

**COMMUNITIES
OF
NORTH-EAST
INDIA**

**Farida Ahmed Das
Indira Barua**

The north-eastern part of our sub-continent has always been a place of mystique and interest for anthropologists and scholars of allied disciplines. The heterogeneous population of this area is composed of diverse biological, cultural and linguistic heritages. There are about 250 identifiable communities in North-East India. So this region attracts the attention of many social scientists, ethnologists, linguists, travellers and missionaries.

This volume contains papers presented in the National Seminar on 'Anthropology and Community' held in the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, Assam. It has twenty-six papers contributed by some leading Anthropologists and researchers containing empirical data on various topics. They cover a wide spectrum and include demography, ecology, ethnicity, gerontology, physical and cultural anthropology, etc. The running theme is 'Anthropology and Community'.

The book will be of immense use to the academicians, public administrators, social planners and political leaders who are directly or indirectly involved in the overall welfare and development of the human communities.

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An Anthropological Perspective



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INTRODUCTION

This volume contains papers presented in the National Seminar on 'Anthropology and Community' that was held in the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, on 12th and 13th November, 1992. The Seminar was sponsored by Dibrugarh University.

The north-eastern part of this sub-continent has always been a place of mystique and interest for anthropologists and scholars of allied disciplines. It offers many virgin areas that are yet to be explored and as such this region is often described as the paradise for anthropologists. The main centre of attraction is its people who have migrated to this part of India through different routes and at different times. The heterogeneous population of this area is composed of diverse biological, cultural and linguistic heritages. The rich cultures of these communities add colours to the uniqueness of the place. As per Anthropological Survey of India Report 1992, there are about 250 identifiable communities in North-East India. So this region attracts the attention of many social scientists, ethnologists, linguists, travellers and missionaries. Till recently people with different ethnic affiliations were living here in considerable harmony but the situation is gradually changing for various reasons.

The discipline of anthropology studies man covering its biological and cultural dimensions. Anthropology, since its beginning, has been concerned with the affairs of human community. Initially anthropology as a discipline centred around the study of primitive societies but the subject has passed through many stages. There is gradual development in anthropological studies. In the contemporary time anthropology practically studies every human society, their life style and bio-cultural problems. North-East India with its rich culture and heritage always draws attention of the anthropologists. We the members of the Depart-

ment of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, felt the need of having a forum for fruitful discussion among the researchers on various aspects of life of different populations. The theme of the seminar 'Anthropology and Community' was chosen mainly to focus the relevance of anthropological studies in understanding different bio-cultural problems of various communities of India in General and of North-East India in particular.

The book contains a total number of twenty-six papers contributed by some leading anthropologists and young researchers containing empirical data on various topics. As the theme of the seminar covers a broad area, we have a variety of papers. The papers cover a wide spectrum and include demography, ecology, ethnicity, gerontology, physical and cultural anthropology, etc.

The first three papers are on the theme, 'Anthropology and Community'. Mahanta in his paper highlights the concept of community in anthropology. Bhagabati emphasises on the relevance of anthropology in the studies of different communities. He points out the applied aspect of anthropological knowledge in the service of the community. Kar in his paper, while dealing with the concept of community in anthropology, points out certain problems arising out of development projects and advocates a holistic approach for formulation of a national policy for the proper welfare of the communities. Nilanjana Sharma in her paper highlights the impact of ecological change in the socio-economic life of the community through a case study.

Sharma Thakur deals with the problems of proper implementation of the tribal development programme. Developmental programmes are made to achieve certain goals but for lack of proper knowledge about the actual need of the people for whom the programme is meant, many such programmes could not yield any result. He puts emphasis on the utilisation of anthropological knowledge in the field of tribal development. Knowledge of local social structure helps in the execution of development programmes by overcoming the socio-cultural obstacles that may come at the time of introducing any new programme.

