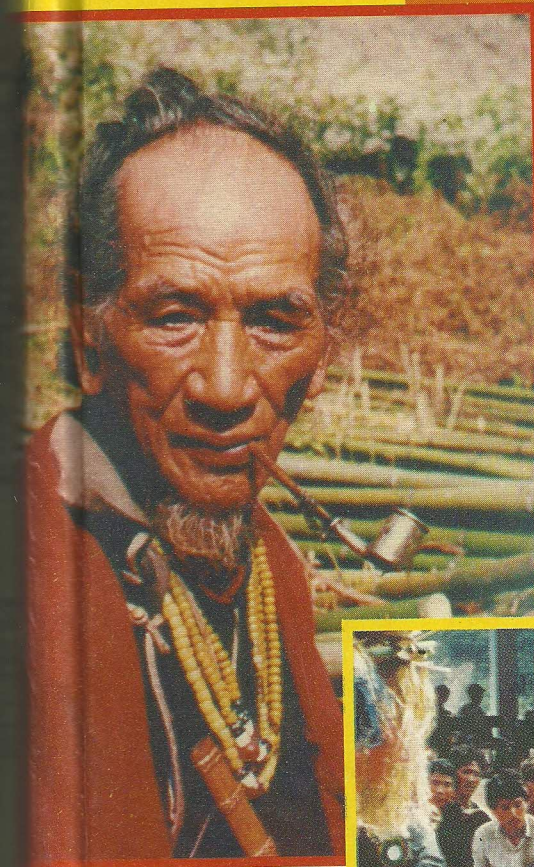


Ethnic Groups Cultural Continuities and Social Change in North East India



**Indira Barua
Sarthak Sengupta
Deepanjana Dutta Das**



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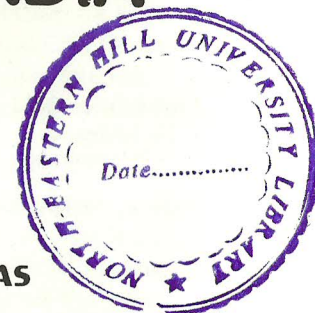
ETHNIC GROUPS, CULTURAL CONTINUITIES AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN NORTH EAST INDIA

Edited by

INDIRA BARUA

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Foreword by

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DIBRUGARH



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Foreword

Towards a Coherent Society in India's North East

The North East region of India has long been known for its uniqueness with its diverse ethnic groups. The region has a special significance for its strategic position, a fact that was recognized by the British as soon as they came here at the beginning of the colonial era. Recently the region has been disturbed due to various issues, e.g. demands for larger political autonomy made by various groups, insurgency and separatist movements in the region. The resulting social conditions affect everybody. In order to work out effective measures to solve the various demographic, educational, economic and social problems the people of the region are facing, it is very important that social scientists and others concerned analyze and understand the process of transformation, reunification and consolidation of traditional systems, institutions and awareness.

Fifty years back in India, we started the process of building a vast country with a huge population as a single nation without any previous experience of such an understanding. We had our own share of success and failures. Today we are ready with a vast wealth of experience of 50 years of nation making.

In the glow of our recently acquired independence, we in the North East were proud of our colourful multi ethnicity, we romanticized our ethnic mosaic. We considered our ethnic diversity as our strength. Over the period, we have decontextualized it, making diversity appear as fragmentation. Suddenly our strength is being perceived as our weakness. The ethnic mosaic has become an ethnic cauldron. The mosaic has become a monstrosity mocking our civilization.

This contradicts the trend of science and technology because science and technology leads the society towards a BORDERLESS WORLD of homogeneity. We have gone through decades of traumatic experiences. Whatever our seeming stability is a measure of our Resilience or Insensitivity, time will decide.

People of the North East are searching for new values. The traumatic experiences of recent years are a reflection of this process. Perhaps we have failed to reform ourselves at a pace compatible with the changed requirements of the new generations, with rapid world-wide changes driven science and technology and concomitant social changes in a globalized world. In this the elders and the youth seem to be on the two sides of an abyss. Society must work out a rapprochement. This is the challenge of the moment for all socially concerned people.

It is quite possible that the abyss has been the result of two processes: (a) the race for development and consequent disparities; and (b) the virtual withdrawal of the major institutions particularly in Assam to frontally meet the realities of the time, through appropriate or timely action, in other words because of their inaction or lack of appropriate action, leaving youth in particular in a vacuum.

Development is acceptable, provided the model is according to our own free choice based on our own intrinsic value system. That freedom should not be interfered with. To determine the model we need in-depth understanding of all aspects of a society.

