

Tribes of North-East India

Issues and Challenges



richi K. Medhi, R.P. Athparia, K. Jose SVD

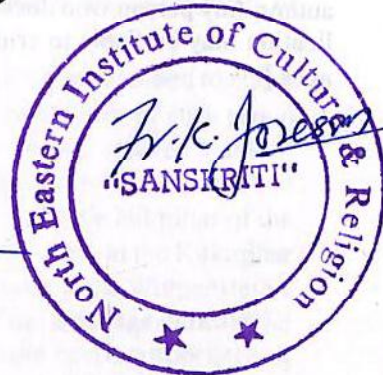
Tribes of North-East India:

Issues and Challenges

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Presented to
Prof. A.C. Sinha



OMSONS PUBLICATIONS

4379/4 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, NEWDELHI 110002

Foreword

A problem of conceptualization apart, the 'tribal question' in India today is one of identity seeking redefinition, reconstruction and reorientation. Predicated on the well-known clauses of our constitution that guarantees equality before law and an equitable distribution of wealth among all its citizens, this new quest for identity (or identities) often finds itself at odds with forms of power or their remnants comprising the fabric of our nation-state. While romantic primitivism with its valorization of 'nature' has informed the theoretical grid of a large body of studies on the tribes, there have also been attempts at totalizing scientific studies geared to the end of creating a body of knowledge dedicated to economic development. If emotions hold sway in romantic celebration of 'nature', scientism of the kind evident in bureaucratic mapping of cultures, steers clear of the larger and more important issues of otherness. At stake is the issue of preservation of identity amidst the prospects and imperatives of development

The bewildering variety of our tribes refuses to be clubbed together as a well-defined 'object of study', the self-incurred limits of each group defining one's separateness from the other on the charted path of development. The emerging Bodo community of Assam has invoked Wittgenstein to outline the 'limits' of their world. On the left pillar of the entrance to Bodofa Upendranath Brahma Park at Dotma in the Kokrajhar district of Assam is inscribed a well-known quote from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'The limits of my language indicate the limits of my world'. Hardly, if ever, has Wittgenstein been appropriated as a mouthpiece for tribal identity. Local identity seeking transnational legitimation may, therefore, involve attention to some other ideas of the great philosopher at the same time. 'The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of the language (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of my world'

Tribes of North-east India

The time-worn metaphors for unity in the socio-political space are those of the melting pot (evoking the witches' cauldron), salad-bowl, stew or mosaic that American sociologists have used for nearly a century. In our sixteenth-century saint-poet Sankaradeva's Assamese rendering of the *Srmadbhagavatapuranam*, unity of the various ethnic groups that inhabit this part of our great country is represented in terms of the unity of a celestial garden: 'kirat cachari/ khasi garo miri/ yavana kanka govala! asama muluka rajaka turuka! kuvaca mlecca candala...' In Sankarachara's rendering many of the tribes enumerated in the Puranas are replaced by the indigenous ethnic groups of the North-east comprising a garden of what Goethe would call the 'human flowers'. The regulated rhythm of the stanza chimes clearly with the poets' own earlier description of a celestial garden full of countless flowers of different hues: 'sirisa seutil tamala malati/ lavanga bagi gulala/ karabira bakal kancana campaka/ phula bhare bhange dala/ sewali newalil palasa paralil parijata yuti jai/ bakula banduli/ ache phuli phulil taro sima sankhya nai...'

It is this infinite variety of the ethnic situation of India's North-east that this anthology (meaning 'flower gathering'), being the outcome of a three day national seminar held the banner of Sanskriti earlier, has variously addressed. I hope the presentations will stimulate the interests of scholars and lay readers alike in the problems and prospects of ethnicity characteristic of India's North-east.

Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami
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2009

Preface

"The Tribes and Castes of Northeast India" is a collection of papers presented in a National Seminar on the Tribes and Castes of North-east India, organized jointly by Sanskriti (North Eastern Institute of Culture and Religion) Guwahati, Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata, Indian Council of Social Science Research, Shillong, Archdiocese of Guwahati, Oisho Bani Society, Agartala and Diocese of Agartala. The Seminar was held at North East Diocesan Social Forum, Guwahati, from 23-25, November 2007.

Though many seminars of similar titles and nature had been organized in many academic circles and universities we feel that the desired results are not achieved on many counts. For eg., when a seminar is organized on the tribe or caste or a group of people of a particular state and the problems faced by them, it needs to be taken up for discussions and deliberations at various levels. The findings of the research papers should reach a large section of people about whom, with whom and for whom we organize such elaborate exercises. We also want to document valuable data on the people of North East who remain either isolated or dormant due to various reasons. This will provide a forum for them and for social scientists to present various concerns of the society today and for the next couple of decades. This also will send clear orientation to the planners and administrators who will have to take the researched data seriously in their policies for decisive programme for development within a specific period of time.

Keeping these and other priorities in mind we drew up some major Objectives of the Seminar such as:

1. To draw up theoretical and methodological understanding on people of North East India.
2. To have an interchange of valuable information among social scientists and scholars who have worked in North East for a

Tribes of North-east India

The time-worn metaphors for unity in the socio-political space are those of the melting pot (evoking the witches' cauldron), salad-bowl, stew or mosaic that American sociologists have used for nearly a century. In our sixteenth-century saint-poet Sankaradeva's Assamese rendering of the *Srmadbhagavatapuranam*, unity of the various ethnic groups that inhabit this part of our great country is represented in terms of the unity of a celestial garden: 'kirat cachari/ khasi garo miri/ yavana kanka govala! asama muluka rajaka turuka! kuvaca mlecca candala...' In Sankarachara's rendering many of the tribes enumerated in the Puranas are replaced by the indigenous ethnic groups of the North-east comprising a garden of what Goethe would call the 'human flowers'. The regulated rhythm of the stanza chimes clearly with the poets' own earlier description of a celestial garden full of countless flowers of different hues: 'sirisa seutil tamala malati/ lavanga bagi gulala/ karabira bakal kancana campaka/ phula bhare bhange dala/ sewali newalil palasa paralil parijata yuti jai/ bakula banduli/ ache phuli phulil taro sima sankhya nai...'

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prolonged period of time.

3. To bring together Social Scientists and to weave a network of systematic study on different tribes and castes of North East will make their concerns relevant to the society they live in and the Nation as a whole.

This present book contains most of the papers presented in the National Seminar on Tribes and Castes. The Universities represented include; Arunachal, Delhi, Dibrugarh, Tezpur, Guwahati, North Bengal, Calcutta, and a couple of other scholars from Mumbai, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala also made their contributions.

We are grateful to a number of persons who made their contributions to make this seminar a great success. The scholars and specialists in various fields of social sciences and the participants have done commendable job by preparing, presenting and interacting constructively with the learned participants. Their major suggestions also are incorporated in the final draft of the paper.

The publishers and printers too deserve our thanks for a wonderful and timely work.

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	iii
<i>Preface</i>	v
<i>A Peep in to the Tribal Scenario of North-East India: An Introduction</i>	xi
1. Culture and Environment of North-East India in Changing Perspective <i>B. K. Medhi & S. K. Roy</i>	1
2. Tribes and Castes of North-East India – Socio-Political Changes in Pre and Post Independence Period <i>Ganesh Ch. Sharma Thakur</i>	22
3. Contemporary Challenges Faced by the Tribals of North-East India: Analysis in the Context of Implementing NRM-Based Development Interventions <i>Vincent Darlong</i>	32
4. Indigenous Knowledge of Agricultural Management and Changing Trend among some Tribal People of Manipur <i>R.P. Athparia</i>	53
5. Changing Village Economy of the Galo: A study on Zirdin Village of West Siang District in Arunachal Pradesh <i>Mari Lollen</i>	61
6. Major Challenges Faced by the Tribals of North-East India <i>Peter Haokip</i>	78
7. Indigenous Resource Management among the Tribes of North-East India with Special Reference to Usage of Bamboo <i>Birinchi K. Medhi & K. Jose SVD</i>	91
8. Concept of Property among the Garos of North-East India <i>Arifur Zaman</i>	104

9. Angami Women and Matrilineal Inheritance: A Case Study of Zounuo-Keyhonuo Group <i>Kedilezo Kikhi</i>	112
10. Impact of Indian Administration on Economic life of Border Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh <i>Ashan Riddi</i>	125
11. Socio-Political Situations of the Tribes of Assam Since Ahom period <i>G. C. Kakati & B. K. Barman</i>	132
12. Health of Tea Garden Workers: A case study in Upper Assam <i>Bhaskar Das & Sarthak Sengupta</i>	145
13. The Idu Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh: A Frontier Tribe in Transition <i>Tarun Mene & S. K. Chaudhuri</i>	154
14. Socio-Cultural Change among the Rabhas <i>Upen Rabha Hakacham & Rupak K. Rabha</i>	171
15. Khasi Society and the Impact of Modernity: Challenges to Identity and Integrity <i>Barnes Mawrie SDB</i>	176
16. Negotiating Cultural Transformation in Tribal North-East India <i>A.C. Sinha</i>	196
17. Types, Distribution, and Religious Significance of the Megaliths of the Karbis of Dimoria, Assam <i>Birinchi K. Medhi & Kalpana Choudhury</i>	217
18. Cultural Contacts: Problems and Opportunities <i>Archbishop Thomas Menampampil SDB</i>	227
19. Problems of Cultural Contact <i>Saroj Chaudhuri</i>	250
20. Folksongs as a Mouthpiece of Tea-Tribes during Colonial Period – Assam in reference <i>Baijayanta Keot & Parag Nath</i>	255

