

Executive Summary of the Thesis

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE EARLY SETTLERS OF ASSAM REGION

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CONTENTS OF THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contents of the Executive Summary.....	i
Table of Contents of the Thesis.....	ii- v
List of Maps.....	vi
List of Figures.....	vii- x
List of Tables.....	xi-xii
Executive Summary.....	xiii-xviii
References.....	xix-xxxix

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	i-iii
Table of Contents	iv-vii
List of Maps.....	viii
List of Figures.....	ix-xii
List of Tables.....	xiii-xiv
Synopsis.....	xv-xxiv

Chapter 1: Introduction

1- 16

- 1.1: Research Problem Statement
- 1.2: Scope of the Current Research
- 1.3: Objectives
- 1.4: Methodology
 - 1.4.1: Literature Survey
 - 1.4.2: Reconnaissance Survey
 - 1.4.3: Field Survey (Sampling)
 - 1.4.4: Documentation and Classification
 - 1.4.5: Comparative Analysis of Material Culture
 - 1.4.6: Ethnographic Survey

Chapter 2: Physiography of the Study Area

17-48

- 2.1: Geology
- 2.2: Mountain Ranges
- 2.3: Soil
- 2.4: Drainage
- 2.5: Climate

2.6: Vegetation

2.7: Crops

2.8: Fauna

2.9: Mineral Resources

2.10: Ethnicity

2.11: Zonal Division Of Assam Region (Present Assam) Based on Various Environmental Parameters

2.11.1: Micro Zones of Assam

Chapter 3: Account of Previous Research: A Review

49-68

3.1: Prehistoric Research

3.2: Early Historic Research

3.3: Research on the Megalithic Traditions

3.4: Literary Evidence

3.4.1: Assam in Puranas, Tantras, and Epics, and other Literatures

3.4.2: Dynastic Rules

Chapter 4: Explored Sites and Material Culture

69-146

4.1: Kamrup

4.1.1: Digaru-Kolong Valley

4.1.1.1: Bogibori

4.1.1.2: Marakdola

4.1.1.3: Sarutaru

4.1.2: Guwahati (GHY)

4.1.3: Ambari

4.1.4: Ganapati (Rani)

4.2: Goalpara

- 4.2.1: Bambooti
- 4.2.2: Damra
- 4.2.3: Mornoi
- 4.3: Golaghat
 - 4.3.1: Doyang-Dhansiri Valley
- 4.4: Dibru Valley
- 4.5: Karbi-Anglong
 - 4.5.1: Bichikkri
 - 4.5.2: Kekang-Adong
 - 4.5.3: Langmet
- 4.6: Dima-Hasao
 - 4.6.1: Daojali-Hading
 - 4.6.1.1: The Ceramics
 - 4.6.2: Asalu
 - 4.6.3: Mailu
 - 4.6.4: Chaikam
 - 4.6.5: Bolason
- 4.7: Observation

Chapter 5: Site Formation Processes

147-198

- 5.1: Description of Sites
- 5.2: The relationship between the living system of the population and the material/
Cultural process for site formation (An ethnographic parallel)
 - 5.2.1: The village Mailu
 - 5.2.2: Semkhor
 - 5.2.3: Boloson

Chapter 6: Cultural relationship with Other Parts of Indian Sub-Continent and south-East Asia **199-226**

6.1: Neolithic sites from other parts of India

6.2: Sites of Bangladesh and Nepal

6.3: Neolithic sites from yangtzi valley (China)

6.4: Mainland Southeast Asia

6.5: Stone jar sites of Northeast India and Southeast Asia

6.6: Historical relation with other parts of Indian subcontinent and with South-east Asia

6.7: Whether they can be considered as the peripheral settlements/ sites of mainland India/or sites of south east Asia? Core- periphery model