The anchorage in our own cultural soil must be protected. Therefore the institutions must be protected. Institutions may also make adjustments and modify to answer our own time. When they do not do this, it amounts to their withdrawal.

Since the time of Nehru and Elwin, the perspectives of the entire North East have changed. Various forces or factors have contributed to this change : economic imperatives of the country, advent of technology as an unstoppable force to open up the area and acting as a strong homogenising influence and people's own aspirations for material development.

Between uniformity or homogeneity and diversity, we must agree to an optimum model of society as a workable solution for a meaningful existence that gives us collectively and individually a sense of fulfilment and self-actualization. We must have structures, organizations and institutions to support a meaningful existence for everybody, when we deal with a large population with scarce resource.

These considerations are becoming extremely important in view of the future prospect of the region becoming a completely open global corridor. We need to recognize that globalization is a mixed blessing. Globalization is here to stay, we cannot wish it away. But we need to be aware of havoc created by globalization of certain specific categories of crimes. A fragmented society with weakened cultural values is most vulnerable in this context. To hold to our ground keeping our heads high when the wind of globalization in its various forms blows through the valleys of the region, we must strengthen the anchorage in our own cultural soil. A process of self-renewal which is clearly supported by our heritage literature is possible and necessary. We need to promote in the North East a coherent society that protects ethnic identities in a globalized environment without contradictions. And this needs information, knowledge and understanding.

The Anthropology Department of Dibrugarh University organized a two day seminar on "*Ethnic Groups of North East India : Problems and Prospects*" in its own premises at Dibrugarh on 28th and 29th April, 1999. The seminar was organized keeping in view some of the issues indicated above. It was partly financed by Oil India, Numaligarh Refinery, ONGC, Assam Oil Division (Digboi) of I.O.C., S.B.I. — Dibrugarh University Branch, ABITA — Dibrugarh.

This volume of the proceedings of the seminar is the result of the dedicated efforts of the editors and their associates and presents the paper presented at the seminar. The volume is an important contribution towards the understanding of the problems mentioned. The contributors and the organizers deserve congratulations.

Such dialogues needs to be widened through networking and engagement of all sectors into an extensive and intensive exercise leading to policy framework and action and

implementation, in order that the North East in its entirety emerges as a coherent society. For this to be achieved it is essential that the mindset of not only the North Easterners, but the mindset of the people of the rest of India should change.

India's vision for the twenty first century is to become a knowledge super power. Ironing out the issues indicated therefore has become a national imperative. So that we all can move towards our legitimate national goal, free from all inhibitions.

PROF. DEVDAS KAKATI
Vice-Chancellor
Dibrugarh University
DIBRUGARH

Acknowledgement

The present volume is the outcome of a national seminar on the theme, "Ethnic Groups of North East India : Problems and Prospects", organised by the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University in April, 1999. We are grateful to the authorities of Dibrugarh University for providing financial support in organising the seminar. The seminar was also partially financed by Oil India Ltd., Duliajaan, Numaligarh Refinery, Assam Oil Division, Digboi, State Bank of India, Dibrugarh University Branch and ABITA, Dibrugarh. We thank these organisations profusely.

We take this opportunity to express our profound sense of gratefulness to Prof. B.M. Das, Prof. A.C. Bhagabati, Prof. A.K. Danda, Prof. Usha Deka, Prof. S.N. Ratha for delivering special lectures and having chaired the different scientific sessions. We are immensely grateful to Prof. D. Kakati, Vice-Chancellor, Dibrugarh University for his support and encouragement not only in organising the seminar but also in writing the foreward of this book.

We are thankful to our contributors for their co-operation and valuable materials, without whose goodwill and co-operation this project would not have been successful.

We place on record our sincere thank to all our colleagues and members of the Department for their constant encouragement and suggestions in every stage, from organising the seminar till the finalisation of this book.

We would like especially to thank Dr. M.N. Dutta for his efforts to prepare the typescript; Dr. Sarit Choudhury of Department of Anthropology, Arunachal University for arranging photographs (Sajolang/Miji tribes of Arunachal Pradesh) for the cover page; and Sri Sunil Kumar Borthakur, former Principal, M.D.K. Girls' College, Dibrugarh, who

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Last but not the least, we express our heartfelt thanks to Mr. K.M. Rai Mittal, M/s Mittal Publications, New Delhi for readily accepting to publish this book.

**Indira Barua
Sarthak Sengupta
Deepanjana D. Das**

Preface

The present compiled work is based upon the research papers presented in the National Seminar on "Ethnic Groups of North East India : Problems and Prospects", organised by the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, on 28th and 29th April, 1999. The Seminar was sponsored by Dibrugarh University.

(North East India, the homeland of diverse tribes and communities, maintain a classic (unique) example of "unity in diversity" for the entire country. Unfortunately, in recent times, there has been a noticeable loosening of the bonds of fraternity resulting in the creation of smaller ethnic groups, each trying to preserve its ethnic identity. Ethnic tensions are intrinsic in this area. When did the seed sprouted? Nobody has an answer. But with the passage of time it has transformed itself into a gigantic tree whose branches are spreading everywhere. This may be considered not only one cause of destabilization, but also the root of numerous problems, like insurgency now prevalent in this region. Unless the problems are tackled now, still in their stage of infancy, the future of the tribes residing in the North East appears to be bleak. Ethnic consciousness, which has surfaced in diverse ways is the result of long historical and political situation of this area. Ethnic consciousness or ethnicity is never a product of isolation. The persistence of an ethnic group can be carried by interaction with other groups of society. "We" feeling of a group may be dormant until the group comes in contact with another group, and, in course of time, diverse socio-political developments arise out of the situation. Initial emotional involvements in most of the situations lead to violence and unrest. In recent years expansion of existing ethnic boundary and re-interpretation of the religious and cultural symbol are noticeable in many societies. Similarly population imbalance and process of

extinction due to assimilation or re-designation of various ethnic groups need immediate attention.

Where lies the root for such diverse problems in North-East India? With the aim of finding an answer to these questions, the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University organised the seminar where social scientists working on diverse aspects of North East India expressed their view points.

The seminar was inaugurated by Prof. Devdas Kakati, Vice-Chancellor of Dibrugarh University. In his inaugural speech he stressed that in the days of technological development with the computer and internet system geographical isolation is not a problem. He expressed his concern over the varied problems of North East India and thought that the best way to deal with some of the problems is to establish a School of Social Science in North East India.

Prof. A.C. Bhagabati, renowned anthropologist, the chief guest of the seminar, in his lecture dwelt at length on the historical account of this region, from pre-colonial to post-independence period. He also pointed out how there had been a significant change in the arsenals of ethnicity. But he hoped that despite the clouds of uncertainty covering over the entire North East, a silver lining is bound to emerge.

In his presidential speech, eminent anthropologist Prof. B.M. Das explained the necessity of understanding bio-cultural aspects of each ethnic groups to deal with varied problems. He also emphasised the role of anthropologists in solving such problems and suggested that on a short-term measure attempts should be made to stop the ongoing trend of decentralization from the larger identity and as a long term project, emphasis should be given to protection of the interests of all the sections, particularly those of the smaller ones.

In all, five special lectures were delivered under different sub-themes by Prof. B.M. Das, Prof. A.C. Bhagabati, Prof. A.K. Danda, Prof. Usha Deka and Prof. S.N. Ratha. All expressed their anxiety over the recent trend of decentralization of ethnic groups from the larger identity, going back to traditionalism as a part of movement to assert identity. They opined that even after 50 years of

independence, India is not able to achieve a proper stage management system. Ethnic plurality within given political entities and their identity assertion with concomitant loyalty shift suggest incapability of states to fulfil basic aspirations of concerned people. There is nothing wrong if the ethnic groups want to improve their socio-economic situation and expect honour for their tradition and culture. Though occasionally it is remarked that the culture is being politicalised, yet in reality all felt that what is happening in society has also its root in the society. All agree that necessary support as well as a healthy approach is to be encouraged for a better future of diverse ethnic groups.

The response of outstation and local scientists to this seminar was very encouraging. In all, more than 45 scientists participated in the seminar. Most of the papers presented in the seminar were found to be very interesting and innovative. These papers reported new data, new ideas and formulated new directions for future research. This book contains a total number of 30 papers contributed both by the leading anthropologists and younger scientists.

The book opens up with a paper by A.K. Danda where he has dealt elaborately with the concept of "ethnicity". He highlights how the academicians and the social scientists of different ages dealt with the problem of ethnicity and identified the possible reasons responsible for the ethnic disturbances of India. He rightly points out how in a plural society like India, fluid characteristics of ethnicity is well represented. B.M. Das focuses how the level of ethnic aspirations varies from population to population by citing examples of various communities of Assam. Probing into the causes of the emerging trend of ethnic identity, Das has emphasised how cultural revivalism and political aspiration make the ethnic problems more complex. He personally feels that it is high time to identify the factors, both constructive and destructive, which are responsible for various ongoing processes and on that basis formulate long term as well as short term projects for the future. Indira Barua in her paper deals with boundary maintaining mechanism of Tais in general and Tai Ahoms in particular. She clearly points out that most of the demands raised by the Tai Ahoms had their roots in the earlier socio-political history of the State.

The study focuses how in the name of ethnic consciousness, they are redefining the ethnic boundaries and reinterpreting or misinterpreting some religious and cultural symbols whenever required for giving a new perception to the community. The ethnic identity among the Tai Ahoms, when looked through time reveals that it is not fixed but fluid in character, like that of many ethnic groups of India. Kalyan Barua in his paper has stressed how inter-ethnic relation leads to ethnic consciousness. He traced the history of Koch Rajbanshis and pointed out how they had to pass through various stages to reach Koch Rajbanshi status. As their inclusion into the list of Scheduled Tribe status is opposed by other Scheduled Tribes, they are at present passing through a transitional phase.

S.N. Ratha, in his paper has analysed a burning problem of Assam i.e. the illegal migration, by tracing its past history. He has clearly stressed how the British administrative policy was responsible for large scale migration from outside Assam. A comparison of demographic data of Assam and Bangladesh on the one hand and the India on the other clearly interpretes the danger of infiltration. And how the fear of reducing natives of Assam to a minority in their homeland has developed problems has been elaborately dealt by him. R.K. Ranjit Singh in his paper discusses the ethnic problems citing examples from small tribal groups of Manipur. He explains that the group prejudices which persist in the mind of the general people of Manipur, act as the vital force behind erupting ethnic tensions. These are the cumulative effect of long historical interactions between these groups of people. Some parts of history may foster greater social cohesion and solidarity whereas some incidents in the history may deepen the cleavage between groups of people. Sarit Kumar Choudhury in his paper focuses the fear and anxiety of two lesser known tribes who because of various reasons are going to be marginalised in their homeland. The Miji/Sajolang and Aka/Hrusso who are numerically weak and placed in a difficult geographical location are gradually becoming conscious of their social and political rights. The only solution according to them is the creation of a separate district in the name of river Bichom. The movement has become popular as the Bichom movement and the hopes and aspirations of the people are represented by it.

Prem Saran has outlined the main characteristics of the tantric sect and tries to examine whether it can be called an ethnic group. He focuses how in various situations the tantric sect exhibits the characteristics of an ethnic group. Citing the examples of the development of the Lingayat sect into a caste group, he shifts his attention to Assam where ethnogenesis currently seem to be almost the only political game.

A thorough knowledge of the smaller ethnic groups is considered essential for implementing any developmental scheme in a particular geographical environment. Sekh Rahim Mondal in his paper has attempted to give an idea about the indigenous and immigrant ethnic and tribal groups living in the Himalayan belt that stretches across the mountains from Afghanistan and Kashmir to Nepal. The various ethnic groups, no doubt have their distinctive culture patterns, yet they have some common traits that distinguish them from people living in the plains. G.C. Sharma Thakur, in his paper, while dealing with the tribal scenario of Assam has cited the example of an acculturation and assimilation process among various ethnic groups of Assam and stressed how it emboldened the growth of a greater Assamese society. Till the sixties of 20th century, because of such processes, there was a healthy growth of unity in diversity. He explains how the constant pressure for autonomy by some tribes encouraged the re-tribalism and nationhood. Anamika Gogoi in her paper highlights the acculturative process on the basis of a case study among the Garos, living at the heart of Guwahati city for the past few centuries. She points out that in the midst of various changes, they are maintaining many of their traditional beliefs and practices. H.C. Mahanta in his paper has highlighted the stone age cultural development of Selbal Valley, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya. The discussion starts with the palaeolithic when people exclusively used different stone tools for all their activities, and it desisted with the Neolithic—when they had used stone tools particularly axes and adzes in addition to potteries. Besides, a study of the ways of the Garos—a hunting, gathering and marginal community, who are living in and around the same area, was undertaken with a view to gain an insight into the subsistence settlement pattern of the prehistoric people in the Selbal valley.

Development projects launched and formulated by the Government and their impact upon various tribes and communities are an important area of study. Bikash Banerjee has examined the trend of developmental efforts in Arunachal Pradesh since it achieved statehood in the year 1987. He tries to trace why in spite of investing sufficient money and providing required quantitative and qualitative services, no significant economic development has taken place in that State.

Women's lives and women's symbolic images came into light after a decade of serious ethnography of women's world in the 1970s. Today, women's studies have been recognised as one of the important areas of academic studies. But still there is dearth of data from this part of India. The next few papers deal with the women's life from various angles. Debajit Barua and A.N.M. Irshad Ali have tried to illustrate various aspects of developmental programmes undertaken during the eight Five-year Plans among the tribal women inhabiting the Rani Development Block of Kamrup district, Assam. While examining the impact of various schemes, it is revealed that poor economic condition, low literacy rate are the main hindrances in the proper utilization of various beneficiary schemes. Promanita Bora, has illustrated some aspects of child-rearing practices among the Mishings. In most cases, women took vaccination without knowing its scientific and medical importance. Children are vaccinated, but in later issues, they do not give much emphasis on it. Simultaneously they have faith in indigenous medicines and magico-religious beliefs and practices. Sadhan Sengupta, has tried to reveal certain aspects of child care processes, particularly immunization and feeding practices of the new born among the Hmar of Manipur. Despite the high literacy rate, the Hmar parents do not follow any modern scientific methods in matters of immunization and feeding. They still follow some practices which are not only unscientific but also unhygienic.

Upala Barua has highlighted how growing urban expansion of Guwahati city badly effected the socio-economic life of the neighbouring communities, particularly the Karbis. To supplement the family economy, the women are to work in various spheres and their workload both in the family

level and outside are increasing tremendously. Chitrallekha Barua deals briefly with the position of Nepali women by juxtaposing it to the rituals, relationship and other behaviour in their society in Assam.

Some important bio-social aspects of certain communities of North East India have been highlighted by few contributors. Rekha Das and Jyotirupa Sarma have briefly focused health status of mothers and children among the Boro Kacharis. Though modern medical facilities are available yet child mortality and morbidity continue to be high. Low literacy rate and lack of scientific knowledge are the main hindrance of better health of mother and child. Romendra Khongsdier has examined the nutritional status of the Kaibartas of Assam and tried to assess their position with the help of anthropometric traits and haemoglobin level. Better dietary intakes may improve the anthropometric and haemoglobin level of the Kaibartas.

Two papers are on the birth weight and bio-social factors in different communities. B. Mondal and Minakshi Barua have attempted to highlight how some bio-social factors are responsible for low birth weight among the Garos of Meghalaya and Ahoms and Sonowals of Upper Assam respectively. M.N. Dutta and F.A. Das show the growth pattern in early childhood among the Kaibartas of Assam.

Demographic study may highlight the trend of population growth. N.C. Sarkar in his paper has tried to focus certain demographic aspects of Muklom Tangsas of Changlang district, Arunachal Pradesh. The analysis reveals that Mukloms are a rapidly growing population where fitness is high.

Arundhati Gogoi in her paper briefly analyses the effects of a few socio-cultural determinants causing differential rates on the fertility and mortality among the Mundas, a tea garden labour population of Assam. Yash Kumar Singh has described the morbidity and mortality scenario that prevails among the Mishings and how their traditional concept of health, diseases and disease causation hamper the utilization of modern health care system.

Deepanjana D. Das and Bobby Dutta seek to find out the nature of crime among the women convicts of Dibrugarh

district's jail and trace the socio-cultural factors responsible for it.

Sr. Molly Joseph speaks the level of education among two tea labour communities of Assam and points out the variation on the basis of caste and religion.

T.S. Singh and T. Kapaiwo bring out a report on ABO and Rh(D) blood group distribution among the Tangkhuls of Manipur. Predominance of A blood group is a common trend in Manipur. Tangkhuls reflect the same trend, while the incidence of Rh(D) negative individuals is almost absent.

The book covers a wide spectrum of issues, relating to ethnic groups, process of assimilation, acculturation and the development of ethnic consciousness among various tribes and communities of North East India. The noted anthropologists and social scientists seek to make an objective analysis of the probable forces responsible for recent identity consciousness on the basis of first hand information from diverse groups. Thus, we presume that the academicians, policy makers and planners may find interest in the book and it may meet partially the long felt need of the researchers on this line.

INDIRA BARUA
SARTHAK SENGUPTA
DEEPANJANA D. DAS

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DR. INDIRA BARUA is a Professor in Anthropology in Dibrugarh University. Professor Barua visited and delivered lectures in Birmingham University, Hongkong University, Chulalongkron University in Bangkok (1984); School of Oriental and African Studies, London University (1993). Her publication includes three books and large number of research papers both in National and International journals. Some of her works were collected on *outstanding contribution* in 'Inventory of Marriage and Family Literatures', University of Minnesota, U.S.A.; and Caroline Population Centre, U.S.A.

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