21. A Brief Sketch on the Santals' Customs and Heritage <i>Bharat Tudu</i>	261
22. Impact of Christianity on the Khasi-Jaintia : People of Meghalaya <i>O.L. Snaitang</i>	269
23. Hinduisation of the Bodos <i>Luke Daimary</i>	278
24. Pith Art of Assam <i>Nabajit Deka</i>	286
25. Tribes of Tripura and National Integration <i>Nirmal Das</i>	290
26. Constraints of Development: A study on the Tiwas of Assam <i>G. C. Ojah</i>	301
27. Tribes and the Politics of National Integration in India's North-East <i>Samir Kumar Das</i>	305
28. Murasingh: Socio-Cultural Crisis <i>Lakshmidhan Murasing</i>	315
29. Funeral rites of the Harbong Tribe of Tripura <i>Nanigopal Chakraborty</i>	321
30. Social and Cultural Dynamics of the Totos <i>Rajib Chatterjee</i>	326
31. Women and Patriarchy: Assam in Context <i>Mandakini Baruah</i>	334
32. Gender and Family in the Context of Matrilineal Societies <i>Dilip Kr. Kalita</i>	339
33. Impressions of Permanence: A Study of the Kherai Ritual of the Bodos <i>Madhurima Goswami</i>	344
34. The Tribe-Caste Continuum and the Formation of the Assamese Identity <i>Chandan Kr. Sharma</i>	354
35. Tribal Identity, Customary Law and Modernisation in North-East India <i>Walter Fernandes</i>	367

- the Editors

A Peep in to the Tribal Scenario of North-east India: *Introduction*

North-East Region of India lies in an extension of the Sub-Himalayan Zone, consisting of lofty mountainous terrains and moderately high hilly tracts interspersed with plateaus and river-fed valleys. While the geographical and topographical situation has made North-East India into a naturally homogenous zone, the partition of the sub-continent literally cut it off from rest of the country – barring a narrow corridor accentuating, as it were, a specificity of the region. North-East India has an aggregate of 2,55,037 sq km accounting for nearly 9 per cent of India's total geographical area with a population of 38,444,026 according to the 2001 census. About three quarters of the region is covered by hilly terrain and one quarter is made up of the four plain areas of Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of Assam, the Tripura plains, and the Manipur plateau. Those in the thinly-populated hill areas are the people we now call 'tribals', and in the fertile plains and plateau are mainly the 'non-tribal, people, who comprise more than 80% of the total population. In recognizing the cultural foreignness of the "tribal" people of the hill regions, we should have in mind that the sanskritization of the plain areas have been going on for centuries. Until the coming of the British rule in the early nineteenth century, the entire region was never linked politically with any major Indian political power, the cultural link of some plain areas with the Indic culture dates back centuries.

When one talks about cultural plurality in North-East India, since it shares little or no commonality in its traditional culture with the rest of India, the case of the "tribal" people in North-East India is especially acute. To address the identity crisis in the region, one has to bear in mind the cultural plurality of the North- East India in general, and the sharp

Tribes of North-east India

difference between the people assimilated into Indic culture, and the unassimilated "tribal" people in particular. Out of constant interactions, cultures influenced each other and developed commonalities. While the Indic-sanskritic culture of India is as a foreign culture for a large part of the regions, there are also areas where it has been at home for centuries. We will argue that the assimilation of people into the Indic culture became a defining factor for what is "tribal" and "not tribal" in the identity of the people of the region today.

A tribe is a loosely organized group of people, united by language and customs, living as a community under one or more chiefs. The tribes are generally classified on the basis of territory, language, occupation, physical characteristics, and cultural contracts. They speak none of the major Indian languages and each tribe has its own less developed language or dialect. Tribes – are scheduled and unscheduled. In 1967 Anthropological Survey of India noted 314 tribal communities spread in different parts of India. It has been found that there are a number of tribal communities in India who are not enjoying special facilities as extended to the Scheduled Tribes. Due to this operational problem many welfare programs are not launched among those people who have not been identified as ST. According to 1981 census, the tribal population of India comprising 427 communities was 51,628,638 constituting 7.76% of India's total population, according to 1991 census it is 67.76 million constituting 8.08% of total population. The population of ST has been on the increase ever since 1951. With 43 communities waiting for the approval (of central government) to be included in ST list, their population will show further increase in recent future. However, as mentioned above ethnographic data on a number of tribes are lacking. Tribals are the dominant ethnic group in the hill states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and the hill districts of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The total tribal population of the region is 10,354,493 which accounts to 27.67 per cent of the population of the region. About 12.28 per cent of India's ST population lives in North-East India. Though Arunachal has more than 90 ethnic groups only 26 of them are recognized as ST, while Manipur has 29, Assam 23, Tripura 19, Meghalaya 17, Mizoram 14, and Nagaland has 5 ethnic groups recognized as ST.

The specific character of the North-East India however, extends beyond its physical features; it has its own distinctiveness also in respect of its population component and cultural pattern. Since very early times the North-East has been the home of the Kiratas or Indo-Mongoloids.

Tribes of North-east India

Although, Austric and Dravidians sub-strata have been discovered by scholars in the racial and cultural make-up of the region and although waves of Aryan Culture have swept over parts of the region – particularly the valleys in Assam, Manipur, and Tripura – the predominance of the Indo-Mongoloid racial and cultural features is much too obvious. Although the Indo-Mongoloids had not occupied a centre-stage position in the history of India's civilization, they have never been off the stage either. Tribals have bare minimum day to day needs. They live amidst nature, and they have unfathomable socio-religious attachment to their land in which they live. When a new development program is initiated in a tribal area they wonder whether it will benefit them without interfering with their traditional ethos and mores. Problem of cultural contact is one of the major factors which need to be dealt with adequate care and concern.

Apart from the fact that the Aryan Hindu religious and cultural norms have been a dominant influence, there is also the living presence in the region of Buddhism of both Hinayana and Mahayana sects, of Islam and also of Christianity in more recent times. Because of the presence of and almost bewildering racial and cultural variety in North-East has often been referred to as the Anthropologists paradise. With equal, if not greater justification the region could be called the folklorists paradise: the stock of folklore material both verbal and non-verbal of the great number of groups and sub-groups inhabiting the region is virtually inexhaustible. This is a region where tradition had held its sway till very recent times. But unusually heavy influx of people from outside the region has disturbed the demographic and cultural balance of the region. Spread of education coupled with the waves of development and modernization has also played its part in changing the region's cultural contours. There have been problems of identity crisis tending to give rise to various kinds of movements aimed at self-assertion. Not only has there been a new concern with individual or group cultures but there have even revivalist tendency also.

With international borders on almost all sides – China on the north, Burma on the east, Bangladesh on the southern west and Bhutan on the north – the North-East India also most strategically placed and is, thus, geo-politically a very sensitive area. While there is no denying that there are considerable diversities within the region, yet the fact remains that there is a basic unity characterizing the seven units making up North-East India – Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Mizoram. Presently, there is also a realization of this unity among the

people of the constituent units and termed 'Seven Sisters', (eight including Sikkim) to designate the seven units reflects that sense of unity and togetherness running through them.

Assam has as many as 23 tribes out of them eleven are hill tribes and 9 in the plains. The prominent among them are Bodos, Mishings, Karbis, Dimasas and Kacharis. Apparently, other tribes which have fewer speakers have not been included in the above table. We note that all these tribals are standing at uneven levels from one another in terms of educational, social, cultural, economic, and political development. Some of them entirely depend on jhum cultivation while others are better off with some stretch of wet land cultivation. Though some of the plains' tribals have become very conscious about their distinct identity and language, it must be admitted honestly that all of them have been contributing very significantly to enrich the composite Assamese culture, language, literature, arts and nationality.

All the tribes of Assam are not very backward. They are hardly cut-off physically and socio-culturally from non-tribals. In Assam generally less productive and forested lands are occupied by the ST like Bodo, Garo, Rabha, Tiwa, Karbi, Dimasa, Barman, Kachari, etc., As per 1991 census out of the total population of 22414327 as many as 2874441 persons or 12.82 per cent were ST in Assam. They mostly belong to Mongoloid stocks. They are socio-economically underdeveloped as compared to the non-tribal communities. They even feel socio-economically and politically suppressed and exploited by the non-tribals. Since the starting of this century, following large scale influx of immigrants especially from undivided Bengal and Nepal to Assam, a sense of fear psychosis of insecurity has developed among the indigenous people including tribals. Thus the tribals being alarmed at this have ethnically united to form a tribal league in Assam as early as 1933. The Assam movement 1979-85, the long existed tribal movements in the Bodo dominated areas in the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra, and the Karbi Anglong and NC Hills districts fundamentally reflect the complex nationality question in Assam.

Arunachal Pradesh, the land of the Rising Sun, is geographically the largest state in North-East India. It is the abode of 26 major tribes and a large number of smaller sub-tribes belonging to Indo-Mongoloid stock. In February 1987 Arunachal was raised to a full-fledged state of the union of India. This has achieved a major objective of making people of the state participate in socio-cultural, political, economic and others spheres of development. This has taken a new step beyond the administrative policy

of Nehru in which they to be left alone to develop on their own genius. But the question is making them realize the utility of the numerous programs envisaged by the government for the over all growth of everyone in the state. Today most of the tribes in Arunachal are under the process of modernization. Change is observed in all the major aspect of life most notably in economics, education, health care, etc. However, most of the people who live in villages depend on jhum cultivation, and they have not adopted to the new and improved ways of production and preservation of the food grains. Added to this problem the infrastructure for transportation and marketing leave much to be desired.

When we look at the Tripura scenario we realize that majority of the people there are Bengalis. The percentage of the tribal community to the total population of Tripura as per the 2001 census was 29% of which Tripuris are 54.16%, Reangs – 13.10%, Chakmas – 11.28%, Jamatia 7.15%, and others are less than 5%. Most of the tribes in Tripura are economically backward, socially vulnerable, ethnically threatened and educationally weak. The tribal society here is perhaps the only one of the many communities in the region who had been historically outnumbered by non-tribals in their own land. This has thrown up many challenges most specifically land alienation, insurgency, decision making based on political clout, market economy, language conflicts, and others. However, the various contributions done by the non-tribal communities in Tripura cannot be overlooked.

Other states in North-East India have their own peculiarities as well. In sum, each of the North Eastern state has to address a number of needs simultaneously. Often by the time state and centre take note of one need another one crops up. Then if no one cares for sometime, we are caught unaware. We pay huge price for our un-preparedness. Whose problems are we addressing? Are the stakeholders involved? Are they willing to pay a price for the changes they desire now or are they willing to suffer for ever? North-East has not one problem to face but a bundle of problems at various intensities. In spite of the best efforts and intention of the government, achievements to curb the problems of the tribal people have not received the desired results. The lack of determination among the government machinery, hopelessness, less enthusiasm, and involvement among the tribals, the administrative bottle-necks at different stages of implementation of the scheme, etc. are the major obstacles on our way to peace and progress. These above mentioned and other considerations made us reflect on one of the major segments of the people of North-East

India – the Tribal fraternity who need to move ahead with greater determination and focus to make a mark in their own societies and in North-East India in general.

It is undoubtedly clear that the tribes and castes on North-East India have a long way to travel towards self-reliance and sustainable development. Government interventions, NGOs collaboration and a number of factors have helped in ways more than one to make tangible changes in their life. The major draw back in all these interventions were that they did not have a mechanism to accompany the people for a prolonged period of time with technical know how, finance, training and encouragement. In some cases the intervention of the agencies did not catch the imagination of the indigenous people and this was a major hurdle in progress and people's participation and commitment to bring in the desired results. Anyone who looks at the tribal scenario in North East India will wonder how they remained so backward even after so many programmes and policies of the Government, the multiple engagements envisaged by NGOs and other welfare agencies. If we look into the area of literacy also they have remained at a very low profile.

This brings us to a brief perusal of the papers presented in this book. The first paper on *Culture and Environment of North-East India in Changing Perspective* by **Birinchi K. Medhi** and **S. K. Roy** deals with various changes taking place in North-East India. They argue that any worthwhile involvement within this region should be based on a well researched enquiry into the various nuances of culture and environment in North-East India, in which Anthropologists have a decisive role to play. **Ganesh Chandra Sharma Thakur** in his paper on *Tribes and Castes of North-East India – Socio-Political Changes in Pre and Post Independence Period*, studies in detail the situation of tribes and castes in North-East India which is different from that of the other parts of the country due to its unique socio-political, geographical, and historical background. The author's observation is very heartening that due to the role played by the great Vaishnavite preceptor Sri Sankaradeva the rigour of social barrier and extreme form of casteism is not traced in the North Eastern states, more particularly in Assam. **Vincent Darlong** in his paper identifies and analyses the contemporary social, environmental, and development challenges faced by the tribals of North-East India in the context of NRM based development interventions.

In his paper *Indigenous Knowledge of Agricultural Management and Changing Trend among some Tribal people of Manipur*, **R. P.**

Athparia takes a look at some of the Indigenous knowledge practices and resource management of the hill tribes of Manipur, especially the Nagas and Kukis with regard to water Gharat or Pani Dhenki, locally known as Twichangsui-in by the Kukis and Rashong by the Tangkhul Nagas. Mari Lollen in his paper entitled *Changing Village Economy of the Galo: A Study on Zirdin Village of West Siang District in Arunachal Pradesh* takes a close look at the village economy, and the various changes observed in the recent past, especially the moving away from Jhum to terrace cultivation. Peter Haokip while writing on the major challenges opines that while the rest of India seems to be still not only unwilling to accept the Mongoloid races of the North East India as full-fledged Indian, the people of North-East too seems to have no sense of belonging to the rest of India, emotionally and psychologically.

In the joint paper by Birinchi K. Medhi and K. Jose SVD entitled *Indigenous Resource Management among the Tribes of North-East India with special Reference to Usage of Bamboo* an effort is made by the authors to study the various major utilities of bamboo which is profusely available in North-East India. Bamboo, a multipurpose agro-forestry product, has been an integral part of the Indian culture. The authors say that, undoubtedly bamboo can revolutionize the economy of the North-East India ensuring employment opportunities to a large number of people. Arifur Zaman writes on the *Concept of Property among the Garos of North-East India*. In India Garos mainly occupy the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya; Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam; and certain parts of Tripura, North Bengal and Bangla Desh. The author observes that the age-old concept of property among the Garos of North-East India have undergone conspicuous changes. Kedilezo Kikhi discusses on Angami women and Matrilineal Inheritance with special reference to Zounuo-Keyhonuo Group which provides a system of unilineal descent to be more particular, comprising a segmentary lineage system, patri-virilocal residence, where the general devolution of productive and immovable property is agnatic. The study finds out that this practice of matrilineally inherited land from a mother to her daughters is a unique feature of the Zounuo-Keyhonuo group, not prevalent in other groups of the Angami society or any other Naga groups.

Ashan Riddi demonstrates the impact on Indian Administration on economic life of border tribes with special reference to the Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh. He observes that prior to 1950, all the essential items were imported from the Tibet, by the Tagins by barter system. However,

Tribes of North-east India

the establishment of Indian administration and economy ruined the economic self-sufficiency of the border Tagin. The Constitutional guarantee for better education during Ahom Period, British Period, and Post independence period and its impact is studied by G.C. Kakati and B.K. Barman. *Health of Tea Garden Workers: A Case Study in Upper Assam*, is undertaken jointly by Sarthak Sengupta and Bhaskar Das. They observe that the health of a person or a community is a function of several factors, viz., hereditary, environmental, and socio-cultural. This data based study conducted in a upper Assam show alarming cases of anaemia, rheumatism, gastroenteritis, skin diseases, respiratory problem, gastric ulcers, mouth ulcers, helmenthiasis, stroke, tuberculosis, epilepsy, diarrhoea, chest pain, toothache, bleeding gums, gingivitis, abdomen pain, cold and cough, giddiness, hysteria etc.

Tarun Mene and Sarit K. Chaudhuri enquire into the Idu Mishmis of Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley Districts of Arunachal Pradesh. From the whole discourse it is evident that like many other tribes of the state, Idu Mishmis are also passing through the phase of transition. However, amidst such changes, Idu Mishmis in general, are conscious of retaining some of their core identity markers, which have given them a distinct space with in the varied cultural mosaic of the tribes of a frontier state. In the paper entitled *Socio-Cultural Change among the Rabhas*, Upen Rabha Hakacham and Rupak Kr. Rabha explain, how the Rabhas in the earlier times followed matrilineal system in property inheritance. Presently there are many Socio-cultural changes taking place among the Rabhas. Changes in the field of inheritance, food habits, religion, dress, language, and other aspects of life are the major ones among them. Barnes Mawrie in his study entitled *Khasi Society and the Impact of Modernity: Challenges to Identity and Integrity*, argues that since the advent of Colonialism and Christianity and along with them modernity, the Khasi society has never been the same. The subjugation of Khasi chiefs to the British rule has had its consequences on the traditional political system while Christianity on its part has brought in tremendous changes through evangelization and all activities associated with this.

A.C. Sinha in his paper entitled *Negotiating Cultural Transformation in Tribal North-East India* takes a passionate look at the concept of culture in the context of North-East India. He says, culture provides something like an all inclusive web of world view, which makes the life comprehensible to the common man/women of the society. The anthropologists have provided a set of definitions of culture as a conceptual

tool for them to understand their subject and inform the readers of their significance. *Types, Distribution, and Religious Significance of the Megaliths of the Karbis of Dimoria, Assam*, is a study by **Birinchi K. Medhi** and **Kalpna Choudhury**. Among a few tribes of North-East India, erection of megaliths in the memory of the deceased members with elaborate rituals is a living culture. The Karbis of Dimoria area still erects megaliths to commemorate deaths. The ethnographic studies undertaken on various contemporary megalithic builders provide valuable information for understanding the complexity of the beliefs involved in the erection of megaliths. **Archbishop Thomas Menampampil SDB** in his paper *Cultural Contacts: Problems and Possibilities* explores various issues involved in the phenomenon of culture contacts. He says cultures separate people more sharply than political boundaries. He concludes by inviting everyone to continuously learn from varied cultures and traditions in our homeland, and in fact from every culture and civilization on the globe. **Saroj Chaudhuri** in his paper, *Problems of Cultural Contact* explains how Tripura is perhaps one of those few states that have experienced continuous and mammoth influxes. And yet, it may sound incredible, but the fact remains that there is hardly any difficulty in dissemination and assimilation between the two cultural streams.

Folksongs as a Mouthpiece of Tea-Tribes During Colonial Period, is an article jointly written by **Baijayanta Keot** and **Parag Nath**. Through typical folk songs the writers present the woes of the tea workers. They observe that though at the very outset, the indigenous Assamese labourers worked hard in the tea estates, a change of attitude was evident as soon as the hegemony transferred to the East India Company. *A Brief Sketch on the Santals' Customs and Heritage* is a paper by **Bharat Tudu**, who opines that the Santal is one of the communities in our country, about whom elaborate studies are not done. The author highlights some of the main drawbacks of education as well as the reasons of economic backwardness among them. **O.L. Snaitang** enquires into the Impact of Christianity on the Khasi-Jaintia people of Meghalaya to find out the impact of Christianity upon the Khasi-Jaintia people upon the assumption that while the new faith has played a significant role in major cultural change among the hill people in Northeast India in the 19th century and well before 1947, it however tended to divide the people on denominational and administrative lines in the second half of the 20th century.

Luke Daimary in his write up on *Hinduisation of the Bodos* says that Bodos are a unique group of people who have an exquisite and

Tribes of North-east India

enviable culture, rich tradition and unique language, melodious songs and colorful dresses and dances. For centuries together they lived within their own cultural and social limits untouched by any process of proselytisation. Hinduisation of the Bodos brought about significant changes in their social and religious outlook. **Nabajit Deka** throws light on the pith art of Assam. He says, Assam, the land of enchanting beauty and cultural diversity had a very rich tradition of visual art since very ancient times, one such living tradition of folk visual art in Assam is the works done on pith in the region of erstwhile Goalpara district. The author calls for a systematic and comprehensive study and documentation of the tradition for the promotion, continuation and proper evaluation of the tradition and the art form.

Nirmal Das in his paper *Tribes of Tripura and National Integration*, argues that in Tripura, tribals are rapidly proceeding towards modernity. We can find the change in education, in dress, religious persuasions, forms of worships, sports and recreations, home life, social-customs, in their attitude towards different forms of labour etc. **Ganesh Ch. Ojah's** paper focuses on the *Constraints of Development among the Tiwas of Assam*. The Tiwas formerly known as the Lalungs are found in Kamrup, Morigaon, Nagaon and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. In the context of Assam, in general, and the Tiwa in particular it is difficult to estimate and draw clear picture of development as there are minimum evaluation studies done on tribal development programmes. **Samir Kumar Das** in his contribution entitled *Tribes and the Politics of National Integration in India's North-East* seeks to track the official and conventional understanding of National Integration in India, with special reference to North-East India while examining the changes that such understanding has undergone in recent years – particularly since the mid-1980s. **Lakshmidhan Murasingh** studies on his own ethnic community. He says, the Murasinghs of Tripura have four branches, viz., Murasinghs, Dongros, Mosbang and Totaram. The author opines, Mura could be a word cognate with 'Mora', that is dead, and Sing is the word for horn. He also highlights some of the stories of their origin. **Nanigopal Chakraborty** writes on the *Funeral Rites of the Harbong Tribe of Tripura*. He studies a peculiar practice of funeral which is exclusive to the Harbongs. This practice speaks of a highly philosophical attitude towards life, an enquiry into the source of which can be a fascinating study for the researchers. The author calls for a team work among inter-disciplinary sciences to unearth the rich pageant of unity in diversity that is north east of India.

Athparia takes a look at some of the Indigenous knowledge practices and resource management of the hill tribes of Manipur, especially the Nagas and Kukis with regard to water Gharat or Pani Dhenki, locally known as Twichangsui-in by the Kukis and Rashong by the Tangkhul Nagas. **Mari Lollen** in his paper entitled *Changing Village Economy of the Galo: A Study on Zirdin Village of West Siang District in Arunachal Pradesh* takes a close look at the village economy, and the various changes observed in the recent past, especially the moving away from Jhum to terrace cultivation. **Peter Haokip** while writing on the major challenges opines that while the rest of India seems to be still not only unwilling to accept the Mongoloid races of the North East India as full-fledged Indian, the people of North- East too seems to have no sense of belonging to the rest of India, emotionally and psychologically.

In the joint paper by **Birinchi K. Medhi** and **K. Jose SVD** entitled *Indigenous Resource Management among the Tribes of North-East India with special Reference to Usage of Bamboo* an effort is made by the authors to study the various major utilities of bamboo which is profusely available in North-East India. Bamboo, a multipurpose agro-forestry product, has been an integral part of the Indian culture. The authors say that, undoubtedly bamboo can revolutionize the economy of the North-East India ensuring employment opportunities to a large number of people. **Arifur Zaman** writes on the *Concept of Property among the Garos of North-East India*. In India Garos mainly occupy the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya; Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam; and certain parts of Tripura, North Bengal and Bangla Desh. The author observes that the age-old concept of property among the Garos of North-East India have undergone conspicuous changes. **Kedilezo Kikhi** discusses on Angami women and Matrilineal Inheritance with special reference to Zounuo-Keyhonuo Group which provides a system of unilineal descent to be more particular, comprising a segmentary lineage system, patri-virilocal residence, where the general devolution of productive and immovable property is agnatic. The study finds out that this practice of matrilineally inherited land from a mother to her daughters is a unique feature of the Zounuo-Keyhonuo group, not prevalent in other groups of the Angami society or any other Naga groups.

Ashan Riddi demonstrates the impact on Indian Administration on economic life of border tribes with special reference to the Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh. He observes that prior to 1950, all the essential items were imported from the Tibet, by the Tagins by barter system. However,

the establishment of Indian administration and economy ruined the economic self-sufficiency of the border Tagin. The Constitutional guarantee for better education during Ahom Period, British Period, and Post independence period and its impact is studied by **G.C. Kakati** and **B.K. Barman**. *Health of Tea Garden Workers: A Case Study in Upper Assam*, is undertaken jointly by **Sarthak Sengupta** and **Bhaskar Das**. They observe that the health of a person or a community is a function of several factors, viz., hereditary, environmental, and socio-cultural. This data based study conducted in a upper Assam show alarming cases of anaemia, rheumatism, gastroenteritis, skin diseases, respiratory problem, gastric ulcers, mouth ulcers, helmenthiasis, stroke, tuberculosis, epilepsy, diarrhoea, chest pain, toothache, bleeding gums, gingivitis, abdomen pain, cold and cough, giddiness, hysteria etc.

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In the essay *Social and Cultural Dynamics of the Totos of West Bengal*, **Rajib Chatterjee** explores the ethnic environment of the Totopara which has changed especially due to migration. At present the total non-Toto population of diverse communities exceeds the Toto population and as a result Toto Para has become a multi ethnic village. In recent times a socio-political tension between the Totos and non-Totos has gradually build up. **Mandakini Barua** makes a study on the Mishing society with special reference to status of women. She observes that the women are not included in the decision making bodies of the village though they are active participants with regard to agricultural operations. **Dilip Kumar Kalita** in his study on *Gender and the Family in the Context of Matrilineal Society* observes that in primitive societies the man did most of the outdoor and hazardous works while the woman stayed back at home and looked after the children and feeding of the family. But in case of the matriarchal societies the picture is a bit different than that of the patriarchal societies.

Impressions of Permanence: A Study of the Kherai Ritual of the Bodos is a study by **Madhurima Goswami** based on her continuous observation of Bodo folk religion. In the Kherai festival the trance dancer 'doudini' propitiates deities through various dances relating to different gods, especially Bathou. This paper presents folk religion in a new light by placing it in the broader context of social structure and cultural consciousness. In the next article **Chandan Kr. Sharma** argues that the Assamese identity is a product of a historical process in which both tribal and non-tribal groups played equally important roles. **Walter Fernandes** discusses the impact of this interaction on the customary law, tradition and identity of some tribes. While customary laws are practiced in North East India, the author calls for a search for an interface with modernity that can update their tradition while avoiding the negative effects.

We take this opportunity to congratulate **SANSKRITI - North Eastern Institute of Culture and Religion**, an Anthropological Research Wing of the SVD (Divine Word/*Oisho Bani*) Society for taking efforts to contact a number of select scholars who contributed papers on some of the most timely and pertinent themes. The above mentioned papers are some of the major ones presented in the three day National Seminar organized by Sanskriti in November 2007. Following the great traditions of late Dr. (Fr.) William Schmidt SVD the founder of Anthropos Institute, Germany and his long time collaborators in SVD and other academic fraternity, and late Dr. (Fr.) Stephen Fuchs SVD the founder of Institute of Indian Culture, Mumbai and a number of renowned faculty members and

Tribes of North-east India

great stalwarts like Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil SDB, Guwahati and others we hope to establish this Institute for scientific study of the people with special reference to this region. This Seminar was a part of our net-working with many well known professors, scholars and others in North-East India. Participants and the collaborators namely, Anthropological Survey of India – Kolkata, Indian Council of Social Science Research – Shillong, Archdiocese of Guwahati, Divine Word/*Oisho Bani* Society, North-East India, and Diocese of Agartala and others deserve appreciation for making this event a very successful one. Now it is hoped that these papers will generate meaningful discussion at various levels so that the themes dealt within this volume will make a substantial contribution in the lives of the tribals on whom this elaborate exercise is made.

15/03/2009

Guwahati

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1

Culture and Environment of North-East India in Changing Perspective

Birnchi K. Medhi
Sankar Kumar Roy

Northeast India collectively a seven sisters state (now Sikkim is added to it) sounds more humane than a mundane political or geographical reality. Culture when looked at in terms of definition it is something lifeless; politician wants the greater cultural entity to be tailored out into many; the geographer materialize this with their cartographic kit. Geographically divided the sister states though stand as distinct political units; but the silent undercurrent of cultural kinship bond continues to exist intact. It is also true that socio-economic aspirations of the seven sisters though quite vary from one another in terms of their culture and ecology, but the fullest fulfillment of their aspirations are expressed through the common cultural linkages and goals. Differences are there in cultural level but interigation is expressed through hetetrogeneity. This makes the region's culture indivisible. This ledged out region is linked with India through a 22km narrow space. Had the space been a criterion for recognizing this region, then this area should come within the imagery of Northeast as region. Obviously geographical contiguity is not the only factor for comprehending a region. '..... political economy, social linkage over length of time and culture history as in the cognitive realms of power, elite of population, are also the inputs that go to the process of defining a region.

This region is not a stagnant entity. Its contour and content go on changing (Roy Barman, 1998:1). This is thought that has added new dimensions to this region overtime.

The seven states of Northeast India cover an area of 2,55,083 Km; the major part (70 p.c.) constitute the valleys of the river Brahmaputra and Imphal Barak Systems. Hence the geographical contrast is followed by varied nature of culture formation. What more is this that it is proximate to the Southeast, East and Indian cultural traditions that has made the cultural chromes multivariate. Archaeological and historical supported fact is this that this area received cultural waves from two great cultural zones at a different depth of turn. The area comes under the subtropical zone, and experiences a high density of rainfall. That leads, to the formation of luxuriant deciduous forest over the highland and keeps the river live through the season. The surface varying from 60 degree-70 degree or less is even suitable for jhum cultivation (Roy, 1981) like that of the other tropical and subtropical zones.