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion **227-240**

7.1: A Discussion on the Micro Zones and their cultural Implications

7.2: The Material Culture

7.3: The Formation of Sites

7.4: Cultural Relations

7.5: Cultural Insights and Ethnographic Analysis

7.6: Conclusion

7.7: Limitations of the Study and Future Prospects

References **241-263**

LIST OF MAPS

Map No.	Page No.
Map 2.1: The relief map of Assam	18
Map 2.2: Geological base map of Assam	20
Map 2.3: Soil Map of Assam	22
Map 2.4: Brahmaputra River and its Tributaries	24
Map 2.5: Map showing rainfall pattern in Assam	25
Map 2.6: Map showing the vegetation cover of Assam	28
Map 2.7: Map showing the agricultural pattern of Assam	29
Map 2.8: Map showing richness of fauna in Assam	30
Map 2.9: Geological and Mineral map of Assam	31
Map 2.10: Map showing the Agro-Climatic zones of Assam	38
Map 2.11: Micro zones of Assam	40
Map 4.1: Explored Sites of Assam	70
Map 4.2: Google view of site Marakdola	74
Map 5.1: Explored and Excavated Neolithic Sites from entire Northeast India	151
Map 6.1: Neolithic site distribution of India, South-east Asia and China with the extension of Shouldered Celt	210
Map 6.2: Extension of Stone Jars	215

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure No.	Page No.
Figure 4.1: Tools from Bogibori	72
Figure 4.2: Rim sherds and decorated body sherds from bogibori	73
Figure 4.3: Megalithic remains at site Marakdola (MKD)	75
Figure 4.4: Section exposing pottery at site Marakdola (MKD)	75
Figure 4.5: Marakdola (MKD) pottery (1)	76
Figure 4.6: Marakdola (MKD) pottery (2)	77
Figure 4.7: Marakdola (MKD) pottery	78
Figure 4.8: Cord and Paddle impressed pottery from Marakdola (MKD)	81
Figure 4.9: Complete Pot and Spouts from Marakdola (MKD) (Collection from Dibrugarh University Anthropology department)	81
Figure 4.10: Guwahati (GHY) pottery	83
Figure 4.11: Dish-on-stand from Ambari excavation	85
Figure 4.12: Terracotta plaque with Sunga-Kushana features and Stamped/Impressed pottery, Ambari	86
Figure 4.13: Ganapati (GNP) pottery	87
Figure 4.14: Ganapati (GNP) pottery	88
Figure 4.15: Stone tools from Bambooti (Gauhati)	94

University Anthropology Department Museum collection)	
Figure 4.16: Abradars from Bambooti (Gauhati University Anthropology Department Museum Collection)	95
Figure 4.17: The abrasion marks on the surface of Abradars	95
Figure 4.18: Stone tools from Damra (Gauhati University Anthropology Department Museum Collection)	96
Figure 4.19: Stone tools and Abradars from Damra (Gauhati University Anthropology Department Museum Collection)	96
Figure 4.20: Mornoi (MRN) pottery	98
Figure 4.21: Mornoi (MRN) pottery	99
Figure 4.22: Stone Tools from Dibru Valley (A collection from Dibrugarh University Anthropology Department)	106
Figure 4.23: Karbi Langpi River: View from Moring Morong hill	107
Figure 4.24: Slopes of hill at Bichikkri where Jhum is cultivated	108
Figure 4.25: Kekang (KKA) Adong pottery	110
Figure 4.26: Kekang (KKA) Adong pottery (1)	111
Figure 4.27: Kekang (KKA) Adong pottery	112
Figure 4.28: Kekang-Adong (KKA) pottery (2)	113
Figure 4.29: Pottery drawing and the diagnostic sherds from	118

Langmet (LGT)	
Figure 4.30: Stone tools from Langmet (LGT)	119
Figure 4.31: Neoliths from Daojali Hading (Guwahati University anthropology Deptt. Museum collection)	123
Figure 4.32: Cord-impressed sherds from Daojali-hading (A collection from Gauhati University Anthropology Department)	124
Figure 4.33: Langting River	126
Figure 4.34: Stone tools from Mailu	128
Figure 4.35: Stone jars from Chaikam	129
Figure 4.36: Monolithic stone jars from Bolosan	130
Figure 5.1: Distribution of Dimasa tribe in Mailu village, North Cachar Hills and Dimasa community living in the hill slopes at present	185
Figure 5.2: Dimasa women carrying bamboo vessel for booming wooden sticks, vegetables from jhum field and hills.	185
Figure 5.3: Find spot of stone tools in Mailu village by the villagers	187
Figure 5.4: Gun Used for game hunting	188
Figure 5.5: Semkhor village and a traditional hut	190
Figure 5.6: The sacrificial stone (a), the decorated buffalo horn (b), the sacrificial ground (c)	191

Figure 5.7: Traditional house exterior (a), A male hunter with equipments (b), a buffalo horn as entrance decoration in house interior part (c), different skeletons of animals on side wall of house interior (d)	192
Figure No 5.8: Three Zemi-Naga women in three different household works; milling process of rice in traditional wooden tool (a), weaving of traditional dresses for women (b), preparing food in a traditional kitchen where pork's are smoked (c)	193
Figure 5.9: The local beer storing and pouring vessal	193
Figure 5.10: The stone jars (a), the present burial stone (b), the sitting platform (c), the memorial stone platform in front of house (d)	195
Figure 6.1: Hoabinhian tool assemblages from Moh-Khiew Cave, Thailand; Chopping tools, Bifacially retouched block and Bifaces from Moh-Khiew	212

LIST OF TABLES

Table No.	Page No.
Table 2.1: Environmental macro zones of Assam with past cultural evidences	37
Table 2.2: Environmental micro zones of Assam with their cultural Materials so far explored	44-46
Table 4.1: Bogibori Stone tools Analysis	73
Table 4.2: Description of Rim sherds from Marakdola (MKD) (See figure 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7)	79-80
Table 4.3: Description of Rim sherds from Guwahati (GHY) (See figure 4.10)	84
Table 4.4: Description of Rim sherds from Ganapati (GNP) (See figure 4.13 and 4.14)	89
Table 4.5: Analysis of Stone Tools from Bambooti (Gauhati University Anthropology Department Museum Collection)	91-94
Table 4.6: Description of Rim sherds from Mornoi (MRN) (See figure 4.20 and 4.21)	100
Table 4.7: Sculptures from Doyang-Dhansiri Valley	102-105
Table 4.8: Description of pottery from Kekang-Adong (KKA) (See figure 4.25, 4.26 and 4.27, 4.28)	114-115
Table 4.9: Description of decorated sherds from Kekang adong (KKA)	115-117

Table 4.10: Description of Rim sherds from Langmet (LGT)	119
(See Figure 4.29)	
Table 4.11: Analysis of pottery from sites of Karbi-Anglong	120-121
(overall)	
Table 4.12: Analysis of stone tools from Mailu	127
Table 4.13: Potteries of Eastern and North East	137-146
India in different cultural period	
Table 5.1: Site Context	152-158
Table 5.2: Sites and Dates of Prehistoric Sites	168-173
from Northeast India	
Table 5.3: Explored Sites in Context	178-181
Table 6.1: Neolithic Sites from other Parts	201-203
of India referred to in the text	
Table no 6.2: Prehistoric sites from Bangladesh	205
and Nepal referred to in the text	
Table no 6.3: Prehistoric sites from Yangtzi Valley,	206
South China referred to in the text	
Table no 6.4: Neolithic sites from Southeast Asia	207-209
referred to in the text	
Table no 6.5: Stone Jar sites from Northeast India	213-214
and Southeast Asia referred to in the text	

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study investigates the cultural evolution of the Assam region in Northeastern India, focusing on the chronological sequence of human habitation from prehistoric to historic periods. The present Assam region is mainly a flat plain land surrounded by hillocks, and lies between 25°44' and 27°55' N latitude and 89°41' and 96°02'E longitude. It is the eastern continuation of the great plains of India and has a well-demarcated physical unit. The region of Assam, which once encompassed all states of North-East India, is a significant landmass that has long served as a connecting route between mainland India and South-East Asia. Archaeological studies started in this region during the late 19th century. The first-ever Neolithic tool from Assam was discovered by Lubbock (1867), at Biswanath, was followed by a series of exploratory work that led to the discovery of several prehistoric sites in the region. Such discoveries by Steel (1870), Barron (1872), Brown (1914), Hutton (1928), Worman (1949), Barua (1939), Chaudhuri (1944), Dani (1960), and many others, not only put Assam in the prehistoric map of the world but also provided significant insights about early settlers of the region. The first stratigraphic excavation was, however, carried out at the site of Daojali Hading in 1962 (IAR 1962-63), which was followed by a series of excavations at other important sites in the region (IAR 1968-69, Rao, 1976; IAR 1987-88, 1988-89, 1989-90, 1997-98, 1999-2000, 2008-09, 1992-93, 1996-97, 1997-98, 2000-2001, 2012-13). Besides providing first-hand knowledge of the region's cultural development from prehistoric to historical periods, these preliminary studies paved the way for later scholars to investigate various aspects of cultural development and their connections to other contemporary cultural entities.

