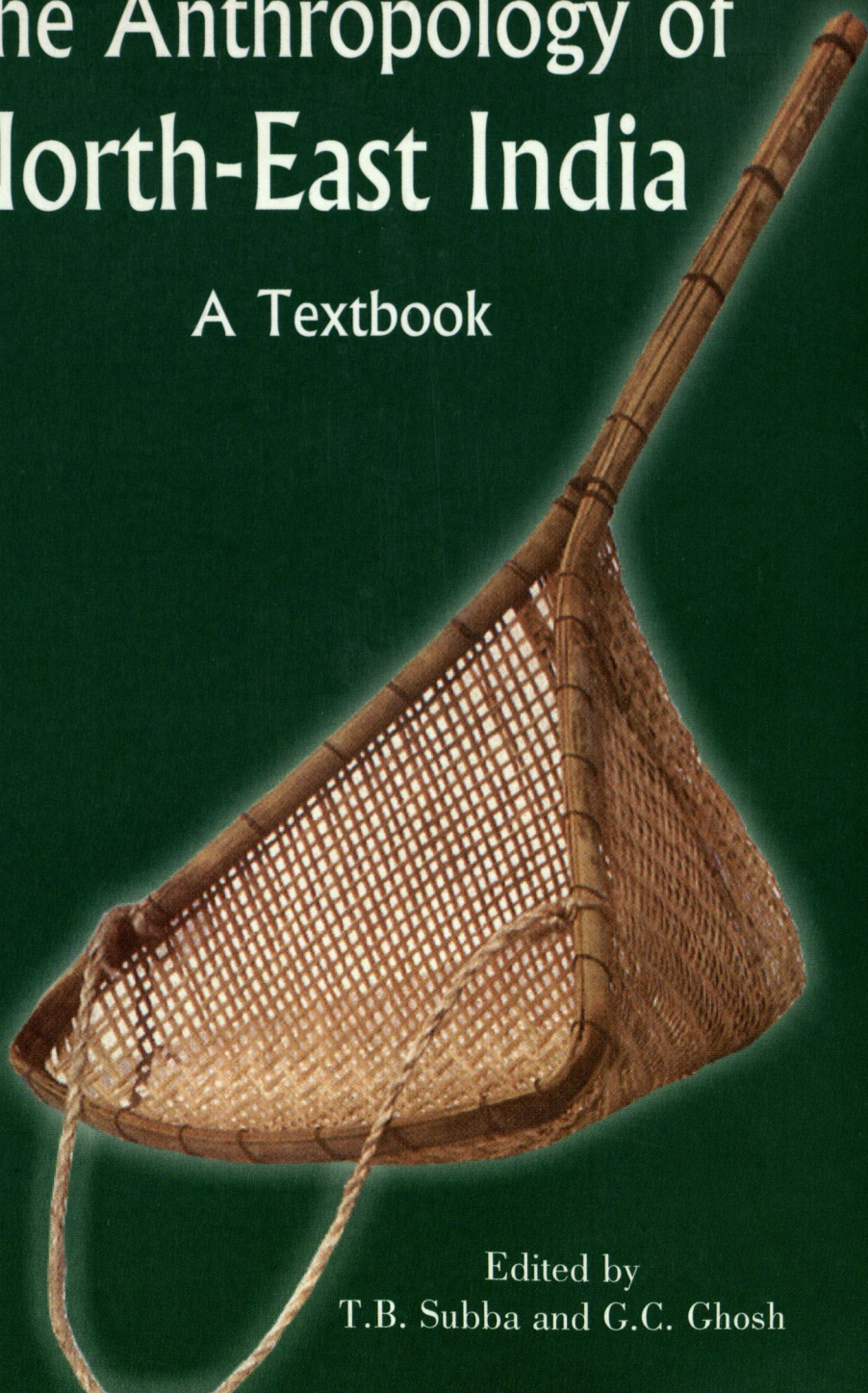


Orient Longman

# The Anthropology of North-East India

A Textbook



Edited by  
T.B. Subba and G.C. Ghosh

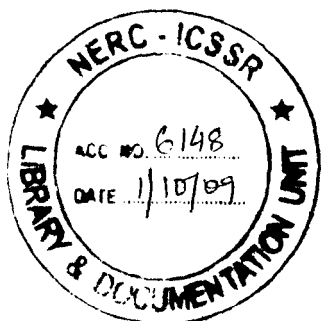
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T.B. SUBBA AND G.C. GHOSH



