

# **Tribes of North-East India**

*Issues and Challenges*



**Birichi K. Medhi, R.P. Athparia, K. Jose SVD**

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## CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>A Peep in to the Tribal Scenario of North-East India: An Introduction</i>	<i>xi</i>
1. Culture and Environment of North-East India in Changing Perspective	
<i>B. K. Medhi &amp; S. K. Roy</i>	<i>1</i>
2. Tribes and Castes of North-East India – Socio-Political Changes in Pre and Post Independence Period	
<i>Ganesh Ch. Sharma Thakur</i>	<i>22</i>
3. Contemporary Challenges Faced by the Tribals of North-East India: Analysis in the Context of Implementing NRM-Based Development Interventions	
<i>Vincent Darlong</i>	<i>32</i>
4. Indigenous Knowledge of Agricultural Management and Changing Trend among some Tribal People of Manipur	
<i>R.P. Athparia</i>	<i>53</i>
5. Changing Village Economy of the Galo: A study on Zirdin Village of West Siang District in Arunachal Pradesh	
<i>Mari Lollen</i>	<i>61</i>
6. Major Challenges Faced by the Tribals of North-East India	
<i>Peter Haokip</i>	<i>78</i>
7. Indigenous Resource Management among the Tribes of North-East India with Special Reference to Usage of Bamboo	
<i>Birinchi K. Medhi &amp; K. Jose SVD</i>	<i>91</i>
8. Concept of Property among the Garos of North-East India	
<i>Arifur Zaman</i>	<i>104</i>

9. Angami Women and Matrilineal Inheritance: A Case Study of Zounuo-Keyhonuo Group <i>Kedilezo Kikhi</i>	112
10. Impact of Indian Administration on Economic life of Border Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh <i>Ashan Riddi</i>	125
11. Socio-Political Situations of the Tribes of Assam Since Ahom period <i>G. C. Kakati &amp; B. K. Barman</i>	132
12. Health of Tea Garden Workers: A case study in Upper Assam <i>Bhaskar Das &amp; Sarthak Sengupta</i>	145
13. The Idu Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh: A Frontier Tribe in Transition <i>Tarun Mene &amp; S. K. Chaudhuri</i>	154
14. Socio-Cultural Change among the Rabhas <i>Upen Rabha Hakacham &amp; Rupak K. Rabha</i>	171
15. Khasi Society and the Impact of Modernity: Challenges to Identity and Integrity <i>Barnes Mawrie SDB</i>	176
16. Negotiating Cultural Transformation in Tribal North-East India <i>A.C. Sinha</i>	196
17. Types, Distribution, and Religious Significance of the Megaliths of the Karbis of Dimoria, Assam <i>Birinchi K. Medhi &amp; Kalpana Choudhury</i>	217
18. Cultural Contacts: Problems and Opportunities <i>Archbishop Thomas Menampampil SDB</i>	227
19. Problems of Cultural Contact <i>Saroj Chaudhuri</i>	250
20. Folksongs as a Mouthpiece of Tea-Tribes during Colonial Period – Assam in reference <i>Baijayanta Keot &amp; Parag Nath</i>	255

21. A Brief Sketch on the Santals' Customs and Heritage <i>Bharat Tudu</i>	261
22. Impact of Christianity on the Khasi-Jaintia : People of Meghalaya <i>O.L. Snaitang</i>	269
23. Hinduisation of the Bodos <i>Luke Daimary</i>	278
24. Pith Art of Assam <i>Nabajit Deka</i>	286
25. Tribes of Tripura and National Integration <i>Nirmal Das</i>	290
26. Constraints of Development: A study on the Tiwas of Assam <i>G. C. Ojah</i>	301
27. Tribes and the Politics of National Integration in India's North-East <i>Samir Kumar Das</i>	305
28. Murasingh: Socio-Cultural Crisis <i>Lakshmidhan Murasing</i>	315
29. Funeral rites of the Harbong Tribe of Tripura <i>Nanigopal Chakraborty</i>	321
30. Social and Cultural Dynamics of the Totos <i>Rajib Chatterjee</i>	326
31. Women and Patriarchy: Assam in Context <i>Mandakini Baruah</i>	334
32. Gender and Family in the Context of Matrilineal Societies <i>Dilip Kr. Kalita</i>	339
33. Impressions of Permanence: A Study of the Kherai Ritual of the Bodos <i>Madhurima Goswami</i>	344
34. The Tribe-Caste Continuum and the Formation of the Assamese Identity <i>Chandan Kr. Sharma</i>	354
35. Tribal Identity, Customary Law and Modernisation in North-East India <i>Walter Fernandes</i>	367

- the Editors

## **A Peep in to the Tribal Scenario of North-east India: *Introduction***

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North-East Region of India lies in an extension of the Sub-Himalayan Zone, consisting of lofty mountainous terrains and moderately high hilly tracts interspersed with plateaus and river-fed valleys. While the geographical and topographical situation has made North-East India into a naturally homogenous zone, the partition of the sub-continent literally cut it off from rest of the country – barring a narrow corridor accentuating, as it were, a specificity of the region. North-East India has an aggregate of 2,55,037 sq km accounting for nearly 9 per cent of India's total geographical area with a population of 38,444,026 according to the 2001 census. About three quarters of the region is covered by hilly terrain and one quarter is made up of the four plain areas of Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of Assam, the Tripura plains, and the Manipur plateau. Those in the thinly-populated hill areas are the people we now call 'tribals', and in the fertile plains and plateau are mainly the 'non-tribal, people, who comprise more than 80% of the total population. In recognizing the cultural foreignness of the "tribal" people of the hill regions, we should have in mind that the sanskritization of the plain areas have been going on for centuries. Until the coming of the British rule in the early nineteenth century, the entire region was never linked politically with any major Indian political power, the cultural link of some plain areas with the Indic culture dates back centuries.

When one talks about cultural plurality in North-East India, since it shares little or no commonality in its traditional culture with the rest of India, the case of the "tribal" people in North-East India is especially acute. To address the identity crisis in the region, one has to bear in mind the cultural plurality of the North- East India in general, and the sharp

difference between the people assimilated into Indic culture, and the unassimilated “tribal” people in particular. Out of constant interactions, cultures influenced each other and developed commonalities. While the Indic-sanskritic culture of India is as a foreign culture for a large part of the regions, there are also areas where it has been at home for centuries. We will argue that the assimilation of people into the Indic culture became a defining factor for what is “tribal” and “not tribal” in the identity of the people of the region today.

A tribe is a loosely organized group of people, united by language and customs, living as a community under one or more chiefs. The tribes are generally classified on the basis of territory, language, occupation, physical characteristics, and cultural contracts. They speak none of the major Indian languages and each tribe has its own less developed language or dialect. Tribes – are scheduled and unscheduled. In 1967 Anthropological Survey of India noted 314 tribal communities spread in different parts of India. It has been found that there are a number of tribal communities in India who are not enjoying special facilities as extended to the Scheduled Tribes. Due to this operational problem many welfare programs are not launched among those people who have not been identified as ST. According to 1981 census, the tribal population of India comprising 427 communities was 51,628,638 constituting 7.76% of India’s total population, according to 1991 census it is 67.76 million constituting 8.08% of total population. The population of ST has been on the increase ever since 1951. With 43 communities waiting for the approval (of central government) to be included in ST list, their population will show further increase in recent future. However, as mentioned above ethnographic data on a number of tribes are lacking. Tribals are the dominant ethnic group in the hill states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and the hill districts of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The total tribal population of the region is 10,354,493 which accounts to 27.67 per cent of the population of the region. About 12.28 per cent of India’s ST population lives in North-East India. Though Arunachal has more than 90 ethnic groups only 26 of them are recognized as ST, while Manipur has 29, Assam 23, Tripura 19, Meghalaya 17, Mizoram 14, and Nagaland has 5 ethnic groups recognized as ST.

The specific character of the North-East India however, extends beyond its physical features; it has its own distinctiveness also in respect of its population component and cultural pattern. Since very early times the North-East has been the home of the Kiratas or Indo-Mongoloids.

Although, Austric and Dravidians sub-strata have been discovered by scholars in the racial and cultural make-up of the region and although waves of Aryan Culture have swept over parts of the region – particularly the valleys in Assam, Manipur, and Tripura – the predominance of the Indo-Mongoloid racial and cultural features is much too obvious. Although the Indo-Mongoloids had not occupied a centre-stage position in the history of India's civilization, they have never been off the stage either. Tribals have bare minimum day to day needs. They live amidst nature, and they have unfathomable socio-religious attachment to their land in which they live. When a new development program is initiated in a tribal area they wonder whether it will benefit them without interfering with their traditional ethos and mores. Problem of cultural contact is one of the major factors which need to be dealt with adequate care and concern.

Apart from the fact that the Aryan Hindu religious and cultural norms have been a dominant influence, there is also the living presence in the region of Buddhism of both Hinayana and Mahayana sects, of Islam and also of Christianity in more recent times. Because of the presence of and almost bewildering racial and cultural variety in North-East has often been referred to as the Anthropologists paradise. With equal, if not greater justification the region could be called the folklorists paradise: the stock of folklore material both verbal and non-verbal of the great number of groups and sub-groups inhabiting the region is virtually inexhaustible. This is a region where tradition had held its sway till very recent times. But unusually heavy influx of people from outside the region has disturbed the demographic and cultural balance of the region. Spread of education coupled with the waves of development and modernization has also played its part in changing the region's cultural contours. There have been problems of identity crisis tending to give rise to various kinds of movements aimed at self-assertion. Not only has there been a new concern with individual or group cultures but there have even revivalist tendency also.

With international borders on almost all sides – China on the north, Burma on the east, Bangladesh on the southern west and Bhutan on the north – the North-East India also most strategically placed and is, thus, geo-politically a very sensitive area. While there is no denying that there are considerable diversities within the region, yet the fact remains that there is a basic unity characterizing the seven units making up North-East India – Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Mizoram. Presently, there is also a realization of this unity among the

people of the constituent units and termed 'Seven Sisters', (eight including Sikkim) to designate the seven units reflects that sense of unity and togetherness running through them.

Assam has as many as 23 tribes out of them eleven are hill tribes and 9 in the plains. The prominent among them are Bodos, Mishings, Karbis, Dimasas and Kacharis. Apparently, other tribes which have fewer speakers have not been included in the above table. We note that all these tribals are standing at uneven levels from one another in terms of educational, social, cultural, economic, and political development. Some of them entirely depend on jhum cultivation while others are better off with some stretch of wet land cultivation. Though some of the plains' tribals have become very conscious about their distinct identity and language, it must be admitted honestly that all of them have been contributing very significantly to enrich the composite Assamese culture, language, literature, arts and nationality.

All the tribes of Assam are not very backward. They are hardly cut-off physically and socio-culturally from non-tribals. In Assam generally less productive and forested lands are occupied by the ST like Bodo, Garo, Rabha, Tiwa, Karbi, Dimasa, Barman, Kachari, etc.,. As per 1991 census out of the total population of 22414327 as many as 2874441 persons or 12.82 per cent were ST in Assam. They mostly belong to Mongoloid stocks. They are socio-economically underdeveloped as compared to the non-tribal communities. They even feel socio-economically and politically suppressed and exploited by the non-tribals. Since the starting of this century, following large scale influx of immigrants especially from undivided Bengal and Nepal to Assam, a sense of fear psychosis of insecurity has developed among the indigenous people including tribals. Thus the tribals being alarmed at this have ethnically united to form a tribal league in Assam as early as 1933. The Assam movement 1979-85, the long existed tribal movements in the Bodo dominated areas in the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra, and the Karbi Anglong and NC Hills districts fundamentally reflect the complex nationality question in Assam.

Arunachal Pradesh, the land of the Rising Sun, is geographically the largest state in North-East India. It is the abode of 26 major tribes and a large number of smaller sub-tribes belonging to Indo-Mongoloid stock. In February 1987 Arunachal was raised to a full-fledged state of the union of India. This has achieved a major objective of making people of the state participate in socio-cultural, political, economic and others spheres of development. This has taken a new step beyond the administrative policy

of Nehru in which they to be left alone to develop on their own genius. But the question is making them realize the utility of the numerous programs envisaged by the government for the over all growth of everyone in the state. Today most of the tribes in Arunachal are under the process of modernization. Change is observed in all the major aspect of life most notably in economics, education, health care, etc. However, most of the people who live in villages depend on jhum cultivation, and they have not adopted to the new and improved ways of production and preservation of the food grains. Added to this problem the infrastructure for transportation and marketing leave much to be desired.

When we look at the Tripura scenario we realize that majority of the people there are Bengalis. The percentage of the tribal community to the total population of Tripura as per the 2001 census was 29% of which Tripuris are 54.16%, Reangs – 13.10%, Chakmas – 11.28%, Jamatia 7.15%, and others are less than 5%. Most of the tribes in Tripura are economically backward, socially vulnerable, ethnically threatened and educationally weak. The tribal society here is perhaps the only one of the many communities in the region who had been historically outnumbered by non-tribals in their own land. This has thrown up many challenges most specifically land alienation, insurgency, decision making based on political clout, market economy, language conflicts, and others. However, the various contributions done by the non-tribal communities in Tripura cannot be overlooked.

Other states in North-East India have their own peculiarities as well. In sum, each of the North Eastern state has to address a number of needs simultaneously. Often by the time state and centre take note of one need another one crops up. Then if no one cares for sometime, we are caught unaware. We pay huge price for our un-preparedness. Whose problems are we addressing? Are the stakeholders involved? Are they willing to pay a price for the changes they desire now or are they willing to suffer for ever? North-East has not one problem to face but a bundle of problems at various intensities. In spite of the best efforts and intention of the government, achievements to curb the problems of the tribal people have not received the desired results. The lack of determination among the government machinery, hopelessness, less enthusiasm, and involvement among the tribals, the administrative bottle-necks at different stages of implementation of the scheme, etc. are the major obstacles on our way to peace and progress. These above mentioned and other considerations made us reflect on one of the major segments of the people of North-East

India – the Tribal fraternity who need to move ahead with greater determination and focus to make a mark in their own societies and in North-East India in general.

It is undoubtedly clear that the tribes and castes on North-East India have a long way to travel towards self-reliance and sustainable development. Government interventions, NGOs collaboration and a number of factors have helped in ways more than one to make tangible changes in their life. The major draw back in all these interventions were that they did not have a mechanism to accompany the people for a prolonged period of time with technical know how, finance, training and encouragement. In some cases the intervention of the agencies did not catch the imagination of the indigenous people and this was a major hurdle in progress and people's participation and commitment to bring in the desired results. Anyone who looks at the tribal scenario in North East India will wonder how they remained so backward even after so many programmes and policies of the Government, the multiple engagements envisaged by NGOs and other welfare agencies. If we look into the area of literacy also they have remained at a very low profile.

This brings us to a brief perusal of the papers presented in this book. The first paper on *Culture and Environment of North-East India in Changing Perspective* by **Birinchi K. