Archaeology in North-East India: The Post-Independence Scenario

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ABSTRACT

The archaeological record of north-east India is distinctive in character. It is a synthesis of two types of cultural traits: Indian and South-east Asian. Archaeological findings from the region known as Assam in the pre-Independence period were reported from the beginning of the nineteenth century, but archaeological work was mainly done by enthusiastic administrators or tea planters who were interested in antiquities. The post-Independence period is marked by problem-oriented research, with institutional involvement, in archaeology. But, till date, none of the universities in the region have an exclusive department of archaeology. The archaeology of the post-Independence period in north-east India can be considered a social phenomenon in a particular historical context. It is now widely recognized that all archaeology is political in that it involves relations of power and contemporary interventions in the production of the past. A new perspective in archaeology, ‘the archaeology of the contemporary past’, acknowledges a clear role for archaeology in bringing to light those aspects of history and contemporary experience that are explicitly hidden from the public view by centres of authority, or are obscured by the absence of authority among individuals and groups within the political arena. This is referred to as ‘presencing the absence’. It is time for presencing the absence in north-east India by digging, by reinterpreting, and by analyzing the data in a structured way, within a coherent framework.

CONTENTS
1. INTRODUCTION
2. THE POST-INDEPENDENCE SCENARIO
3. ARUNACHAL PRADESH
4. ASSAM
5. NAGALAND
6. MANIPUR
7. MEGHALAYA
8. TRIPURA
9. ANALYSIS OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE
1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the north-east of India comprises of seven distinct states. In pre-Independence India, however, the region was largely one political entity, named Assam. Assam was among the founding states of the Union of India in 1947, when the state comprised large part of the north-east region. Subsequently, a number of other states were carved out of Assam, starting with Nagaland in 1963 and ending with Arunachal Pradesh in 1972 (Map 1). At present, the region conforms to a national imaginary of an emergent political entity called 'north-east India', which is a conglomerate of seven states. These states are believed to possess a set of common features such as hilly-mountainous landscapes, Tibeto-Burmese populations, and still retain certain pre-modern ways of life. These are essential components in understanding a diverse but historically linked region which has remained peripheral to the study of the archaeology of the subcontinent.
During the colonial period, archaeology remained marginal to British interest in Assam. Archaeological findings in the region began to be reported only from the early years of the nineteenth century, mainly through the initiative of individuals interested in antiquities. British interest was focussed on textual sources, mainly of the Ahom period, with a definitive agenda. British scholars tried to project Assam as a remote, isolated outpost of India, its present entirely unrelated to the past; thereby disinheriting the present population of its rich patrimony. At the same time, archaeological efforts undertaken by individual British civil servants and the Kamrup Anusandhan Samity, a voluntary organization of local enthusiasts and scholars, highlighted the cultural linkages between Kamrup, the historical kingdom that covered a major part of north-east India and the rest of the sub-continent.

The active and living linkages that such efforts both saw and sought between Kamrup and the neighbouring regions had implications for the colonial government confronting the aftermath of the division of Bengal. The British were apprehensive that malignant infections like violent protest and radical political mobilization might disrupt peaceful conditions in Assam. Political disturbances of the kind in Bengal would have severely affected the interests of the colonial state in sectors like tea and timber industry of Assam, a disruption that the British could ill afford. It was therefore important to steer Assam's growing intelligentsia towards favouring the British government.

The colonial government's initiative was intended to facilitate and encourage a different focus on historical studies. Thus, the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) was established in 1928 under direct control of the colonial government and under the leadership of Suryakanta Bhuiyan, a distinguished Assamese scholar. The focus of the department was specifically historical, dealing with periods and events through a clearly defined emphasis on recorded history. As a result, the effort to recover archaeological evidence by systematic exploration and excavation, which was started by the Kamrup Anusandhan Samity and emphasized by E. A. Gait in his *History of Assam* (1905), did not receive adequate attention.

Nevertheless, the Bengal Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was set up in 1900. This evolved into the Eastern Circle five years later, in 1905. With the establishment of this Circle, exploratory works were undertaken and important archaeological sites were discovered and located within a broad chronological framework. The monument survey undertaken by T. Bloch in 1901 is an example of an organized archaeological effort in pre-Independence India.


J. C. Dutta's *Old Relics of Kāmarupa*, published in 1891, is a useful collection of medieval inscriptions from Assam. K. L. Barua, the author of *Early History of Kāmarupa*, had stressed the importance of undertaking excavations to recover ancient relics, and he published a number of
articles along these lines. Barua's article titled 'Prehistoric Cultures of Assam', published in the Journal of the Assam Research Society in 1939, is one of the first articles on archaeology by a local researcher. In the preface of Early History of Kāmarupa (1966), Barua had advocated the use of archaeological techniques for the reconstruction of Assam's history. Sir John Lubbock's article titled 'The Stone Age: Stone Tools in Upper Assam', published in the Athenaeum in 1867, and the work done by two British administrators, J. P. Mills and J. H. Hutton, are other important works in archaeology from the pre-Independence period.