Danda focuses on the concept of ethnicity. So long as ethnicity manifests itself as a physico-cultural categorization, it poses no problem within a state but in a pluri-cultural state for

fulfilment of aspiration of individuals and groups it may involve the people in forming the interest alliance and finally lead to some socio-political movement. Barua in his paper highlights the facts on the basis of a case study among the Rabhas. He points out the factors contributing towards the growing ethnicity among the Rabhas and their conflict with the Koch people.

B.M. Das focuses on the trends of physical anthropological research in the Brahmaputra valley from the beginning of this century. It is indeed high time to take stock of the research work in this field in the area to keep pace with the contemporary work in other parts of the world. He identifies three different stages of physical anthropological work as initial stage, data generating stage and analytical stage and invites researchers to work on some important aspects like population, health, biochemical genetics, demography, etc.

The knowledge of population structure is becoming essential in understanding various bio-cultural problems of different communities. Basu tries to visualise the relevance of the concept of population structure in the light of hierarchy and relatedness in understanding the problem of bio-cultural survival with the help of prevailing scenario in Darjeeling hills. The relationship between genetic and demographic structure can never be denied. Khongsdier and Ghosh emphasise this in the backdrop of Khasi (War) population. Demographic data can help to interpret some biological phenomena. Cultural factors may influence the formation and occasional disappearance of biological difference. They show how socio-cultural factors (mating pattern, marriage distance) may influence to form some subgroups in the biological sense within a bigger group. The subsequent papers by Ahmed Das and Das and Das are also contributing to the fact that the social factors may lead to the formation of sub-endogamous groups within a large group and such marital pattern ultimately leads to biological separation that may be a cause for biological variation.

A.K. Das in his paper shows the difference in growth pattern of the children of two different communities living under same geographical area. With the help of dermatoglyphic traits, Deepanjana Das in her paper indicates the biological difference

between the tribal groups consisting of Dafla and Mishing with the non-tribal Ahom community.

In the light of the prevalence of hereditary diseases in the human populations Srivastava emphasises the necessity of taking up some research work that can help people to understand the intensity as well as consequence of transmission of such defective traits and find means to prevent them.

Kar and Gogoi highlight the prevailing health practices and their impact on the health condition of the Noctes of Arunachal Pradesh. The discussion mainly centres around the people's living condition, food habits, personal hygiene and concept of disease and treatment. Health status of the school children in the three linguistic groups of a city in Assam is assessed with the help of anthropometric traits by Gulrukh Begum in her paper.

'Women's Studies' is becoming a new area of studies in anthropology. Suparna Barua in her paper describes the role played by women in their day to day life in the Dimasa society of North Cachar hills and also emphasises the position enjoyed by them in their society. Jeuti Barua's paper also deals with women. Her paper concerns with the problems faced by the divorced women in the Assamese society. She also indicates that the incidence of divorce cases are on the increase in the contemporary Assamese society. Indira Barua in her paper emphasises the importance of child rearing practices in the personality development of a child. She deals with the ways of socialisation of the children in the Deori community of Assam.

Two papers are on the rate of infant mortality in different communities. Rekha Das and Deepak Adak try to find out the infant and child mortality and its causes in the caste population and in the Khasis.

Upala Barua in her paper points out certain problems of the aged persons in two different communities in different socio-economic settings.

The papers of Borgohain, Bezbarua and Dowarah deal with different aspects of socio-cultural life of the three communities, namely, the Tangsa of Arunachal Pradesh and Matak and Mishing of Assam. Borgohain highlights the indigenous judicial systems

that are still functioning among the Tangsas. Bezbarua in her paper focuses the religious bonds that are in existence among the Matak while Dowerah emphasises upon certain changes that have taken place in the performance of some traditional rituals and ceremonies among the Mishings of Assam. He tries to identify the factors responsible for such changes.

Thus the book covers a broad area centering around the theme, 'Anthropology and Community'. The papers compiled in this volume are collection of diverse observations on different aspects of life of the various communities of North-East India. We sincerely hope that the social scientists and scholars from allied disciplines will find interest in the papers included in this volume. We are confident the publication will be of immense use to the academicians, public administrators, social planners and political leaders who are directly or indirectly involved in the overall welfare and development of the human communities.

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