of a community by observing, participating and disseminating the time tested values of our valiant ancestors whose untiring efforts made us what and who we are.

Individuality and creativity of cultures often is taken as threat to other individuals and groups. But should they be so? Uniformity always need not be the norm for arriving at unity; or diversity every time need not threaten and challenge us. As cultures are always evolving to become relevant and flourishing in a particular environment, specificities have their room for relevance as long as they do not choke creativity, agility and spirit of optimism.

May I kindly salute the innumerable learned men and women who contributed to a broader understanding and appreciation of cultures and religions of this region? Hence, this small book in your hands is a humble effort to trigger your imagination, to forge ahead in thinking, and chart out a path in understanding the multifaceted and vibrant cultural heritage of a far flung part of the country - the North East India.

But, North East India can never be understood by us in its entirety. For that matter even a static thing is never understood fully and entirely, then how about a gigantic ocean of cultures and peoples in this region? Yet, definitely certain overarching themes can be identified and studied. This volume is one of such efforts in this direction.

At this point of time I will put on record my thanks to Archbishop Thomas Menampampil SDB, who never failed to inspire me with special reference to the cause of *Sanskriti* (North Eastern Institute of Culture and Religion, Guwahati) and its Research Initiatives. My sincere thanks are due to Dr. Gautam Kumar Bera, a social-cultural anthropologist of substance, who has kindly consented to write an encouraging and thought provoking Foreword.

A word of appreciation is also due to the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) who provided all the necessary opportunities to enhance my academic training; and to my beloved parents, brothers and sisters in whose love and fellowship I am nurtured; to Manoj Antony SVD the Assistant Director of SANSKRITI, a constant encouragement and support, Omsons Publishers, Delhi for their timely work, the people of North East India who not only fascinate me with their untiring enthusiasm and spirit of accommodation; all the professors and scholars particularly those who encourage the cause of research, and agencies who partially sponsored annual national seminars initiated by SANSKRITI - NEICR, Guwahati.

Yvonne Pereira SSpS, the Consulting Editor of this volume deserves big thanks for fine tuning the write ups and to all others who made this book a reality. I hope in the near future similar themes will be studied by SANSKRITI Research Team and other scholarly fraternity, so that understanding North East India becomes a reality step by step. Thanks everybody and God bless you.

K. Jose SVD

in institutions, thought patterns and material objects'. E. B. Tylor, explains culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief art, moral, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society' (Cosser and Rosenberg, 1981:18). Culture includes all the elements of a person's mature endowment that one has acquired through conscious learning. However, we observe culture as universal in human experience, yet local or regional in its manifestations; it is stable, however is also dynamic and manifests in constant change (Herskovits, 1974: 305).

II

The North East India though politically part of India, is culturally and ethnically a world apart. North East India accounts for 8 per cent of the total geographical area of the country and has 3.88 per cent of the total population. There are approximately 300 distinct tribes who speak around 400 dialects. It is estimated that 32 million people live in North East India, among whom 9.1 million are made up of indigenous people. At present, tribals are in majority in four of the seven states. In Mizoram, of the total population of 94 per cent, most of the inhabitants are tribal whereas Nagaland has 84 per cent of tribal population and is inhabited by 13 major tribes and sub-tribes speaking different dialects. The state of Meghalaya has 81 per cent of the population as tribal and is noted for its three leading matrilineal tribal groups. Arunachal Pradesh alone accounts for 26 major tribal groups and these constitute about 70 per cent of the total population. Tripura is the home of 19 different scheduled tribes, and they constitute 29 per cent of the state population. Manipur is the abode of 28 tribal groups, which makes approximately 28 per cent of the state population. Tribes living in Assam are categorized into 14 hill tribes and 9 plains tribes and the state accounts for merely 11 percent of the tribal population. Thus the entire North East India is cast into a magnificent intermingling of cultures.

Like the rest of India, the North Eastern section of India is a mosaic of cultures. It has been the meeting place of a variety of cultures, religions, ethnic and linguistic groups. There are

Austroloid, Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan people living here. The various communities living in North East India basically face two challenges. One certainly is an effort to carving out a common North East Indian identity. The second is a challenge of resolving the interregional socio-economic and cultural differences between various individual communities. Their identity revolves around the community or clan land, forests which are common property, resource and economy which provide a unique rhythm for their life (Kamei, 1997:79).

The hills and plains of North East India have been occupied by different streams of Mongoloid people who came from the north and the east at different points of history well before the colonial rule. It is generally agreed that the Mongoloids, once occupied practically the whole of North East India who eventually settled in different ecological settings crystallized into distinct tribal societies. Even in the case of Assam plains, the early rulers were Indo-Mongoloids of various dynasties spanning a time period from fifth to mid-eleventh century. While the hills and mountains of North-East India remained outside the orbit of Hindu influence and caste-based social formation, the history of Assam plains shows that by the twelfth century local kings of Mongoloid origin became Hindus. Then, there is the classic example of social transformation and subsequent contribution in shaping the regional society by the *Ahoms* who ruled over Assam for merely 600 years, from 1228 A.D. till the advent of the British in 1826. In pre-*Ahom* period, the social formations in Assam were predominantly tribal in nature. But through the development of a centralized power and state religion, the different ethnic groups were united and the Assamese as a wider social formation formed under the leadership of Shankaradeva in the sixteenth century, played a significant role.