2. THE POST-INDEPENDENCE SCENARIO

The post-Independence period is marked by problem-oriented research, with institutional involvement, in archaeology. But, unlike in other Indian states, archaeology was not developed into an academic discipline in north-east India. Till date, none of the universities in the region have an exclusive department of archaeology. The North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) inaugurated a combined Department of History and Archaeology at its inception in 1973. The University of Nagaland, which was founded in 1998, has also had a Department of History and Archaeology since its inception. Courses were taught under the Prehistoric Archaeology section of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, and the Department of Anthropology, Manipur University.

The lack of trained archaeologists in the region and the absence of proper academic infrastructure to train and nurture young students is one of the prime reasons for the lack of archaeological research in north-east India. In 1980, the Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta, published multiple volumes titled Sources of the History of India under the editorship of N. R. Ray. In Volume III of this publication, extensive coverage was given to the ancient and medieval periods of Assam (Sharma 1980). This was probably for the first time that a prominent publication on Indian history dealt with the region extensively. Prior to this, Assam or north-east India would hardly be mentioned in history books on India.

As a result of the involvement of prehistorians in archaeological research, new Stone Age sites were discovered in north-east India. Explorations were undertaken in Meghalaya, North Cachar Hills, Manipur, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. By the late 1980s, all the northeastern states had departments in charge of, or dealing with, archaeology.

In Arunachal Pradesh, archaeological research was placed under the Directorate of Research; in Assam, a separate department altogether, the Directorate of Archaeology, was created; in Meghalaya, it was placed under the Department of Higher Education; in Nagaland, the Department of Art and Culture was placed in charge of archaeology; in Manipur, a State Department of Archaeology was created; in Mizoram, it was placed under the Department of Art and Culture; and in Tripura, an archaeological wing was established under the Directorate of Higher Education. These departments did conservation works, set up museums and undertook research-oriented work including explorations and excavations. Excavation reports were published, and this gave a new impetus to the discipline.
3. ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), is one of the youngest states of north-east India. Being an extension of the Himalayan and the Patkai mountain ranges, Arunachal Pradesh is also the largest of the northeastern states, covering a total area of 83,743 sq km. This easternmost part of the country is surrounded on three sides by international borders: with Bhutan to the west, China to the north and north-east, and Myanmar to the east. To the south, it is bordered by Assam and Nagaland.

Legends say that this was where the sage Paraśurāma washed away his sin, where the sage Vyāsa meditated, where King Bhīṣmaka founded his kingdom, and where Lord Kṛṣṇa married his consort Rukminī. Clearly attempts were made at fabricating a respectable lineage for the region by later day enthusiasts with a pronounced Brāhmaṇical bias.

Remains of past societies have been found in many districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The Stone Age is represented by Palaeolithic and Neolithic tools. During the early part of the twentieth century, there appeared several reports of Neolithic cultural relics recovered from different parts of Arunachal Pradesh (Anderson 1871; Banerjee 1924-25). Stone Age antiquities collected by J. P. Mills and J. H. Grace between 1933-35 from the state are now preserved in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford University.

Another important collection, made from the Daphabum area of Lohit district in 1972 by B. P. Borpardikar, is preserved in the Prehistory Branch of the ASI, at Nagpur. Indeed, Borpardikar’s investigation resulted in the first ever discovery of a pre-Neolithic (i.e., Palaeolithic) cultural phase in Arunachal Pradesh. The Pitt Rivers Museum collection, on the other hand, represents the Neolithic phase of Arunachal Pradesh.

In 1979, a Neolithic site was reported to have been discovered at Parsi Parlo. The site has been excavated by the archaeological branch of the Arunachal Pradesh Directorate of Research. Three cultural phases were identified during the excavation: Phase I: aceramic Neolithic; Phase II: ceramic Neolithic; and Phase III: Ferrolithic.

Phase I consisted of scrappers and large cutting tools; Phase II was characterized by the occurrence of pecked and ground stone implements, waisted blades/axes, facetted tools and handmade pottery; and in Phase III, alongside pecked and ground stone implements, there was evidence of iron tools. An iron blade was found with a lump of raw iron. Iron has not been reported from any Prehistoric site in north-east India except Parsi Parlo.

The use of iron poses a problem in understanding the development of Prehistoric technology in the region. The heralding of the Iron Age in 1000 BC across India (and across the world at different time periods) indicates human cultural development. To explain the absence of this period in the archaeological record of north-east India, archaeologists and historians from both within and outside the region have often remarked, until now, that cultural development in north-east India may not have occurred along the same lines as in the other parts of the subcontinent.

Iron was an easily available metal that made agriculture possible in the monsoon jungles of the Indian plains (Kosambi 1963). However, in the Himalayan foothills, the jungle could be
cleared by fire alone. Further, most Neolithic sites of north-east India have been found situated either on the foothills or on hill tops. Evidence also suggests that these cultures practiced shifting cultivation. In the inventory of agricultural implements used by shifting cultivators even in modern times, the use of iron implements is minimal (Sharma 2007). This might, therefore, be one of the probable reasons for the absence of iron implements in this region's pre-modern toolkit. That is, as the requirement for iron was minimal, maybe it was not exploited.

Iron-making traditions similar to the Chinese and Burmese traditions were reported by British administrators in Upper Assam and the Naga Hills. According to Colonel Hannay (1856) there were, at one time, 3,000 smelters and smiths in Upper Assam. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Assam was famous for the manufacture of big iron guns. F. R. Mallet further observed that the smiths of Upper Assam used contrivances quite different from those used in India 'proper'. Mallet noted that wooden blowing guns were common amongst the Chinese and Burmese, and conjectured that it was probable that the Assamese had acquired a knowledge of the principle from them. Such exchange of technologies might also have been possible during the Prehistoric period.

Indeed, archaeologists have reported iron in the Neolithic sites of northern Burma (Paureau et al. 2010). But the prevalence of iron must have been minimal in north-east India, where it was not widely used to make agricultural implements. This region offered better alternatives like cane, wood and bamboo, which the people might have opted for.

Still, the absence of the metal age in north-east India remains an enigma for archaeologists of the region. Iron, copper, bronze, gold, silver and different types of alloys have been reported in historical sites of the region from the seventh century onwards. The copper-plate inscriptions of King Bhāskaravarman from Nidhanpur, and the Paglatek gold coins are some of the best examples of these finds. However, by this time metallurgical technology had matured, and these were products of an advanced stage of production. In these circumstances, we should have had evidence of an incipient stage of metal work in the region.

Since this incipient stage is completely missing in the region, it may be conjectured that the technology was borrowed. On the other hand, hardly any Early Historic sites, and no Megalithic sites, have been excavated in the region. In fact, the Megalithic culture of the region has been studied primarily as a living tradition, using ethno-archaeology. In these circumstances, we are left with two options: either the evidence lies buried underground, still unexposed, or organic materials like wood, bamboo and cane fulfilled the role of metal in the region until historical times.

The Directorate of Research regularly conducts explorations and excavations in the state. Some of the other important archaeological sites here are Bhismaknagar in west Dibang Valley district (occupied between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries), Nakshaparvat in east Dibang Valley district, and Tamresvari temple of Lohit district.

Nakshaparvat is a thirteenth-century site, 3.05 ha. in size. A systematic horizontal excavation revealed architectural remains, ceramics and stone sculptures here. There were houses made of dressed blocks of granite, stone pillars, and burnt brick houses. Mud mortar was used for flooring while iron clamps and a variety of iron nails were used for binding the granite slabs and blocks. The ceramics consisted of carinated bowls with conical lids, large bowls and pots made in
stamped, cord-marked brownish, and Chinese celadon wares. Buddhist tantric deities, the Buddhist holy tree, dvārpālas, snake motifs, etc., were also found. It is noteworthy that evidence of stone sculptures and stone masonry work lies strewn on the landscape in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Though these have been documented, no attempt has yet been made to analyze them contextually.

The Bhismaknagar Palace, dating between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, or perhaps even earlier, in Dibang Valley district, and Malinithan in the foothills of West Siang district, are important ruins that have been discovered. The Malinithan site is dated to the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries, and is noted for its rich sculptures and abundant architectural fragments.

The famous Parasuram Kunda in Lohit district, a Buddhist stūpa in Tirap district, and Bhalukpong in West Kameng district reveal the long-standing influence of various religions on the people of this region. In the state capital, Itanagar, a historical fort dating from the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries has also been found. According to local tradition, it represents the site of old Mayapura. That is, the fort identifies the site with old Mayapura.

The Tawang Gompa, or monastery, in Tawang district is one of the best Buddhist monasteries. Built in the seventeenth century, this monastery consists of a huge complex with sixty-five residential buildings alongside the main temple structure. It still contains a wealth of old scriptures and records, beautifully illustrated religious texts, images and thaṅkās (painted scrolls).