Jhum cultivation, according to the some scholars, suffers from inherent limitation such as damaging effect on environment; it keeps the economy below subsistence level. An empirical observation over the interior areas of Northeast India have shown that this traditional practice serves as a sole means for subsistence economy, since other methods of cultivation prove either ineffective or outmoded. What is more important that such system of cultivation has emerged out of age-old interaction between technology, culture and environment. Its age-old anchorage and indigenous knowledge system is as such that with a simple hoe a limited plot of land can be brought under cultivation, and the prolong fallow period is there to recap the lost energy and vegetation caused by such practice. It does not cause major havoc to the traditional life. What is felt that it indiscriminates expansion of the modern system in the traditional way of life of the ethno-cultural groups and causes major ecological and socio-economic problems.

In Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh in order to restrict the soil erosion on the Jhum field contour bunding was done by using the log in a systematic manner. Compare the land man proportion where the carrying capacity of the land is hardly 13 persons per sq km, in case of Mizoram 42, and Nagaland 73. The figure shown is as per the report of the Census of India 2001. According to the report of this organization of the year 1991, out of 31547314 of the seven states, Assam alone had a population 22,41,221 i.e 70% of the total population, and the rest belong to highland states.

However, the decadal growth rate (Census of India 2001) has shown the progressive increase in population. In fact compared to the growth of the density of population in Assam, it has remained low in the highland zones. For that in the traditional way of the community owned land tenure system most of the land remained under exploited. This is an indigenous method of checking over exploitation, and soil erosion of the hilly slopes. It indirectly contributes to keeping the population low and balanced. This system continues to work effectively as long as the traditional system of community ownership of the land continues to exist. The traditional kinship system as institution for distribution for economic resources acts as a positive force for maintaining a socio-economic uniformity. The density of population in Alluvium plains had been higher, and that still so today owing the fertile land and agrarian economy backed by plough cultivation. It produces surplus that leads to creation of the denticulate economic contours, and occupational specialization.

Racially, the ethnic groups in the Northeast are predominantly Mongoloid. The majority (71%) of them are the traditional inhabitant of the hills or highland of the Himalayan Mountain, which cover a area of 74000 sq miles. There are, however, nearly one million ethnic population that are distributed over 2000 sq miles flood plains of the river Brahmaputra (Bhagabati, 1972: 19). Almost cent percent of the people living in the hills practice jhum cultivation, such type of cultivation are chronologically modern but economically in prehistoric stage (Roy, 1981, 1994). This is a practice found all over in the Northeast highland that comes under subtropical zone. Garo hills in Meghalaya is taken as an example. In such type of economy where two hands serve as sole means of energy, and low level of technology with an inherent limitation in the time span of rainfall (March to June), and Ecological conditions. All add a finite character to the quantum of production. Moreover the erratic nature of rainfall of the monsoon poses a constant uncertainty in respect of the food production. To tide over this situation they traditionally use two varieties of crops- the dry and the wet. Suckling (1972) described such practice as 'stone age economy'. The failure or excess in rainfall does not cause any major hazard to the crop production under such condition remains well within or marginal to subsistence level. The deficit caused thereof is compensated by the use of roots and tubers available in wild state.

Northeast presents a scenario quite distinct from other parts of India. Shifting cultivation continues to be the main stay of the economy of the hill dwellers. In Arunachal it includes the Nishi, the Adi, the Mishimi,

the Tagin, the Nocte, the Halam Wanchoo, etc., in Nagaland the different groups of the Naga, in Tripura the Hamar, the Harenkhel, etc., and in Meghalaya the Garo, the Khasi, and the Jyantia constitute two matrilineal cultural islands among the patrilineal shifting cultivators. Here what we have seen that economically although they are having homogeneity, but in minor details culturally and economically there are distinctive features of Northeast Indian ethnic situation, and this is an outcome of historical process over the time. A number of factors are at play; this may be linguistic, racial, and cultural. We cannot put the culture and language always together, and as an isolate because the Indo-Mongoloid population at Garo Hills are matrilineal belonging to Tibero-Burman linguistic group where the matrilineal Khasi in the Khasi and Jyantia Hills, belong to a distinct and separate linguistic group- the Monkhemar. When the idioms of life, worldview, the legendary backgrounds of origins are taken into account, it becomes apparent that with such peculiarities each cultural group maintains its distinctiveness.

When the ecology and the distributional patterns of various ethno-cultural groups and cultures are taken into account, it presents a certain distinctive features. The ethno-cultural groups having Indo-Mongoloid racial and Tibeto-Burman or Tibeto-Chinese linguistic affiliations are mostly found to be distributed over the highland of sub-Himalayan or Eastern Himalayan mountainous region, while the people speaking Indo-European language are distributed over the flood plains. In between the highland and flood plain is foothills region there live the people belonging to the linguistic and racial affiliations as are in the highland. The people nearer to the flood plains have entered into a process of coming into the fold of plough using Indo-European speaking cultures.

They got acculturated and are on the road to peasantry. They have developed land tenure system akin to that of the Indo-European speaking people of the plains, but at the same time their kinship system remain same as was in their highland counterparts. Their distributional system of the wealth or agricultural resources are distributed through the arteries of their kinship network. What more is that in village they are having a community owned granary that serves a balancing institution for distribution and redistribution of the economic resources. Such types economic institutions are more stronger in the highland and more obligatory. This is being supported by the strong network of kinship. Nobody, a male or a female suffers from the problem of insecurity even after one loses one's working member. among the Garos of Meghalaya it is the obligation of

the members of the matrilineal clan to provide a widower with a wife, and a widow with a husband. What is reported from Nagaland few decades back before their economy became fully monetized, during any arm raid against their village was repulsed by member of the clan together. Here the kinship network acts as defense work. The exchange or bator is still in current among the ethnic groups of Northeast India (Roy, 1994). The most pertinent point that we like to mention that the economy of the highland is characterized by the principle of economic cut off (Sahalins, 1972) and it is the economy of concrete and finite objects. It is the economy of democracy in material culture. It is the economy of almost even economic contour. It has rhythm of its own that acts quite attuned with their own ecological system. They have their own balancing systems both in environmental and cultural spheres.

Let us move into the foothill plains, and examine its cultural composition. This area is predominantly inhabited by the ethno-cultural groups with Southeast Asian cultural traditions. They came down to the plains and subsequently came into the fold of peasantry through the acceptance of the plough in food production technology. The plough in the flood plains underpins the whole socio-economic structure. Apart from creating surplus economy, it has shaped its worldview, developed the idioms of life guarded by the mores, custom and beliefs, peculiar to the Indo-European speaking Eastern Indian counterpart. When plough enters into the cultures of foothills region, it enters with the values peculiar to the flood plains, not in full but in part at the beginnings.

Gradually this system started proliferating into their egalitarian socio-economic network. They started imbibing some values and customs of the plains culture. While doing that they started abandoning some habits and customs of their cultures what their flood plains consider derogatory. Herefrom started the process of their cultural transformation. Traditional deities became the incarnation of Hindu gods and goddesses, but the practices centering round the worship of the newly incarnated deities remain traditional. This was possible through the development of homogeneous economic structure like that of referent culture of the neighbouring plains. This makes space for the easy acceptance of the Indo-European languages. The Pati Rabhas may be used as an example. The process of siphoning into Hindu caste system was not direct as that of Christianization. It has to follow successive stages of transformation. The economic and religious transition together have given them a stronger religious consolidation. It started with formation of a stage Koach, the

nearest to caste organization. We have seen among the Vaishnavite koach of Biswanath Chariali, Assam, they consider the Koach as *jati*. Basing on the same concept they consider the Tea Garden Workers around them a Ghasia- the lower caste. The inter-dinning among them is highly forbidden.

The process once started does not follow forward direction. The force that once served as a means of composite culture formation takes nowadays as reverse path. There is growing movement of reverting to their traditions. The same we have witnessed among the Meitie of Manipur (Hudson, 1909), they got prostalized in Vaishnavite faith if Gauriyo Vaishnavism of Bengal tradition, but after a long spell of time there was a strong movement of reverting to their traditional faith. The traditional fold and gods and goddess are now coming to the for; but that in a manner of the referent groups.

The causes are many, sometime educations, modern system of democratic process, religious and political movements, introduction of monetized economy across the country have accelerated process. These should not be viewed as disintegration, but as a process of socio-cultural rearrangement in response to time.

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The main point that we like to draw here is that what the people really want; this should be prior to the introduction of any planned change in the vast society whom we are concerned with. Things done cannot be undone. Any change introduced with a uniform or a common national objective in view without taking the ground ethno-cultural realities of the multicultural situations into account, it proves in most of the cases chaotic (Roy and Acharya, 2002). It disrupts the existing socio-cultural texture, it introduces fissiferous force in a society from outside; that starts hitting the outer core, creates cleavage in the traditional societies, it expands, and finally creates a number of variants within main body of culture. This starts from family level, the old fail to communicate their traditional values, worldview, and conception towards life to the youth brought up under partial colonial educations which is in a perpetual state of experimentations. Likewise the youth also fail to reach the old with a mind grown under changing value system and worldviews that portray before him an imaginary concept of the quality of life. They chase after that 'golden deer'. The more they do so, the more they get detached from the mores of their culture. The old witness the same, they stand helpless; but they realize that traditional texture of the culture is no longer strong enough to withstand the process of transformation brought about by the agencies

from the centers quite distant and unknown. The society is losing its grip over the system. Persons and culture do not act in a tandem, as it was a few decades back. With the changing rhythms caused by extraneous agencies all cannot a same step. Those who cannot they are gaolia or rural folk, and other are saharía/nagaría or urbanites. New classes of youth emerge. The situation as we see today in northeast is a sequence to the introduction of a new system; we call it 'modern'; its impact of which was not scientifically assessed among the people of Northeast representing multivariate cultural, geographical, and socio-economic chromes prior to their introduction or execution.

The problem of disbalance of socio-economic and cultural equilibrium starts here from. The process once starts, it goes on unbridled. In fact its is irrevocable. The socio-economic structure as we see in the Northeast through broadly divided into two- the plains which includes the foothill plains (datikasaria) and the flood plains (bhaiam), and the highlands exhibit contrast both geographical and cultural formations. The technology of the flood plain where bovine power is utilized give birth to surplus production of paddy created a stratified closed class socio-economic system or socio-economic institution where occupational determinism by birth has been till to day paying its active role even today. A few decades back traditional socio-economic relation or structure underpinned by caste or 'classical codes' has been a vital and controlling force of the peasants of this area. Here, the occupational specialization were not many, and it was rigid as it is found in its neighbouring province. The peasantry developed on the flood plains of the river Brahmaputra in respect of the form and function like that of other parts of India and form an inexorable part of urban centers either by close or distant relations. In the words of Redfield (1986) a peasant culture is a part culture. The very socio-economic structure of the peasantry of the flood plains distinctly vary from the peasantry from the rest of Indian peasantry by virtue of the fact that here it is more open and less rigid as the very structure of castism is built on the egalitarian base, and the number of castes limit to a few only or the divisions are broad based. Sometimes occupational are almost absent in some sphere. The economic or social institutional pattern in the flood plains is as such that of the egalitarian elements, it imbibes from the ethnic sub-strata, and the closed class elements it inherits from the North Indian counterparts are allowed to function within the same system, but they do not clash with each other. The craft of basket making by the males and the art of weaving by the females irrespective of any caste affiliation speak of

this synthetic reality of the historical past, or more beyond that. What is apparent that for its, liberal or open institutional character it left the door of culture open for window for further inflow from the cultural elements, juxtaposed around it, and offered a platform for ethno-cultural groups underpinned by Southeast Asian linguistic and cultural tradition and cultural heritages from the Indo-European speaking people from the North India traditions entered into a process of cultural synthesis, and formed a new wider culture with a new configuration. This is an ongoing process. It gets jolt but does not halt at the same time.

What were the initial driving forces made the highlanders to move down the foothill zones? The principal or initial force was the safer agricultural economy, and mode of existence of the agrarian of the flood plains. In fact it is the general tendency or to say universal endeavour of the people to exist under safer, comfortable and secured condition. The conditions mentioned here are relative to time and space. All from the hill did not migrate; only a segment of them through different points of entry came in contact with. Their occasional contacts no doubt brought them nearer to each other and that led to the dispelling of awe and fear or the distrust emerged out of cultural and linguistic distances communication gap existed, and it was at an initial place that was bridged up through the cultural standardized or exchange where the matters mattered. It acts as a means for dumb communication for the socio-economic systems for both the flood plains and the highlander. Both understood the demand of each other and that they solved initially through mute trade because the peoples from plain and the hills could not communicate each other as the two belong to different linguistic groups. Because of their frequent contacts the linguistic barrier got diffused. The hostility was over; the Garo established a economic linkage with the neighbouring plains. *Duars* or the entry points are the corridors of cultures. Taher has recorded the location of as many as more that sixty *duars* between the highland and the flood plains. Historical significance of such spots in the process of culture synthesis are immense and far reaching and penetrating as well. These vary often acted as a catalytic agent. For example- the Kacharis at Udalguri boarding Arunachal Pradesh (Erstwhile NEFA) and Assam where the Sherdukpanis from Arunachal Pradesh came down and camp there for a month during the winter for bartering and exchanging their forest products with the traders and people of flood plains for salt, paddy, dry fishes decorative, and other metallic products, for their forest products life the asfoidea (or hing), black pepper, saffron, wooden crafts and others (Goswami, 1971:3,5).

This makes them act as gobetween and the Kacharis enter into a state of cultural kinship with the people and traders of the plains and the ethnic group of the highland. This relation is renewed annually. They get themselves interlocked on economic ground. There are a number of such evidences that continued to exist till towards the beginning of early twenties, it spread over the wider boundary of plains. The flow was continuous and regular. This is evident from the existence of some newly emerged occupational groups, viz., *Hatkhowa*, distributed around hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo, district Kamrup, Assam, situated on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra. To be noted that wherever there is such regular trading groups. The Monpas from Arunachal Pradesh during winter come down to the north bank of the river Brahmaputra; they conducted trade with their forest resources and handicraft among the plains people of Assam. At different transit points they established their religious institutions. One of such is Mahamuni at Hajo. The same pantheon or the same compound is shared even today by both the Monpa and the local people in common. Here the *Hatkhowa* acted as a go between the Monpa and the local clients. Nowadays with the development of improved communication system, enmass practice of trade has come to a half, but the occupational groups as said earlier exist even today almost as a non-functional entity, and as reminiscence of past intercultural relations between the two cultures.

The previous relations cemented by economic relation and contact lead to the developing cultural closeness between the highland and the plains. Hill people started knowing the fertility of the plains, efficiency of higher form of technology, and the economic security offered by peasantry. However, their age old adaption and the socio-economic security to a given physical environment, harsh it may be, offered them a kind of protection, where they feel culturally secured. Their clans offer them security, both economic and social. They do not like to expose themselves to linguistically and culturally alien situation all of a sudden. In a same manner they did not accept, the same attitude they show to date even to the newcomers. They accept them with impunity. But they accept the material helps (from government institutions) newly introduced, but that without taking any liability. But one in one's village has certain status responsibilities roles towards one's own, and in addition one has definite role and obligation towards the socio-economic institutions that conditioned his way of life and existence. One is as an integral part of the structure. One's unconscious involvement with one's society one lives in is conditioned and bound by the idioms of one's life. The cultures rhythms

sometimes beyond that it is true that the people nearer to the urban or periurban or the administrative HQ, are the easy receiver of such aids or grants. When one moves interior where their traditional system of food producing technology (referred earlier) survives with little change, the same socio-cultural economics and land tenure system continue to exist. Within such cultures when the bits of modern money economy enter, it creates a little ripple over the already existing system. The ripples extend their ambit more and more at a slow rate; the steady intrusion of elements, from modern centers continue. In such process the extension of roads and communications and other media of communication contribute identifiably. The traditional economic system cannot keep pace with newly infiltrated system; they get strained. Close to the heel of this process the modern education system enters. The outcome is that the traditional educational institutions lose their media of operation slowly in the face of the new system.

All make them move to the urban centers. The modern elements enter into traditional socio-economic system are not at all filtered, it is unseived. Their indiscriminate introductions do not take the local resource, topography, and traditional economic patterns into cognizance. The protests were initially directed once towards the personnel who acted as the harbingers of civilization after post colonial period, but that dwindled in course of time. The material items aliens to their cultures were accepted as said earlier, and that leading to the drain out of the traditional meager resources they generate. The construction of the road and communication has impacts on certain spheres of health and hygiene, and other means of welfare. It brings in commodities from the market centers. What they return with? These are raw material locally available that act as an essential part of economy of the people, and the balancing factor for the environment as well. These are carried to the urban centers through improved transport system. Materials attract material, for this we see the reciprocal inflows of material cultural items between the urban and rural through the wide networks of communication and road systems. If the material products are bartered, it does not cause major problem as it happens between two or more neighbouring groups or distant cultures. It could have ended in cohesion as have been between the highland and the plains a few decades back. The only means of meeting the deficits both by the people of the plains and highland was through bartering; that continues today even. Everything was determined through cultural evaluation; but it works independent of the erratic ups and down of the dollar (Roy, 1994). The

infiltration of money economy in the highland, is going to change the traditional texture of the socio-economic system of the egalitarian cultures.

The sequences of change or its effect are evidenced in the erosion of traditional structure and the creation of new system within a system. The traditional crafts give way to the analogous improved and finished products from the market. Anything comes from distant or outside returns with premium by slicing away the non-compensatable indigenous resources. When one makes a comparative study over the indigenous crafts from the 'life and culture' of the people. What is seen that democracy in material cultural level, and egalitarianism in socio-economic pattern are on wane among the shifting cultivators of highland, and the ethno-cultural groups of the foothills plains. Through the expanding roads and communications, the arteries for economic development, instead of transmitting the pure blood or elements for development, a little healthy nutrient economic elements are pumped into the simple societies of Northeast. In return the raw materials are pumped out, and are poured into the industrial set up of the industrial centers. The more the people are flooded with extraneous commodities, the more advanced they are. The planners take the satisfaction, that the people of Northeast are on the road to transformation, and they conform themselves to the given indices of national development. This is some kind of cultural pulverization. The ends of the strings of this process remain at the hands of distant global planners or economic players.

The so-called planned changes introduced among the people Northeast have given birth to multifarious socio-cultural and economic problems. This is more so among the ethno-cultural groups depending solely on subsistence economy. They fell prey to some cheap but temporally effective material with catchy look. An example from Garo hills may be cited here; this is as such. In Garo hills the Garos were encouraged to raise the cash crop like pineapple in the fallow land nearer to their homesteads. Initially it was introduced with subsidy from the government. They started planting pineapple. The subsidy given for raising pineapple went directly to the consumers shops of the towns wherefrom at a first chance they picked up bottled wine (*bilati mad*) and radio sets operated by cells. When the cells for radio got consumed and the radio developed snag or defect, they frequently went to town. The money they received from the beneficiaries went back to the donors with premium (personal communication: Late D.N. Majumdar). That an insignificant matter it seems to be at the moment, but that caused a ripple of changes within the society that had existed with its age old tranquility.

People get more inclined towards the town where life is more pleasurable; electronics media gave them more recreations than their own rites and rituals and dormitory (*nok pante*) that a few decades back imparted informal education attuned with their life and culture has almost become difunct. So in the case for among almost all the ethno-cultural groups retaining their subsistence economy in the highland. The same tradition continues to exist among the ethno-cultural groups who migrated to the plains from highland and adopted the wet cultivation, and coming in to the fold of the peasantry of the plains. Dormitory as an institution succumbed to the same end as their highlander counterpart did much earlier and at a much rapid rate; because modernity makes it inroad into highland through the plains.

