

Abstract

Title of the Thesis: Archaeology of the Early Settlers of Assam Region

Submitted by: Nisha Rani Das

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.

However, despite having an extensive work throughout the region, it is still difficult to understand a cultural chronology for whole of Assam which is absent in most of the earlier works. While the prehistoric sites have been categorised in a specific cultural sequence with the help of tool typology and relative dating, many excavations that have been carried out on historical sites have also failed to provide any dated chronology for the historical period. Moreover, both site formation and settlement archaeology are neglected

fields in the archaeological work of this particular area. For the prehistoric sites, it is still untouched subject as there are very few sites so far discovered. To address these gaps, 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 in to 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. Over 18 sites are investigated and re-investigated in this study from various cultural periods. The sites are: Daojali Hading (IAR 1962-63); Sarutaru (Rao, 1977); Marakdola (Rao, 1977); Bogibori; Bambooti (IAR, 2012-13); Asalu (Thakuria, 2015); Mailu; Bolosan (Thakuria, 2016); Chaikam; Kekang-Adong; Langmet; Bichikkri; Guwahati; Ambari (IAR, 1968-69); Doyang-Dhansiri valley (IAR, 1996-97); Dibru Valley (Anderson, 1871); Mornoi; and Ganapati. 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.

After studying the physiographic characteristics of the Assam region, 14 microenvironmental zones and integrated cultural data to reveal the role of the environment in shaping culture. This gives the idea of relationship between cultural materials with different zones. Notably, areas near the Brahmaputra River showed historical settlements, while hilly zones contained prehistoric remains. The study found a correlation between environmental factors, like water sources and raw materials, and settlement patterns. This hilly terrain offered natural defenses and abundant resources, fostering habitation. In context of stone jar localities that also fall within the zones with hilly terrain, revealed the kind of strategic locations that might facilitate trade and cultural interactions between different communities, that promoted exchanges of goods, ideas, and technologies, fostering cultural diversity and innovation among the early inhabitants.

The study also examines material remains, prepared typological and chronological chart of pottery and stone tools from different excavated sites of Assam. Each stone tool's physical characteristics and descriptions have been recorded. On the other hand, the ceramics have been categorised and classified in order to be documented. For the identification of the colour of sherds, the Munsell colour Chart for Soil Colour. With the aid of the classification and description of ceramics, stone tools and their raw materials, an intra- and inter-site relationship has been established.

Starting with the foothills of modern-day Assam, that provide ample evidence of human habitation from the dawn of time to the present. These foothills are the extension of Garo-khasi hills, which is also noticed in their material culture. The explored sites from North Cachar hills shows two kinds of material remains; stone tools and stone jars. The location from where stone tools has been recovered; Daojali Hading and Mailu, shows similar geographical and geomorphological characteristics. Moreover, the locations of newly explored stone jars (Chaikam) are oriented in the same direction, facing north-south and standing east-west. These jars were most likely used as a marker of secondary burial

practice, and the number of jars indicates that the slopes were used for community burial. Currently, the slopes where the jar stands are used for jhum cultivation, making it less likely that burial material will be found inside the jars' holes, or if the jars were only used as symbolic, they must be devoid of burial goods.

A sizeable portion of ceramics have been found that are comparable to other sites reported from north-east India as well as northern and eastern Indian archaeological sites, that have a closer relationship to the potteries discovered in the recent field survey. If we compare the thickness of the sherds, color, and most significantly the decorative patterns, we can see a striking similarity between the pottery from Assam archaeological sites and those from Eastern India. However, even though the decorations are similar, the collection from the recently discovered sites does not demonstrate a very earlier occurrence periodically. The overall ceramics from this current exploration is also divided into six groups. It showed a great deal of connections and differences among them, showed that while there appeared to be a change in forms and fabrics, a consistent decorative pattern or a pattern persisted. These enduring motifs on pottery, showcases the remarkable artistic and cultural continuity of the region. It highlights the resilience and preservation of artistic traditions, even amidst changes in social structures and historical events.

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. If seen particularly, the localities from where tools have been reported, all are in slopes, or hill tops, it can be seen that still those areas are occupied by ethnic communities who are substantially dependent on agriculture i.e. Jhum. Additionally, the region experiences a perpetual geomorphological transformation due to frequent heavy floods and continuous seismic activities. These natural phenomena contribute to the dynamic landscape changes in the area, further shaping the archaeological context.

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. The extension of Neolithic assemblages shows a great deal of cultural distribution from Southeast Asia to Eastern and Northern India via northeast India. Moreover, during the period of Early and Late Historic period, Assam was a part of cultural assimilation under the changing political scenario of Indian sub-continent specifically eastern and northern India. This archaeological evidence underscores the interconnectedness of various cultural groups across the broader geographical expanse and highlights Assam's pivotal position as a conduit for cultural exchange and interaction throughout different historical periods. After studying the cultural development of Bangladesh from earliest times to later periods, it can be assumed that West Tripura, East Bangladesh and North-Cachar hills of Assam can be considered as part of cohesive cultural zone. Likewise, in prehistoric period, a horizontal progression is discernible, characterized by the presence of similar stone tools and pottery assemblages from Meghalaya to Nagaland-Manipur spanning Assam. For the core-periphery model this research explores how the region's unique geographic and environmental factors influences settlement patterns and helps analysing the distribution of material culture. while the prehistoric evidence is limited, it suggests that these regions served as peripheries with influences from southeast Asia and it gradually integrated with other parts of India with the passage of time.

Furthermore, ethnographic surveys in areas with prehistoric affinities offer contemporary insights into ancient cultures. The study documents the settlement patterns, traditional practices, and contributions to the preservation of ancestral heritage among ethnic communities in Dima Hasao or North Cachar hill district. These communities exhibit a preference for hill slopes near water sources, emphasizing the critical interplay between subsistence and security needs in their habitation choices. Menhirs which are generally believed as memorial stones are used by some of them as sacrificial stones and according to the size of the stone, the object to be sacrificed is selected.

This study explored the region under investigation, shedding light on its microenvironmental zones and their influence on early human settlement. Through a combination of archaeological evidence and contemporary ethnographic data, a potential relationship between the landscape and its inhabitants emerges. It also indicates a continuous presence from prehistoric to historic eras, despite the absence of stratigraphic proof. This continuity is inferred from the gradual adoption of advanced manufacturing

techniques, particularly evident in pottery production. Unlike many other regions in the subcontinent, this area has only recently experienced processes of development and modernization, resulting in the amalgamation of long-standing indigenous cultures with more recent influences.

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