4. ASSAM

The most recent excavation in Assam was the reopening of the site of Ambari in the year 2008-2009 (Pls. 61-62, 63A). Two noteworthy findings of the season from the site are: a brick stairway, probably leading to a water tank; and a terracotta plaque of the Śūnga style. On the basis of these two pieces of evidence, the excavators have dated these structural and cultural findings to between the second century BC and the first century AD. Three other noteworthy excavations in Assam are the Bhaitbari excavations, undertaken by A. K. Sharma of the ASI in 1992; the Sarutaro-Marakdola excavations, undertaken by S. N. Rao, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, from 1971-74; and the excavation undertaken at Daojali Hading, North Cachar Hills, by T. C. Sharma and M. C. Goswami of Gauhati University, in 1961-63.

At Bhaitbari, in West Garo Hills district, evidence of a fortified settlement, approximately 5 sq km in size, was found on the south banks of the Jinjirian river, which is an abandoned course of the river Brahmaputra. The most remarkable find of this excavation was a brick-cum-mud structure, 5.75 m in height with a diameter of 30 m at the bottom. This is the only evidence of its type in north-east India. The fortification wall deserves special mention.

The quantity of archaeological evidence recovered from Bhaitbari was enormous. Two groups of temple complexes were discovered. The sculptures here were mainly Brāhmanical. The wealth of archaeological data speaks of a flourishing settlement.

The Bhaitbari remains are mainly religious in nature. Except for the fortification wall, no other secular architecture was found. The antiquity of the lowest level of the site was fixed at the
second century BC on the basis of excavated pottery. The temples have been stylistically dated to the ninth to tenth centuries AD. Enormous amount of pottery of different types was discovered in different layers, along with terracotta plaques and stone liṅgas. Analysis of the pottery could throw valuable light on the antiquity of the site.

Between 1971-74, one Neolithic site and one post-Neolithic site were excavated in the vicinity of Guwahati by S. N. Rao, from the Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Rao reported the occurrence of double-shouldered celts and cord-marked pottery from Sarutaru in Kamrup district. Another site in the same area, Marakdola, was also excavated by S. N. Rao, who reported it as a post-Neolithic site. It was dated by C-14 method to AD 1292 (B.S.I.P. No. 5-42).

The site of Daojali Hading in North Cachhar Hills district was excavated by T. C. Sharma and M. C. Goswami in 1961-63 (Pl. 63B). A detailed study of the cultural material from the site was undertaken by Sharma (1966a), and the conclusions drawn are:

1. This is the only evidence of Neolithic cord-impressed and basket pattern pottery found, so far, in India. After this discovery, the boundary of the East Asiatic 'corded ware' Neolithic culture may undoubtedly be extended to include northeastern India. Moreover, its discovery confirms the earlier hypothesis, developed on the basis of the typological study of stone tools, that the Neolithic culture of Assam is closely linked with the East Asiatic Neolithic complex (Worrall 1949: 188-89; Dani 1960: 77).

2. All the stone tools found at the site are closely comparable to those of the late Bacsonian, an industry from Vietnam. The close relationship between these two cultures can also be firmly established on the evidence of the cord-impressed pottery, which is common to both cultures.

Besides this, the ASI has excavated the sites of Sri Surya Pahar in Goalpara district of Assam, and Charaideo in Sibsagar district of Assam.

Sri Surya Pahar is a multicultural site. The remains here are mainly religious in character. The Brahmānical sculptures have been dated stylistically to the eastern Indian school of art, between the ninth and twelfth centuries AD. There are votive Buddhist stūpas and three images of Jaina tīrthaṅkaras, identified as Ādinātha, on the walls of a rock shelter in the site (Pis. 64-66).

A unique characteristic of the site is the carving of votive stūpas and liṅgas on single flat slabs. These are of different sizes. This pattern of carving a stūpa and a liṅga on a single platform has not been reported from any other site in India. Similar carvings are also reported from Indonesia. Further, this cult is believed to have originated in ancient Bengal although, till date, no trace of its place of origin has been found. At Surya Pahar, these carvings might have been made under the influence of a local cult, which might have been practiced there. The site is located on the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra, which at present flows 1.5 km away from the site. Links with ancient Bengal by this river route could certainly have been possible.

Charaideo is the traditional burial ground of Ahom royalty. Graves of a number of Ahom kings are found in the area. The Ahoms used to bury their dead kings and nobles in coffins and erect an earthen mound over it. These mounds varied in size, depending on the power and status of the individual who was buried. The hemispherical mounds had octagonal enclosure walls,
with entrances on the western side and brick structures on top. These mounds are known as maidams. The biggest maidams are believed to be that of the Ahom king Gadadhar Singha (AD 1618-1696) and Rudra Singha (AD 1696-1714). Skeleton materials and pottery have been recovered in excavations at Charaideo (Pls. 67, 68A).

