

T. B. Subba (Ed.), *North-east India—A Handbook of Anthropology*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2012, pp. 452, ₹495.

This book gives a vivid account and an enriching insight into North-east India. Culturally, the North-east is different from the mainstream, coupled with its difficult geographical terrain, political problems and instability. It is a well compiled handbook which gives a comprehensive account of the anthropology of the North-east. The book is edited by renowned anthropologist T. B. Subba. It consists of 19 essays.

The book is divided into four parts. The book is chronologically in sequence starting from the pre-historic period to the colonial period. The first part titled 'Pre-historic North-east India', is a journey to the pre-historic period of the North-east, where in some of the states like Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Assam, Sikkim, Stone Age sites were discovered; except for Mizoram, where archaeological research is yet to start. Reading about ethno-archaeology in the second chapter of the first part was interesting. Ethno-archaeology views contemporary culture from an archaeological perspective and examines material culture of the past and present and their objective evaluation. In the third chapter, the discussion is about megaliths or large stones/monuments which stand alone or with other stones. Based on physical attributes of size and shape, the megaliths of North-east can be grouped into the following: menhirs (single dressed or undressed standing stone), cists (small stone-built coffin-like box), dolmens (flat stone resting on three or four smaller vertical pillars or piled up stones) and capstones (stone slabs of various sizes and circular or rectangular in shape). Functional types of megaliths of North-east India are as follows: burial stones, memorial stones, resting stones, watch towers, religious stones, and so on.

Part II—Colonial North-east India

This section is a descriptive account of the North-east by British administrators. One of the most significant contributions has been by administrator-ethnographer, J. H. Hutton, who has been a major contributor to the study of the Naga Hills. Hutton spent 20 years in the Naga Hills and wrote two monographs, namely, *The Angami Nagas* and *The Sema Nagas*. J. H. Hutton took his position as an officer in the Indian Civil Service as an advantage to collect government data which

helped him in his writings. Though Hutton's perspective is different from that of Malinowski who established a rapport with the people he was studying through participant observation, Hutton on the other hand had the relationship of the ruler and the ruled with the people of the North-east. Anthropology originated in the colonial milieu to draw the attention of the world to the conditions of the so-called savages/primitives. Anthropologists created awareness about the people who lived in isolation and neglect, but at the same time highlighted the lack of infrastructure, lack of transport and communication, widespread epidemics and the absence of medicines in the North-east. One of the most well-known anthropologists was James Philip Mills (J. P. Mills). He was one of the first to realise that the nagging problem of the North-eastern people could be solved by understanding the people under its administration. He wrote two books on Lhota Nagas, Ao Nagas and a lot of articles on the North-east. His contribution has been tremendous. He is still fondly remembered as an officer with a commitment and an infectious love for the people.

Colonial ethnography can be divided into three phases:

The Explorative Phase: This was a phase marked by commercial activities like tea plantations and economic exploitation of natural resources like timber and natural gas. The opinion of early administrators, travellers and missionaries about the tribes they came in contact with was poor and their attitude towards them contemptuous.

The Consolidating Phase: This was the phase when the British succeeded in pacifying and administering certain parts of the Hills. The ethnographic writings during this phase were based on some form of detailed investigation, research and fieldwork and were more structured; the widely known monographs during this phase are those authored by Mills and Hutton.

Academic Anthropology: This phase is marked by trained anthropologists like Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf whose works were ethnographically rich. His famous works include *The Naked Naga* and *The Apatanis and Their Neighbours*.

The third part of the book is aptly titled 'Physical Anthropology of North-east India'. Physical anthropology is the systematic study of biological evolution and variation of humankind. This section is very enriching because in terms of 'Physical Anthropology' the North-east is a field where limited research has been conducted. One gets familiar with terms like the following:

Racial Paradigm—reserves of haemoglobin E, prevalent in South-east Asia is found to be also common among the people of the North-east.

Micro-evolutionary Paradigm—the study of sub-groups of a community, life, culture.

Molecular Paradigm—genetic unity of India's tribals and castes with other Asian populations.

Biological Paradigm—discusses health, diseases, environment.

There is an interesting chapter on dental anthropology which is the study of people from evidence provided by teeth, and a chapter on dermatoglyphic traits (that is, writing on the skin) which refers to the configurations formed by the skin ridges on the fingers, palms, soles and toes of humans. Their variations exhibit differential trends from individual to individual among different ethnic groups and in the two sexes. The fourth part of the book discusses Socio-cultural Anthropology in North-east India. The Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) established in 1945 has done pioneering work especially of the North-east Indian tribes. AnSI has completed more than 700 research projects and started a mega project in 1985 called 'The People of India' project. In this project, 345 communities were identified and studied. These included 172 Scheduled Tribes, 31 Scheduled Castes, 34 OBC and 108 general communities. Over a period of time the study of social-cultural anthropology which includes studying social systems, political systems, economic systems, rituals, religions, rural, urban studies, etc., has provided a large quantity of data. One of the distinct features of the tribes of North-east India are tribal social organisations. Social groupings based on blood ties are perhaps the most important social units. Such groups are family, lineage, clan, tribe, etc. Locality is another social group, wherein persons from the same locality form a social group. Where groupings are on the basis of age groups, like the Oraons, who have a three fold division of bachelors, each age group has definite duties and privileges. Sex groupings are also quite common, for example, among the Ao Naga, young men formed the standing army of the village. Among the Oraon tribe, the youth spend the night in separate house meant for them, participate in ceremonial hunts, and help the villagers on marriage and festivals. AnSI work has been very prominent in contributing towards the awareness about the lesser known tribes like the Lalung Mann of Meghalaya, who numbered around 696 in 1971 census, and the lesser known tribes in Arunachal Pradesh like the Adi-Tangam, Akas, Membas. Customarily, a village owns land within the village boundaries. Individuals may claim a plot/plot of the village land. Inheritance is patrilocal except for the Khasis in Meghalaya. Cultivation is the main means of livelihood. Over a period of time, farmers have experimented, implemented, modified developed systems of agriculture. The indigenous knowledge system of the region incorporates a deep understanding of the land system and the mechanisms of its operation, for example, traditionally bamboo is planted by the Nagas on the edge of the cleft to hold soil; use of nitrogen-fixing plants to enrich soil fertility among the tribes of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh indicates the scientific basis of indigenous knowledge. There are a lot of medicinal-plants and lot of natural resources but the North-east remains underdeveloped because of its difficult geographical terrain and political problems. The government needs to do a lot more to use the untapped resources. In the North-east, jhuming cultivation is the major means of cultivation, attached with it is their traditional beliefs and knowledge in selecting plot of lands for jhuming; series of festivals are organised to celebrate the occasion of burning, planting of crops and harvesting.

The book will be a rich guide to students, researchers and academics for its comprehensive content.

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