The pattern of social change clearly reveals that change is a multifaceted process involved with innumerable causes and consequences. In a society, change may be rapid, if the society generates an internal dynamism encompassing all spheres of culture. At the same time, change may be slow and even imperceptible, if it gets stagnated by socially caused inertia which thwarts internal dynamism and arrests progress (Ahmad, 1986). Social change occurs,

in all societies irrespective of their structure, compactness, integrity and stage of development, etc. The tribal societies of North East India is also witnessing social change due to a variety of factors. In addition, with the increasing tempo of development in the sphere of education and the economy, the dimension and spirit of acculturation have been gaining, thereby boosting the entire process of social change. However, the pattern of social change throughout the Region is in no way uniform.

North East India as a whole is surrounded by countries such as - Bangladesh, Bhutan, Tibet, China and Myanmar. A major section of the people of Assam, Tripura and Manipur live in the valleys and plains; Arunachal, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland are mainly hills. These states are further brought together under a political arrangement known as the North Eastern Council in which Sikkim is also included. All these eight states together form a cultural spectrum irrespective of its individual uniqueness, differences and specificities.

The social structure of North East India has emerged out of various integrations, for example, the Naga among the Indo-Burmese; and the Khasi and the Jaintia among the Austro-Asiatics. The Constitution of India categorizes them as Scheduled Tribes; they practice the traditional or primal religion. On the other hand, in the subsequent period, majority of the people living in the plains of Assam, Manipur and Tripura are sanskritized. In recent years there are several movements among them to rediscover their tribal origin. For example, the Meithei of Manipur, who were claiming themselves as high caste Hindu, are now affirming that their traditional roots are basically tribal in both culture and religion.

Communitarian dimension of celebration and worship patterns permeates all aspects of life in North East India. To be truly human is to belong to the whole community, including the ancestors and creation. Therefore, the active participation in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community is paramount. A distinctive characteristic of tribal religion is that it doesn't have sacred scripture or scriptures as other religions do. The religious ethos is contained in the people's hearts, minds, oral history and

rituals. Their religion is instead centered on earth/creation. In the tribal worldview, one cannot make a clear-cut distinction between the sacred and secular, between religious and non-religious, or the spiritual and material areas of life. There is a sense of sacred and a cosmic oneness in their overall life and thinking pattern.

North East India is the most densely administered region of the country. Though the whole region was encompassed under the banner of Assam, the emergence of new states generated hope; there were tremendous job opportunities and the explosion of expectations. It is necessary to have planned human resource utilization and to allow the percolation of resources to the lowest level of the society. There is also the urgent need of reform in the existing system of education. The same is not done in spite of loud pronouncements. The education generated hope when there was enough scope for employment of the white collar jobs seekers. Apart from this other factors, such as heavy and ever-increasing number of drop outs from the schools also is alarming. The academicians and the universities need to join hands in overhauling the present system of education.

Human development, environmental upgradation, improving the quality of life and recognizing the aspirations of the younger generation are all major concerns in North East India. Certainly economic development is a tangible parameter for a vibrant community and region. The number of rebellious movements will point at the failure to meet their economic needs. The region rich with resources of coal, oil, tea, water etc. should bring in hope. Abundance of natural resources in itself will not bring economic sustenance. There is a need to materialize the vision for this vast region with immense potentialities. We often complain that the funds received by north eastern region of our country is far less than what is required for our multifaceted engagements related to development and prosperity; but one cannot forget the fact that the central funds and amenities remain often underutilized, and larger chunk of it is siphoned off with no remorse of conscience.

III

Although North East is under the banner of the larger India, the socio-cultural and emotional distance remains between the people of North East India and the rest of the country. A major factor affecting this condition is the political leadership which was handed over to the local leaders who found it a challenge to respond to the party politics of national ideologies on the one hand and local concerns of North East India on the other. Most of the time, decisions which affect North East India were made in the national capital, which the people of the Region resented. Gradually, the socio-cultural and emotional distance found concrete expression in the formation of various movements for autonomy and self-rule. In course of time these groups who gave a lead in this were known as insurgent groups. Ineffectiveness of peaceful methods to achieve their ends gave rise to armed assertion or insurgency. Extortion or donations started in a small way for survival of insurgent groups has now become the biggest money making activity in the Region. This also contributed for identity crisis in North East India.

The multiethnic and multicultural setting of India and India's struggle to define its nationhood since the nationalist movement provided a platform for the development of ethno-nationalism and other forms of identity-quest. Closely linked to, and in some way encapsulated in, the idea of ethno-nationalism is a more popular political terminology called "regionalism", which is prevalent in many parts of India. We may say that this region is pulled asunder by regional and ethno-national feelings and movements, because it has not settled the notion of its identity in a manner convincing to all the people-groups within. India as a "nation" also suffers acute identity crisis. Added to this the large scale immigration and its effects of land alienation has adversely affected the economy; this has also invited many cross-cultural conflicts and violence.

IV

Land and natural resources, customary laws, and cultural identity, inter-cultural living, deep sense of the sacred, community centered living, openness to face new challenges, and human

resources are the strengths of the North East India. All the same, we have a number of areas which are not so positive and life enhancing as well. As Austroloid, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan and Dravidian features of the people are naturally accepted, Mongoloid characteristics of this part of the country need to be accepted and cherished. We do not need uniformity always to foster unity, do we?

Unemployment and frustration have shrewdly invited young minds to take up arms and violence; yet violence will not enhance peace or development. It is the ingenuity of communities to take responsibility and safeguard local interests and simultaneously open up themselves to changes that will bring in the desired results, since changes are inevitable for any forward looking society. One cannot wait to welcome development and then give up armed struggle. Peace promotion and development initiatives have to go hand in hand. No doubt, communities are in transition. What is required is to recapture the original genius of the community and move ahead inspiring others and working harder than ever to reach the desired goal. We need the audacity to read the history of our communities critically and be part of a history creatively responding to the emerging new challenges, and then the cultural spectrum of North East India will shine as never before.

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