5. NAGALAND

The most recent archaeological work in Nagaland was carried out by the Department of History and Archaeology, Nagaland University, Kohima, at the Neolithic site of Chunlyiemti (2009); in an excavation at Cave 2 of Ranyak Khen (henceforth RYK) in Mimi; and in the Osteobiographic studies of skeletal remains dug out from graves of Jotsoma village (2008).

Handmade pottery and ground stone tools were reported from Chunlyiemti in 1974. This is a Naga ancestral site in Tuensang district of Nagaland. In a recent excavation led by Tia Toshi Jamir from the Department of History and Archaeology, a habitation site was discovered. In a locality named Longtrok, a stone staircase leading to a house was discovered. Polished stone axes, grinding stones, spindle whorls, pottery vessels, beads of rare stones, earrings made of stone, and mullers and pestles were found alongside coarse, gritty handmade pottery decorated with grooved beater impressions and twisted cord designs.

Attempts were made to re-create a Neolithic house using locally available material, based on the ground plan found during excavations. Local villagers were invited to participate in the construction. This was done with an aim to encourage ‘community-based archaeology’, and arose as the result of a concern to preserve archaeological sites. With new development activities like construction of telephone towers, water supply pipes, buildings, etc., archaeological sites are under constant threat. The Chunlyiemti excavation confirmed the region’s Neolithic heritage.

Recent Neolithic studies undertaken in Nagaland reveal some regional peculiarities in terms of the raw material used. Neolithic celts are chiefly fashioned from greenstone or gneiss. Other sparingly-used rocks include shale, slate, fossilized wood, sandstone and jadeite. These materials are not available locally, and were obtained from Upper Burma, South China or the Naga Ophiolite belt on the Indo-Myanmarese border.

Excavations at Mimi uncovered occupational debris about 1.17 m thick (from datum), along with evidence of edge grinding tools of serpentinite and limestone made from river pebbles, a rich collection of faunal materials, grinding stones, a few discoids and bone tools (Pls. 68B-C, 69A).

A significant find from the Mimi cave was a human interment accompanied with grave goods. The most common cultural remains were ceramics and lithic tools, with very rare occurrence of bone tools. Wares were mostly coarse, mixed with stone granules, ranging from thick to thin wares and confined to reddish brown, dark brown, brown, yellowish-brown, greyish-brown and grey ware. Besides plain ware, design elements consisted mostly of cord marks, carved paddle impressions, irregular incised lines and appliqués. Three distinct cording impressions were observed: thick cord impression, thin cord impression, and overlapping patterns of cord marks executed either vertically or in an oblique fashion.
Three worked bones were also reported. The rich faunal data, including sharp cut marks and charring on the bone, implies that the cave not only served as a habitation site but also as a place where hunted animals were butchered and cooked (Jamir et al. 2011). The ash deposit reported from stratigraphic unit 3, from a depth of 111-126 cm (from datum), is dated, and the date is 1 Sigma calibrated result: Cal BC 4450 to 4350 BC (Cal BP 6400 to 6300). This is the first Neolithic date discovered in north-east India.

The osteobiographic study of human skeletal remains from Jotsoma, a village in Kohima district, was also carried out. The study focussed on the conditions of the skeletons' preservation, cranial and post-cranial descriptions of each individual, dental pathology and sex determination. Excavations were undertaken for three seasons by Toshi Jamir and Ditamulu Vasa of the Department of History and Archaeology, at the Jotsoma burial ground. The ground is no longer in use, and the graves have suffered considerable damage as a result of road-building. The study proved that the individuals represented in this skeletal population were markedly different from the contemporary Naga population. Both the males and females studied were dolichocephalic, or long-headed, tall and robust in build. Another noteworthy find was a jar burial, reported for the first time from Nagaland.

The first Neolithic tool reported from Nagaland was a highly polished stone axe of blue jadeite, acquired by a tea planter from Namsang. Most surface finds in Nagaland are reported from areas that are currently inhabited by the Angami, Sema and Lotha Nagas. A few of the important sites where these collections have been found are: Rokimi, Karami, Siromi, Lazimi, Iturr'i, Lokhimi, Sachema and Kgwema, Chunlyiemti, Jotsoma and Changsang.

In 1997, Wati Jungshi Jamir provided an excellent review of the Megaliths seen in the region in his Ph.D. thesis, 'Megalithic Tradition in Nagaland: An Ethno-Archaeological Study'. Jamir undertook a village-to-village survey, documenting Megalithic fields and also documenting the process of erection of Megaliths. The existence of this custom in modern Naga society was also investigated, and it was identified as a living tradition.