The research aims at understanding all of the cultural periods, starting with the earliest, by choosing a specific region where a clearer chronology can be understood. Materials from the current exploration and the earlier excavated sites from the present-day Assam and the neighbouring geographical locality are been compared to establish a relative dating in order to know the greater chronology of the area. Additionally, material remains from previously excavated sites are studied in relation to their stratigraphy, wherever possible. Understanding the site formation processes of previously studied and newly explored sites in the study area, that is, the Brahmaputra Valley and its surrounding hill districts, is another objective of the research. In this way, the study also looks at determining the area's accessibility to past inhabitants belonging to different cultures. Simultaneously, investigating the region's geomorphology and its environment by studying select natural zones, which will provide insight into the relationship between humans and land in different cultural periods. The study

area will be divided into different environmental zones and how they differ in terms of physiography, vegetation, landscape, cultivation, and water sources.

Fieldwork forms the cornerstone of this research, involving explorations across the present political boundary of Assam. The data was generated through field survey and systematic surveys through all the previous collections of material culture from university departments, State Department of Archaeology, Government of Assam, and Museums. The systematic survey, which involves field walking or extensive village to village survey across the landscape and localities was carried out with a goal to find the spatial extension of the cultural area, identify the archaeological finds, document the sites with geo-coordinates, temporally (relative dating) fix them and appreciate its surrounding environmental settings. Thus, both primary and secondary data were used. The classification, analysis, and description of field data have all been meticulously recorded. An extensive literature review was carried out to understand the further archaeological potential of the area by identifying the loop holes in the previous works. With the aid of topographical maps of the area prepared by the survey of India, a reconnaissance survey was carried out. Based on different physiographic characteristics, the entire region has been divided into different zones.

Chapter I: Introduction

This chapter provides an outline of the present archaeological scenario of Northeast India, in general, and Assam, in particular. The cultural setting of the study area, which falls within the present political boundary of Assam, has specifically been discussed while introducing the archaeological parameters and the scope of the present work. The chapter also discusses the major objectives of the research. Both primary and secondary data were used in the research, and the different methodologies employed for the collection of data have been discussed in detail.

Chapter II: Physiography of the Study Area

The physiography and the environmental parameters of an area determine the settlement pattern and cultural landscape of a region to a great extent. This chapter deals with these specific aspects, particularly with a focus on the study area. To understand distinct cultural patterns, the study area has been divided into different environmental zones. Different cultural zones have also been identified based on the respective environmental parameters. There were 14 microenvironmental zones in the area. The cultural data was integrated with it to see the role played by the environment in the development of culture. It revealed a wide range of

information about the areas that have been occupied from earliest to latest. While the hilly regions have been continuously inhabited since the prehistoric era, early historical and medieval sites are spatially dispersed throughout the plain Brahmaputra Valley. These developments appear to strategically reflect the population growth theory, the adoption of new agricultural strategies, including the use of river banks for large-scale agriculture where the soil is more fertile, the riverine relationship between contemporary developed culture, trade, and networks, etc.

Chapter III: Accounts of Previous Research: A Review

This chapter presents a review of previous studies conducted in the context of archaeology of the broader region of Assam (understood in general as Northeast India). Studies beginning from the pre-Independence times to the modern times help identify significant aspects of the different cultural periods. A major part of the chapter is dedicated to studies concerning the use of literary evidence to acquire knowledge about the land during the historical period as well as the various dynastic rules. This has sparked interest in the archaeological parallels of the materials recovered so far from historically significant sites.

Chapter IV: Explored Sites and Material Culture

This chapter deals with the archaeological data collected from earlier studies and also the data collected during the present research. A detailed description of all the sites studied (newly explored and materials housed at the universities) has been provided. The analysis of archaeological material and its interpretation is the focus of this chapter. Materials have been documented in the form of drawings. Ceramics have been analysed based on fabric, colour, and form. An attempt has been made to set a relative chronology of the cultural periods based on the analysis of the material evidence.

Chapter V: Site Formation Processes

This chapter examines all the factors that contribute to the formation of sites through various cultural periods. It is primarily important to comprehend the selection of the location as well as the accessibility of the area in terms of geography, landscape, geomorphology, and water sources. Some of the living communities from Dima Hasao have been studied to draw an ethnographic parallel. The ethnographic study has provided ample contextual evidence for the formation of settlements on hilltops, adjacent river valleys, and plain areas of the hills. The formation of sites within the study area, gives a macro level understanding of their proximity

and geographical behaviour within a long span of time. Here, it can be distinguished between two different horizontal formations of sites based on material culture; one connecting Meghalaya-Assam-Nagaland/Manipur-via Myanmar to South-east Asia and the other from Bangladesh-Tripura-Assam (specifically North-Cachar Hill)-Myanmar. Though in first case Meghalayan flake blade industry is absent in Assam. When studying formation processes, it involves the comprehensive collection and analysis of data spanning from the initial occupation of the landscape to the present day.