The phenomena as we see today had its beginning with the penetration of colonial system. The process of consolidating the administrative group over the the 'pre civilized' ethnic groups in the highland as mentioned earlier was started with the prostelization of western religious faith. They did that without distributing the traditional socio-economic system. Society cradles it when it received further tacit aids in the form of materials and other help. It created cultural space within the traditional society for the new. Western educational institutions started growing up and it almost carpeted over whole highland where the influences from the neighbouring royal system failed to penetrate or to make any tangible inroad. The ethnic situation remained as an open space for the colonial expansionism. The very process of prostylization used education as a bridge between the people in either Tibeto-Chinese, or Tibeto-Burmese or Monkhemar speaking population of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Tripura. Power centers of this system remained beyond the mainland of India.

If we look at the overall cultural scenario of the highland, it is seen that the colonial administrator maintained a kind distinctiveness in their administrative establishment including the institutional patterns (office, residence), and mode of living. At the same time through religious homogeneity they maintained a kind of unitary system between the two- the administrator and the administrated. They give them subsidy, but they never introduced any developmental programme that was in operation in their country. Roads and communication they developed were designed to serve their colonial interest. The very sense of donor and receipient was endemic to their relation. This was somehow inculcated in their each and every endeavour. The passing through the hazardous and difficult hills and the passes were for transporting the tea to Guwahati, an administrative

HQ, wherefrom it could be sent to different directions. They could read it out that the simple societies having corresponding simple socio-economic institutions could be subjugated by giving some economic fillups. This way their process of humanizing the 'wild tribes' started (Bhagabati, 1988: 8). They had commercialized the cultural simplicity of the highlander in tacit manner. The same they could not do among the people of the plain who have a complex and structured socio-economic network backed by the strong religious base. The difference between the plains and the highland existed or rather made it exist. It broke at many points, and such points serve as an platform where the people from the plains and the ethno-cultural groups from the highland meet on certain occasions or dates when the two despite their linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic needs met one another. This was an age-old process. It seemed to have worked independent of political interference or its initial phase. But later on the British administrator acted as a catalytic agent to such enterprise (Luthra, Quoted from Bhagabati, 1988:8).

(iv)

The independent India emerged with an ethno-political identity, which is composite in its forms and texture. Transition from colonial administration to an administration democratically oriented created a transitional vacuum. The old policy of status quo and isolation was replaced by a policy of development, and integration (Roy Burman, 1970 : 113), everything to be newly formulated. The problem of recognizing the cultural and economic aspirations of the hills and the plains people became an issue of priority. The contrast physical and the cultural environments seem to have introduced some kinds of problem of keeping the cultural groups together as a cohesive cultural whole or as a nation. Initial emergence of nationhood witnessed the pangs of the process of synthesis, especially in Northeast India. Initially it was centrifugal in nature; now is becoming centripetal.

The whole matter within the inertia of colonial educational outlook was viewed with. It was centrifugal because the traditional land tenure system acted as causative force, wherever the traditional system of land tenure is altered in name of improvement or change, it creates chaos in socio-economic structure or institutions. System cannot be created; it evolves. It was viewed when the policy remains more or less white colour. The condition is not much better or different from the colonial state, the policy remain more or less while colour oriented. Compared to the vastness

of population, ecological, economic and cultural diversity, the number of educational institutions in keeping with needs of Northeast are quite negligible, and that too were mainly designed or oriented keeping the necessity of the urban and periurban needs. Even if it reaches to the interior part of the traditional structure, that too creates negative effect on the culture of that area. What is seen that anything comes unfiltered through cultural sieves from the urban center, it at a first chance hits on indigenous knowledge system; thus creating socio-economic imbalances. Whereas from the plain plough in the foothill plain made a slow and steady expansion, it increased the quantum of production, but did not alter the traditional values at beginning. Following the plough the classical tradition entered, and the process of cultural synthesis with people of the foothills begins.

What is seen at the moment that basic economy of subsistence of the Northeast, say its plains or the highland, mainly depends on plough and shifting cultivations, respectively. Each has its own idioms of life, and cultural rhythms quite deeply entrenched. It works efficiently under its own environment. Each is relative to time and space. As mentioned when the process of urbanization starts in such traditional setting, it grows at the expense of its traditional counterpart. It gives birth to new technical and new moral order (Redfield, 1968) among the urbanites. The quality of life, which the urban elites search for still remains as concept and the proper meaning of them, is yet to be understood. It is something like a chase after a mirage. What the planner want to see let their conception of the quality of life be reflected by the traditional cultures of Northeast. Very often their expected reality do not reciprocate with the practical reality. The qualitative growth does not mean higher qualitative state. Because the man is a cultural animal, his rhythms of life draws crescendo of big cultures. He suffers from identity crisis at a given moment of his stage of life. That's why a Naga, a Garo, a Khasi, an Assamese, even after being educated in western institutions hardly abandons his traditional identity and the very sense of his nationhood; so does the religion. This is the scenarion of the Northeast where we see there exist a silent democracy in material cultural and socio-economic spheres. That made the cultures of Northeast to remain as a cohesive socio-cultural identity (Roy, 1994). This is silent force, this needs to be understood well through in depth concerted, and integrated approaches by the disciplines concerned with this problem. Isolated approach without proper cognizance to the ground reality will prove counterproductive for Northeast India, and gives birth to some and to some socio-economic problems. The emerging problems are the outcome

of the negative impact of the commercial economy apparently having a benevolent tone.

The rate of expansion of industrial structures in Northeast is quite lower compared to that of the rest part of India. Whatever, may be the structure and the quantum of production of such industries, but its nature of contribution to the economic pool of the seven sisters need further scrutiny. The industry has grown, whatever may the extent has pitched a change and the waves of the changes that hit the socio-economic bases of the traditional socio-economic structure. After the installation of an industry, Guwahati city as an example, it is seen that the agricultural lands of ethno-cultural groups were being procured from the owners of the lands. The owner of the most of the lands had been ethno-cultural group. The people were monetarily compensated. They moved interior to the foothills. When such a phenomenon takes place, the traditional institutions, which are interwoven with the 'life and culture' of the people lost their media of operation. It has thrown people in a state of being refugee in their own habitat. The process has not stopped there; it is being further accentuated with expansion of the habitats of the progressively developing middle class elites from the traditional setup. Neither the state machinery, nor any institution dealing with the human problem under modernization has taken up this burning issue of socio-cultural problems for study, and their constant follow up. Such as indiscriminate introduction of modernity in name of development or industrialization may impair damage to the national cause in future.

Another example is cited here to illustrate the devastating effect of the establishment of Ashok Paper Mills, district Goalpara, Assam. This industrial unit under the patronage of Assam Government was established around late seventies. For this the resource was drawn mostly from bamboo rich hills of Garo hills district of Meghalaya. The mill started with drawing the bamboo, which is an essential base for jhum cultivation from Garo hill through the contractors of the plains. The rate of falling the bamboo assumed such a disastrous state that it started creating problem in 'jhum cultivation', and for their day-to-day requirements. Inside their subsistence economy, money was pumped disproportionately. That created some touts within the egalitarian society. They got detached from the cultural soil, and started cleaving the age-old but balanced traditional socio-economic institution. Through such broken structure of social institutions, the money economy started operating. However, after short spell of time the paper mill collapsed. The supply of bamboo was stopped; but it left a trail of

cultural anarchism, which ended in creating delinquent youth and insurgency.

The imbalance in cultural and ecological spheres is controlled by social custom in the remotest area of the highland even today. To illustrate this, an example from an area inhabited by the Apatani considerably away from Zero (sometimes known as Hapoli) in Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh may be cited here. Behind each homestead, there is a bamboo grove; an Apatani family maintains that meticulously. This is being guarded by the custom. Whenever for house building or for other purpose a bamboo is felled; immediately it is to be replaced by another sapling nearest to the spot of bamboo felled. This is a kind of culturally controlled auto-check system that ends in maintaining a balance between the nature and culture. Such elements work silent as a part of the socio-ecological system in Northeast India. That makes the culture thrive on cursing past the time. This needs scientific recording, and to be examined to what extent it can be integrated with the emerging systems of development which cultures of the Northeast is passing through. Our conception towards the culture and ecology is based somewhat on statistical evaluation. This has made the Planning Commission (1981) high powered to publish a report on slash and burnt cultivation. It states that in 60's to 70's slope the highest erosion is caused by this type of cultivation. It gives a negative image of slash and burnt cultivation (Roy Burman, 1998 : 13). Terrace is taken as a substitute for jhum cultivation to arrest erosion and high production as well. After the introduction of terrace cultivation it is seen that the people from selected areas were motivated with the subsidy and cow-dung as a manure for the terrace. For the first time people raised good crop from the terraces, but certain items like cotton, paddy, etc., showed deficiency in their production pattern. For the next year the production dwindled as the organic manner (i.e., cow dung) is not available; because keeping of cattle is an alien practice for the Garos. The whole endeavour instead of improving the quality of life to the people and deterring the degradation of surface prove counter productive. The modeled village retaining its traditional form by using the wood (not fodder or leaves) was constructed by the planning agencies nearer to terrace plots. Because of the progressive decline of the annual production, the people enter into economic crisis. Their traditional socio-economic balance, matrilineal kinship bond based jhum cultivation and tenure system became quite inoperative here, they were in a socio-economically chaotic stage. What more that in this process the people do not have spontaneous attachment. On a fine morning, they abandoned

their modded village in group and backed their traditional way of life in order to avert their socio-economic and cultural crisis, and for comfortable and socially secured existence. What is felt that 'culture and life' does not exist in food only; it is in totality- deficit and affluenc, starvation and overfeeding, toil and recreation, 'cooperation and reciprocity', and joint socio-economic pursuit (Roy, 1981; 1994; 1990). Our idiom of life and culture act discordant in the life of the simple people of the Northeast. What is felt that 'culture and life' does not exist in food only; it is in totality- deficit and affluenc, starvation and overfeeding, toil and recreation, 'cooperation and reciprocity', and joint socio-economic pursuit (Roy, 1981; 1994; 1990). Our idiom of life and culture act discordant in the life of the simple people of the Northeast.

We should understand the problem against the gamout of 'cultural relativism'. What is effecient in one place may not be same for the other. For example the 'terrace cultivation' practiced by the Apatanis in Subansiri' Arunachal Pradesh, where this practice has emerged out of the interaction between culture and environment. The gentle hilly slope watered by the hilly runnels and springs are utilized by the people in a way where, the terrace does not cause ecological hazard. Nor does it cause the socio-economic imbalance, because the economics of production is culturally stabilized and systematized.

Towards the late seventies (1976) we had a chance to be in the Draflong village inhabited by the Mishmi considerably away from Tezu, the Head Quarter of Lohit district, Arunachal Pradesh; we saw that the valuable belonging were kept in a structure at a distance almos. without any protection We feel quite surprised. Our puzzle was over when we saw their evenness in the contour of socio-economic pattern. Here nobody was poor, nor was anybody rich. The people enjoyed economic plenty by minimizing their material need. Under such an uniform socio-economic state the question of taking anything from other does not arise at all. The Garos of the Meghalaya present a phenomenon different in expression but same notion as prevalent among the mishmis. This is as such each family in a village built own granary together with other in cluster situated away from main homestead (Playfair, 1909) and are not guarded. Everything deficit and affluence, pleasure and sorrow, is culturally shared. Nobody suffers from economic or social insecurity as at socio-economic level all stand as a uniform cohesive whole. This what we think is unique almost the shifting cultivators of the highland. The same element spills over among the ethno-cultural agrarians of the foothills region. That had been

a phenomenon of till late nineties. Power struggles are there; so does the problem of selection of leader problem. Sets of norms and customs a few decades ago safeguarded and balanced socio-economic structure.

(v)

The old wanted to see let their worldview be reflected on their offsprings. But time is moving forward; new views about cultures emerge to which the new generation get themselves exposed. This make them to evolve a new structure which may not have any bearing on the traditional base. the ethos of the old come in confrontation with the new thoughts and ideas of growing generation. Finally the new values are accommodated within the existing system and this is a process to enter into a stage of configuration. When the elder with his post-figurative stage could say a young configurative stage, you know, I have been young and you never have been old. But the today's young people reply: you have never been young in the world I am young, and you never can be' (Mead, 1970). What happened in the post second world war era? Here had been a large scale immigration into America from Africa and other underdeveloped countries. The indigenous youth and the old under the new techno-economic system exposed themselves and experienced a new or alien values in American in their own ways. That resulted in making traditional values of the old non-functional, the youth got themselves to be part of the new system he was reared up (Mead 1970). More or less same situation prevails here; people need not migrate from their habitat. New technological cults with amorphous structur and meanings give birth to new values and appearance to an indistinct image of future different from his own.

The main problem that the plains having with the foothills and foothills with the hills was cordinated through the culturally evolved system or process. In such process all men from the hills may not be in direct contact with the economy of the plains, but there existed a kind of indirect or invisible contacts or influences. The same way colonial administration had their invisible administrative machinery extended into the interior. They did that creating some indigenous middlemen. The same practice with a different attitude and nomenclature continued though the creation of administrative centre and capitals being at centre for each newly created state. In place of middleman there comes Liaison Officer or employees who carry the message of changes mooted by the various government agencies of planning to the people without cognizing emergent problems both in socio-economic and in physical enviornment. Such ideas mooted reached at a speedier rate to such areas where the communication networks,

road transport are effective and efficient. Such area become exposed to modern system. whoever comes within the ambit of this system develops the ills that the cultures of the town possess. He suffers from the problem of alienation from his own culture. The culture, the same people who had once been a part of his existence, under the influence of new system that becomes his counterpart.

The peasant economy of the plain which already is inherently tied up with the urban cultures absorbs such elements and underwent through the process of class formation. Here a class gets economically interlocked with another from within communicates with other from within each stratified socio-economic environment consisting of the ethos, the mores, set of values and norms. Here what we have seen that under the wider environmental system of change each group very often maintains their relative positions in traditional environment and outside also. An example cited here to elucidate this fact. The second author undertook a problem oriented study on changes in a multiethnic situation where the educated young were trained to get themselves prepared as future entrepreneurs. That too by giving boost to some of the traditional elements of their economy. This is as such a caste Hindu family peasant who is acquainted with the cattle keeping were provided with jersey breed, the Rabhas were with hybrid duck and fowl varieties, and the Garos with Australian hog with subsidy and feeds and security cover. They were given such items with a condition that after six month, they would not have to pay any in cash, but in kind. For circulation of the products, the sponsors made necessary arrangements as a part of the scheme. There are booths for milk collection at different spots on the road where from the Veterinary Department, Government of Assam, would collect the same. Likewise storage arrangement in the center itself was made from pork to be collected, from the Garos, and eggs from the Rabhas. Nothing happened as per their expectation. Despite the benign attitude of the sponser, everything ended in fiasco. Why such things happens, the cause is that the educated youth who were selected were educated in formal education, which proved impractical and isolated in the socio-economic structure of their family or village cultural environment. Animal husbandry in the strict sense of term in traditional context is not a part of their life. It is part of their regular rhythms of life where no additional involvement is required. The introduction of improved breed needs new additional care and treatment; this is alien to the people. What is important that in a traditional society a person cannot be alienated from his family. In fact the cattle, and the poultry are given to

a family through a person. Behind a person there remains all members of family who were also instrumental to the success of such scheme. This point was not informed properly or was not conveyed to the future entrepreneur. As a result person and society stood isolated.

What is thought that segmented approach always suffer from such consequences. The whole process needs to be integrated with wider network through the process of formal education. That was lacking in the ethnic traders, around Rani, a periurban people of Guwahati city. People come in contact with the traders, government agencies, their participation in the system was simply mechanical. They could not reach the inner of the modern economic system. Their world view remained village centered. They failed to integrate themselves with the wider open socio-economic environment.

To get one self-integrated with the modern system, education becomes a must. So lack of education means lack of communication, and at the same time education without any relation with the life, culture, and environment proves more counterproductive for a society. Traditional institutions, distributional and re-distributional, which include family kinship collective economic pursuits, and common granaries even today serve as fountain for socio-economic 'life and culture' of the people. We call them underdeveloped or underprivileged. Time has come to make a new assessment for Northeast Indian cultural situation. Education carried the light from the so called higher cultures to the simples. It gives them light no doubt; but sometimes that creates conflagration which the Northeast India is suffering from. Let the causes of socio-economic ills and its environment be diagnosed first and then the planner be allowed to prescribe the medicine. In this regard the anthropologists have an important role to play along with other scientists.

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2

Tribes and Castes of North East India

Socio-Political Changes in Pre and Post Independence Period

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Northeast Region of India having a population of 39.04 million (Census 2001) is mainly a region consisting of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Out of these states, four states are having tribal population in majority viz. Mizoram (94.5 pc), Nagaland (89.1 pc), Meghalaya (85.9 pc) and Arunachal Pradesh (64.2 pc). The region has literacy rate of 65.77 pc as against all India rate of 65.2 pc. The figure of literacy varies from 54.74 pc in Arunachal to highest figure of 88.49 pc in Mizoram. 34.69 pc of the people in the region fall below poverty line in 2000 AD as against national average of 26.1 pc. Highest pc of population below poverty line is found in Sikkim is 36.55 pc and lowest in Mizoram; 19.47 pc. Details of Scheduled tribe population in North East region are shown below.

In India and for that matter in North Eastern states, the tribes, castes, sub-castes, religious, and linguistic groups overlap making almost impossible to put strictly the tribes and castes in water tight compartments. This is more applicable in case of tribes and castes of Assam leading to a tribe caste continuum that took place in the distant past. Perhaps due to this factor and the role played by the great Vaisnavite preceptor Sri Sankaradeva the rigour of social barrier and extreme form of casteism is not traced in the North Eastern states, more particularly in Assam.

Tribes of North-east India

Table 1

Showing total population of North Eastern States in millions, pc of ST population, ST literacy pc; ST pc below poverty line (census 2001)

State	Total Pop in million	ST pop	Literacy ST below poverty line	ST
Arunachal Pradesh	1.09	64.2	54.71	33.47
Assam	26.64	12.8	64.28	36.09
Manipur	2.39	34.2	68.87	28.54
Meghalaya	3.31	85.9	63.31	33.87
Mizoram	0.89	94.5	88.49	19.47
Nagaland	1.99	89.1	67.11	32.67
Sikkim	0.54	20.6	69.98	36.55
Tripura	0.19	31.1	73.66	34.44
NE Region	39.04	26.9	65.77	34.69
India	1027.02	—	65.38	26.10

Note: Population and literacy figures as per 2001 census. Below poverty line figures refer to 1999-2000

The tribe and caste situation of North-East India is different from that prevailing in other parts of the country due to its unique socio-political, geographical and historical background. The region has had attracted attention of the anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and administrators, both foreign and Indian due to the multiplicity of ethnic groups forming into a Anthropological museum. The tribal populations of the region speak different dialects having distinct socio-cultural traditions distinguishable from one another. Entering into this region at different times, the tribes became autochthones of the region. Although the tribes belong to the Mongoloid stock, Australoid elements also become visible in certain cases. Besides many tribes living in the plains of Assam possess certain Caucasoid strains. The Indo-Mongoloids of the region have two distinct linguistic divisions viz. Tibeto Burmans and Siamese Chinese. The Thai is one of the major sub divisions of the latter group. In this sub division we find non scheduled ethnic groups like the Ahoms, Phakes, Khamyango, Turungs, Aitonias and Scheduled tribes like Khamtis, Singhphos etc. Except the Khasi and Pnar who speak Hon Khmer language of Austro Asiatic language family, other groups of Indo Mongoloids speak Tibeto Burman lanaguages. The Akas, Adis, Mishings, Nishi (Daflas), Mishmi etc. of all under North Assam sub division of Tibeto Burman. In the Assam Burma Sub Division, Bodo, Naga, Mizo, Kuki, Mikir (Karbi),