Archaeological research activities are picking up in the state. Nagaland University is planning to start a separate department of Archaeology. In the meanwhile, its Department of History and Archaeology has undertaken commendable work, led by a team of young scholars whose passion for involvement is bound to take the discipline to much higher levels in the years to come.

6. MANIPUR

Sekta in Manipur is located 18 km north-east of Imphal. It was excavated by A. K. Sharma of the ASI in 1991, and by O. K. Singh, from the State Archaeology Department of Manipur in 1997. Sekta's antiquity may be traced back to the second century BC, and it was in occupation until the eighteenth century AD. The occupation has been divided into eight cultural layers belonging to different historical periods. The site is important for the archaeology of north-east India because it is the only archaeological site from which we have evidence of human burial, and evidence of
the use of copper, bronze, iron and beads. The pottery in its lower levels is said to have similarities with Bhaibari pottery. The Sekta report was published by the State Archaeology Department, but the richness of the site demands much better attention and greater involvement of archaeologists.

The prehistory of the Manipur may broadly be divided into two cultural phases:

1. Paleolithic or, more preferably, pre-Neolithic
2. Neolithic

Pre-Paleolithic tools have been discovered from the hilly areas of the state. O. K. Singh is the pioneer in this field. Singh discovered Paleolithic tools from the Khangkhui limestone caves near Khangkhui Khullen. The Khangkhui caves and rock shelters in the eastern districts of Manipur are located about 11 km south-east of Ukhrul at an altitude of 1,767 m. The stream flowing near the western foothill of Khangkhui provided a congenial area for human habitation. A trial excavation was undertaken at one of the caves of the western slope, and Singh discovered many stone artefacts, bone tools and faunal remains. A chopper of south-east Asian type, hand-axes, spear-heads, scrapers of different types, bone, blade, burins, borers, flake points, knife, tabular flakes and large fluted cores of sandstone were recovered. The remains associated with these tools are the bones and teeth of herbivorous animals.

Faunal remains obtained from these caves were examined by G. L. Badam of Deccan College, Pune, who identified them as belonging to Cervus, Sus Bovide and wild fowls. According to him, these species cannot be older than Late Pleistocene, and compare with those recovered from the Kurnool caves in Andhra Pradesh. Further, the stone tool industries of Manipur are closely comparable with those found in the Zhoukoudian cave of China. Both these industries were based on the manufacture of core and flake tools with a few blades, in addition to a small series of microliths. The antiquity of the Khangkhui caves may go back to the late phase of the Quaternary period.

Other explorations/excavations have been carried out at Sajik Tampak (Chandel), which brought to light Palaeolithic culture, and around the Songbu cave, at an elevation of 900 m. Explorations yielded scrapers, knives, flakes, blades, and cores of sandstone and quartzitic sandstone.

Other significant explorations/excavations were undertaken at Tharon cave, Nongpok Keithelmanbi, etc. Cultural remains found here consist of flake tools, fine pebble tools of Haobinhian type, split pebbles, flake choppers, pebble strikers, chisel edge and different types of pebble tools, blades, flakes, cores, scrapers, engravers, etc.

The collection of a small Neolithic tool series was started in October 1967, from Phunan hill, situated 22 km south-east of Imphal. The collection includes a number of potsherds such as plain ware, stamped ware, incised ware, cord-marked ware, ware with circular spots, and appliqué wares. It was followed by the exploration of Neolithic sites at Napachik. The cultural materials discovered from this exploration comprised choppers, scrapers, flakes, edged ground knives, grinding stones, ground and polished celts, and potsherds including handmade tripod vessels.
7. MEGHALAYA

The two most recent archaeological studies in Meghalaya were of the Prehistoric sites (Mitri 2009) around the Barapani lake, 50 km from Shillong in the Khasi hills, and a study of the Prehistoric sites of the Ganol and Rongram river valley in the Garo hills (Sharma 2007).

The main objective of Mitri’s work was to construct the basic framework of the Neolithic culture of the Khasi-Jaintia hills. The work identified the Ri-Bhoi region of East Khasi Hills district as having the maximum potential for Neolithic research. The Neolithic sites identified by Mitri are Umiam-Barapani, Sohpet Bneng, Khanduli, Saipung, Sutnga, Trangblang in East Khasi Hills district, and Nongspung and Wahlung in West Khasi Hills district. The stone tools found were classified as axes, adzes, shouldered tools, tanged tools and harvesters (Pl. 69B). This research was able to establish a close link between the ancestral sites of Khasi folklore and the areas of Neolithic finds.