Chapter VI: Cultural Relationship with Other Parts of the Indian Sub-continent and South-East Asia

This chapter deals with the distribution of cultural material and its extension to sites in other parts of India and South-East Asia belonging to the contemporary cultural periods. It also develops a core and periphery model to understand the geographical openings and barriers (e.g., the geographical-cultural transmission model). In the discourse concerning the cultural relations and interactions of the region with other parts of Indian sub-continent, distant patterns of both integration and isolation have emerged from the earliest periods.

Chapter VII: Discussion and Conclusion

The major findings and a summary of research findings are presented in this chapter. It discusses the significance of the current study, its limitations, and future prospects. It can be affirmed that the objectives outlined for this study have, to a large extent, shaped the broader perspective of the region under investigation. The micro zones within the study area provided insights into the specific geomorphological and environmental conditions suitable for early inhabitants, which also had an impact on the formation processes during various cultural periods. Combining the two suggests a potential relationship between people and the land, as indicated by the preferred types of dwellings and landscape, which are again supported by ethnographic studies of the current population living close to the archaeological sites. Assuming that there is no break in cultural continuity between the prehistoric and historic periods after discussing the material remains, it is possible to identify a continuous history of occupation. In contrast to many other regions in the subcontinent, it becomes apparent that the processes of development and modernization have only recently made inroads into this area. Consequently, this led to the amalgamation of longstanding indigenous cultures with more recent influences.

Key Findings

This study incorporates the following advancements in current archaeological knowledge of the Assam region. More than 15 sites are investigated and re-investigated in this study from various cultural periods. The newly discovered sites have material evidence such as stone tools, stone jars and ceramics. The geo-coordinates, physical environment, and geomorphological settings of each site have properly been documented. Materials in the custody of Anthropology departments in various universities have been documented in the form of detailed descriptions, drawings and photographs. As per the present investigation, a great majority of prehistoric occupation in the current political boundary of Assam is concentrated in the hill districts of Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong and are close to the foothills near the Meghalayan plateau. In this thesis, a detailed analysis of pottery is carried out, which has not been previously done in the region. The pottery analysis covers descriptions of fabric, colour and forms for each piece as well as comparisons with sites in the surrounding geographical area. This can act as a reference material for future workers of this region. This research has dealt with various confusions about the relative chronology of cultural materials and contextualized them. The ceramics industry shows a continuation of decorative patterns from Neolithic to early historic period with variances of fabric and colour. Based on these, the potteries are divided into groups and an inter- and intra-site relationship has been worked out.

Recommendations/Suggestions

After understanding the comprehensive nature of the research on the cultural evolution of the Assam region, it is recommended that future studies consider expanding on the interdisciplinary approach employed in this thesis. Further integration of methodologies such as adoption of new excavation techniques, genetic analysis, linguistics, and advanced remote sensing technologies could enhance our understanding of the region's cultural history. Additionally, to address the challenges posed by the lack of dated sites and the difficulty in contextualizing collected artefacts, the excavations should be prioritized with systematic methods with rigorous stratigraphic recording. In Assam, there are many archaeological sites that have not yet been thoroughly investigated; these sites may reveal new details about the early settlers and their way of life. Remote sensing methods could be a method to find potential excavation sites and give a thorough understanding of the settlement patterns in the area despite a little bit of formation studies on sites has been done in this research. Along with these technical developments, there is scope for interdisciplinary

research that combines archaeology with related disciplines like history, anthropology, earth sciences, linguistics, and genetics. Such interdisciplinary methods might aid in creating a more thorough understanding of the Assam's early settlers' social structure, language, and culture. A promising field of study is genetics. Individuals from various places and cultures would have come together to form new communities among the early settlers of Assam, making up a diverse group. Researchers can learn more about the ancestry and migration patterns of the early settlers by examining the genetic composition of the current populations in the area. Researchers can learn more about the past and diversity of this fascinating area by examining the material culture, settlement patterns, environmental factors, genetics, language, and cultural traditions. Collaborations with reputed national and international institutions will be a suggested one. Overall, this research lays a strong foundation, and future investigations should build upon it to construct a more detailed and interconnected narrative of Assam's rich cultural heritage.

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