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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

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# Anthropology of North-East India

T.B. SUBBA AND G.C. GHOSH

This book has been written to cater to the needs of undergraduate and postgraduate students of Anthropology and Sociology in India in general and North-East India in particular. Many teachers in these disciplines voiced the need for such a book on various occasions but it was only in March 1999, that for the first time, anthropologists working at the Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata and those teaching at North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, came together to organise a seminar to discuss the contents of this book.

Though primarily aimed at students and compiled as a textbook, it is formatted in such a way that it can also cater to a wider audience as a standard reference book on the region. The contributors and editors have taken a lot of care to see that information is given clearly and unambiguously. At the same time, they have refrained from making any value judgments. One of the efforts of this book has been to raise curiosity in the minds of the readers, about the environment, the biology, and peoples of North-East India. The book exposes its readers to various view and debates open in the hope that students might probe further into research problems identified or indicated by various contributors to this book.

Another effort has been to provide reading material as well as comprehensive reading lists in several branches of Anthropology. These branches of Anthropology are no less important than those

dealt with here but are unfortunately rather ignored by most anthropologists in the country, who may be broadly categorised into Physical/Biological and Social/Cultural anthropologists. Thus, we have brought together readings from Prehistoric Archaeology, Physical/Biological Anthropology, and Social Anthropology. Regrettably, we have not been able to include Linguistic Anthropology here. The Department of Anthropology at North-East Hill University is one of the few Anthropology departments in the country which is making a sincere effort to rectify this lacuna. We seek the support of other department of Anthropology in the country in this venture.

This book aims to provide as much information to the students and researchers as possible, to take stock of the ground that has been covered during the last fifty years or so of Independence, and identify the research gaps, which are many. Clarity of concepts has been given as much attention as clarity of method in handling various research issues. The effort has also been to get the best person in the field to do this. The present volume is an attempt by the current generation of anthropologists to give the next generation a carefully worked overview of the issues in Anthropology today. We see it as a beginning, and hope that future generations will add to this work.

We shall now dwell briefly on the relationship between Anthropology and Sociology, particularly in the Indian context. Of all the branches of Anthropology, the closest link that Sociology has is with Social Anthropology and this relationship is very competently and cogently discussed by Andre Beteille, one of the finest teachers that India could boast of, in his *Essays in Comparative Sociology*. In fact, there are a number of university department in India, which bear the title Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology. The differences that were there between them in origin, theory, or methodology are no longer visible. It is difficult to say whether M.N. Srinivas or S.C. Dube or Beteille himself are sociologists or social anthropologists. It is practically impossible to know the disciplinary background of an author from a book or an article.

If we look at the titles of some recent these in Geography, Economics, and Political Science at some of the Indian universities, we often wonder if students of Sociology or Social Anthropology had submitted them. In fact, the distance between Sociology and Social Anthropology is less than the distance between Physical Anthropology and Social Anthropology, or for that matter, between Prehistoric Archaeology or Paleo-anthropology or Linguistic Anthropology and Social Anthropology. Actually speaking, each branch of Anthropology is more closely connected to some other disciplines than the other branches within the discipline. Hence, although some anthropologists might take pride in saying that their discipline is one of the most inter-disciplinary, which is quite right, they are equally unsure of the future of the discipline as an integrated science of 'man'. Anthropology is better prepared to change content without compromising on the basic objective of the discipline, or its identity. Forced integration is more a liability than an asset.

It is also important to dwell in some detail on the question of the identity of the Northeast as a region. In 1998, who published an article in which it was argued that the existence of the North-East as a region is a myth. Of course, it has its historical and even mythical antecedents in Pragajyotish and later Assam, despite the fact that Manipur and Tripura, the then two princely states were outside Assam. The region also has an extremely long international border, surrounded as it is, almost from all directions, by foreign countries. Tribes who have almostly taken to Christianity during the last one and a half centuries mostly inhabit the hills. Non-tribal or Hinduised tribal populations, on the other hand, inhabit the Brahmaputra, Barak, and Imphal valleys. In terms of economic pursuits, settled cultivation is practised in the valleys and river-banks whereas the hills have widespread practice of shifting cultivation. It is a food deficit region with growing unemployment problems due to the absence of any industrial activities, which in turn, is due to the lack of infrastructural development and also insurgency. Moreover, the tea gardens and other entrepreneurial efforts of this region, are under great stress due to the insurgent situation

prevailing there for almost two decades now. Trade might have proved to be very important to the economy of this region but for various political and (non-) diplomatic reasons, it has not been able to solve the unemployment problem. The timber economy required the break provided by the Supreme Court 'ban': otherwise, the excessive deforestation would have killed it.

The languages of the region are classified into the Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Mon-Khmer families, with poor mutual intelligibility even between two languages of the same family. Religion-wise, Hindus and Christians are the two major religious groups in the region, with minor exceptions, in the valleys and hills, respectively. Other religious groups like the Buddhists, Muslims, and indigenous groups are also important in certain states such as the Buddhists and indigenous peoples in Arunachal Pradesh, and Muslims in Assam. Racially, they are broadly divided into Mongoloid and Caucasoid groups, which are again ecologically divided with the former being found mostly in the hills and the latter in the plains or valleys.

It is also important to note about this region that its state or national boundaries are not effective in controlling the movement of people across such borders and the people, languages, cultures, religions, etc., of this region have extensions towards all directions beyond the region from very ancient times. It is also interesting that despite ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences, most people of the North-East see themselves as a group, share a sense of a fraternity and see themselves as distinct from the rest of India. Such a feeling is finding a broader base now and is acquiring a stronger character within the region. This is evident from the North-East students' organisations that have come up in the recent past.

If there is anything that binds this region, it is a sense of deprivation. On the other hand, the feeling of those from outside this region is that the latter are over-pampered, at the cost of development in other parts of India. Propagation of such theories or precipitation of such feelings is not difficult because both the sides are correct to some extent but that would mean indulgence in witchcraft and not the sign of a mature citizen.

The identity of a region or community is important but it need not be pushed against the identity of a nation. The various identities—ethnic, regional and national—can very well coexist.

We now briefly present the 15 contributions to this volume. These are divided into four sections. Section I deals with the prehistoric archaeology of the region. The paper written by Harish Sharma, discusses the status of archaeological research in all the seven states of the region and shows how the pottery excavations show a remarkable continuity of the present with the prehistoric past. But Professor Sharma also shows how the archaeological finds from the region do not give us sufficient data to reconstruct the cultural history of the people of this region, although this is the aim of prehistoric archaeologists.

Section II deals with the colonial period of the region. The first article in this section is by P.K. Misra. In the first part of his article, he traces the colonial context by discussing the socio-economic scenario in the country in general and the region in particular, the evolution of various colonial policies towards the tribes of the region, and Hutton's own perceptions of the people of India. A brief biographical sketch of Hutton and a critical reading of his ethnography of the Nagas follows this. The other article in this section is on J.P. Mills and is by B.R. Rizvi. His article begins with an exposition of the colonial context and the works of Mills' predecessors who served in the region. Then there is a brief biography of Mills followed by a detailed ethnography. The critical appreciation in this section of both Hutton and Mills is useful for understanding their contribution to the ethnography of region in general and of Naga tribes in particular.

Section III deals with the Biological Anthropology of the region. The opening paper by Amitabha Basu is an effort to define a framework for Biological Anthropology on the basis of a review of the extant studies. The paper does not deal specifically with the region, except towards the end. However, an article giving an all-India picture would certainly benefit the students of the region, particularly when such a broad canvas is often missing in anthropological literature. While the students

are well informed about specific tribes, they often miss the overarching theoretical situation.

Bapukan Choudhury and Gulrukh Begum's paper is a comprehensive survey of the literature on concepts, parameters, methods, and theories in the field of growth studies, in general. Again, the wide-ranging perspective offered is useful in situating the specific case of the North-East. The third article, also related to these issues, is prepared by Farida Ahmed Das.

The paper by Romendro Khongsdier deals with the study of genetic drift in natural populations. Besides a detailed discussion on the methods of studying genetic drift, the article cites instances from several such populations in the region, like the Khasi of Meghalaya, and the Semsá of Assam. An effort has also been made here to speculate on demographic and cultural consequences of a genetic drift.

The last article in this section is on dermatoglyphics. In this article, Saarthak Sengupta reviews the status of dermatoglyphic research in the region and identifies the gaps. The dermatoglyphic data on various tribes of the region have been compared on the basis of standard indices, which do not clearly establish the population affinity of those tribes. In fact, the physical affinities based on certain dermatoglyphic indices are not always supported by other such indices and it is extremely difficult to generalise on population affinities. Differences in such data between males and females belonging to the same population create further difficulties in this respect.

The last section is on the Social Anthropology of the region. The first article in this section deals with 'tribal social organisation', an expression with which many anthropologists and sociologists are not comfortable. However, R.K. Kar has been able to delineate, with the help of a comparative framework and fairly detailed ethnography of each tribe discussed, some pattern in the way the various tribes of the region organise themselves. He also shows how an individual member of a tribe combine in him/her a number of roles simultaneously.

The second article deals with agrarian relations, which are admittedly one of the most complex in the region. In this article,

Satyabrata Chakrabarti gives a brief historical background of the agrarian history of the region dealing mainly with the colonial period, which is followed by an account of agrarian relations in the various states of the region. He also brings out some of the major hurdles in engineering agrarian transformation in the region.

The third article by Jayanta Kumar Sarkar is about the contribution of the Anthropological Survey of India, one of the largest government-controlled research institutions in India, to the Social Anthropology of the region. The main objective of this article is to highlight the various methods that this institution adopted since its inception in order to understand the various cultures of the region. Hence, instead of presenting the account in a time series, it has been done on the basis of themes and methods. This article also provides information on the aims and objectives of this institution, its brief history, and a detailed account of the particular tribes and communities studied by the technical staff of this institution. What this institution has missed has been pointed out in the next article by Sarit Kumar Chaudhuri on the lesser-known tribes of the region.

The fifth article is on the tribal women of the region written by Lucy Vashum Zehol. This article is not only an effort to grapple with the conceptual problems related to women and their status but also an attempt to contextualise the same with the experiences of Naga women in general and Tangkhul women in particular.

R.P. Athparia's paper deals with the Karbis who have recently attracted a lot of state attention due to the violence unleashed by some of their militant organisation in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The case of the Karbis is interesting for the way they have used their folklore to construct their identity. Dr Athparia discussed this issue by looking at the historical context. The significance of land, in view of their declining control over it, is also analysed in the context of their negotiation for a more meaningful identity.

Finally, we present an article written jointly by Anungla Aier and Sapu Changkija. This is a detailed account of the indigenous

knowledge of various tribes of the region regarding the management of their natural resources. This explains why the North-East is one of the eighteen important regions for biodiversity.

The present volume would not have been possible without the cooperation of our contributors, many of whom are retired or very senior teachers or researchers in the discipline. We thank them for sharing our dream of gifting something worthwhile to the next generation of anthropologists and sociologists. We also thank Dr Ranajit Kumar Bhattacharya, Director, Anthropological Survey of India, and Late Professor B. Pakem, the then Vice-Chancellor of North-Eastern Hill University for supporting our project. V. Murali deserves special appreciation for doing most of the typing.