The main aim of the research programme developed by S. Sharma (2007) was to develop a regional archaeological structure. Initiated by ecological considerations, this model was adopted to understand the adaptability conditions developed by the Prehistoric inhabitants of the area. Situated as it is between two different environmental systems – the monsoonal tropics and the tropical rainforest zone – the regional ecology of north-east India has had a major role in the growth and development of human culture in the area. Affinities between the Neolithic tools of south-east Asia and north-east India were very clear. However, certain bifacial artefacts found here are also similar to certain middle-Paleolithic assemblages from other parts of India. Thus, there appears to be a synthesis of two types of cultural traits. These are the adaptability conditions indigenous to the region. This explains the relationship between Prehistoric human behaviour and the observable archaeological record of the region.

Sharma’s study confirmed the stratigraphy of Prehistoric sites in the region. It was established that the ground and polished celts occurred within the yellowish brown alluvium, and that the bifaces, flakes and pebble tools occurred within the strong brown alluvium. Geological studies undertaken in the region establish, with C-14 dates, that the strong brown alluvium is Pleistocene in origin while the yellowish-brown alluvium is Holocene. The ‘bamboo hypothesis’ has been used to explain the amorphous character of the flakes. These were identified as processing tools, while more specialized tools are believed to have been made from organic materials like bamboo or wood. Unfortunately, as these are perishable, we do not find them in the archaeological record of the area.

Twelve sites from the area were intensively studied. They are Gawak Abri, Didarni, Rongram IB, Ida Bichik, Bibragiri, Missimagiri, Selbal Bichik, Mokbol Bichik II, Chitra Abri, Mokbol Bichik I and Didami. Other pioneering works from Meghalaya includes a study on ‘Megaliths and Social Formation in Khasi-Jaintia’ by Cecile Mawlong from the Department of History and Archaeology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, (Pl. 69C) and the works undertaken by Tarun Ch. Sharma from the Department of Anthropology between 1977 and 1987.
8. TRIPIRA

The most prominent areas of archaeological interest in Tripura are the Haora and Khowai river valleys, Pilak and Unnakoti.

Pilak in South Tripura district is stylistically dated to between the eighth and ninth centuries AD, and has Buddhist and Hindu remains. Unnakoti is dated to the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD, and has sculptures of Hindu gods and goddesses.

In 1983, B. C. Poddar and N. R. Ramesh of the Geological Survey of India reported the discovery of Stone Age sites in the Haora and Khowai river valleys in Tripura. This study included exhaustive documentation of the late Quaternary sediments of northeastern India, and of associated Stone Age sites in Tripura. In Tripura, the lower layers, with a silicified fossil wood industry, have been dated by C-14 method to 32,500 BC, and the upper layers, with Neolithic tools, have been dated to 1500 BC (Ramesh and Rajagopalan 1999: 13-30). The discovery of the silicified fossil wood industry with hand-axes, cleavers, choppers, and flake and blade tools was a noteworthy development in the prehistory of north-east India.

9. ANALYSIS OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The archaeological record of north-east India uncovered till now reveals certain shortcomings in the data needed for a proper reconstruction of the past. These are: 1. absence of absolute dates; 2. absence of clear stratigraphy of the sites; 3. absence of botanical and zoological data; 4. absence of metal, except the discovery of iron from Parsi Parlo.

The absence of this vital data can be attributed to the absence of excavation in the region, which, in turn, may be attributed to the absence of the discipline of archaeology in the university curricula of the region.

In these circumstances, we are forced to consider the archaeology of the post-Independence period in north-east India as a social phenomenon in a particular historical context. It is now widely recognized that all archaeology is political in that it involves relations of power and contemporary interventions in the production of the past (Buchli and Lucas 2001). North-east India, on the periphery of the Indian Union, retained its image as a remote isolated outpost of India even in the post-Independence period. The archaeological record reported till now shows affinities with the archaeological record of south and south-east Asia. Often, researches in the region working on extra-Indian linkages are viewed with some amount of apprehension.

However, by considering archaeology as a way of creating the past in the present, we can see how the archaeology of post-Independence north-east India has recreated a past which carries significance even in the context of our own times. The decisive features of this relationship of power are ethnicity, electoral politics and resources. Archaeology stands peripheral in the picture. In fact, compared to anthropology and history, archaeology remains marginal to the larger discourse on the region.
The archaeological record of north-east India is distinctive in character. As noted earlier, it is a synthesis of two types of cultural traits: Indian and south-east Asian. The data seems insufficient, but the man-land relationship in the area has produced this data. Interpreting this man-land relationship in the light of present theoretical developments in the discipline will bring us closer to a comprehensive understanding. This should be the main objective of archaeological research in the region.

When we speak of archaeology as a material witness, we refer to the potential of archaeology to uncover that which is hidden, obscured, clandestine or forgotten. A new perspective in archaeology, 'the archaeology of the contemporary past', acknowledges a clear role for archaeology in bringing to light those aspects of history and contemporary experience that are explicitly hidden from the public view by centres of power, or are obscured by the absence of authority among individuals and groups within the political arena. This is referred to as 'presencing the absence' (Buchli and Lucas 2001; Gonzalez-Ruibal 2008; Zarnkin and Funari 2008).

It is time for presencing the absence in north-east India by digging, by reinterpreting, and by analyzing the data in a structured way, within a coherent and home-baked theoretical framework. Emphasis on community archaeology and culture resource management programmes can provide further support to this endeavour.

References


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A: Lathiya 2009-10, Site-cum-contour map
B: Location plan for Lathiya
A: Monolithic pillar, Gupta period
B & C: Garuda capital (view from both sides)
A: Foundation trench of pillar
B: Structures in southern residential area
A & B: Structures and ghost walls; C: General view of the site
A & B: Hearths 1 and 2
A & B: Spouted pots
C: Period II (Gupta period) spouts
A-C: Period II (Gupta period) spouts
A: Period I potsherds
B & C: Period II sprinklers, spouts
A & B: Period II decorated potsherds
C & D: Terracotta human figurines
A: Period II terracotta human figurine
B: Period II stone figurine
C & D: Miscellaneous objects
A-C: Period I copper coins
A: Period I copper coins; B: Period I inscribed copper seals
C & D: Period II (Gupta period) terracotta sealings
A-E: Period II (Gupta period) terracotta sealings
A: A view of the Ropar mound
B: Exposed trenches at Ropar
A: Pieces of human figurines with pin-holes and punched circles to indicate ornamentation
B: Mauryan style figurine
C: Female figurine recovered from Ropar with beaded headdress
D: Period IVA female forms
A: Images depicting elaborate headdresses
B: Female figurine with a beaded waistband
C: Female figurines with elaborate decorations
A: Kushan period hand-modelled female forms
B: Coarse/rudimentary female figures of the Kushan period
A: Female figurine belonging to the Gupta period; B: Bust of a woman holding a kalaśa-like object (Period IVC); C: Terracotta figurine of vina-player recovered from Period IVC
A: General view of the exposed structure, Ambari
B: Miniature terracotta Śiva-liṅga, Ambari
A: Decorated potsherds, Ambari
B: Kaolin ware, Ambari
A: Sealing on burnt clay lump, Ambari
B: Cord-marked Neolithic pottery from Daojali Hading, North Cachhar Hills, Assam
A: Rock-cut images, Sri Surya Pahar
B: Adinātha, Sri Surya Pahar
A: Rock-cut caves, Sri Surya Pahar
B: Rock-cut stūpas, Sri Surya Pahar
A: Exposed adhishtāna of Pañcāyatana temple, Sri Surya Pahar
B: Terracotta Nāga figure, Sri Surya Pahar
A: Exposed dome-like structure, maidam 2, Charaideo
B: General view of maidam, Charaideo
A: Wooden decorative piece found in maidam 2, Charaideo
B & C: Neolithic tools from RYK cave, Mimi, Nagaland (Courtesy: Toshi Jamir, Department of History and Archaeology, Nagaland University)
A: Pottery from RYK cave, Mimi, Nagaland (Courtesy: Toshi Jamir, Department of History and Archaeology, Nagaland University); B: Tools from Umiam-Barapani, Sohpet Bneng, Khanduli, Saipung, Sutnga, Trangblang in East Khasi Hills and Nongspung and Wahlung in West Khasi Hills, Meghalaya (Courtesy: Marco Mitri, Assistant Professor, Union Christian College, Barapani, Shillong); C: Megaliths from Cherrapunjee, Shillong
PLATE 70

ANCIENT INDIA, NEW SERIES, NO.1

A: Gaṅgā from Ahichchhatra. National Museum, New Delhi
B: Yamunā from Ahichchhatra. National Museum, New Delhi
A: The Veiled Rebecca, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad
B: Sculpture of Man-and-Woman, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad
A: Inscribed casket from Piprahwa. Fourth century BC, Indian Museum, Kolkata
B: Didarganj Yakshi, Patna Museum, Patna
A view of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai
A: Sculptural panel depicting the adoration of Buddha's feet from Amravati, Second century AD, Government Museum, Chennai; B: Kanishka, inscribed, Mathura Museum, Mathura
A: Crowned Buddha in bhūmisparśa-mudrā, Pāla period, Bodhgaya Museum, Bodhgaya
B: Buddha in bronze, Nalanda
A: Lion-capital of Aśoka, Sarnath Museum, Sarnath
B: A silver throne, Hazarduari Palace Museum, Mushirdabad
A: Terracotta Yakshi, Ashutosh Museum, Kolkata
B: Yakshi, Bharat Kala Bhawan, Varanasi
Picnic by Ramakinkar Baij, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi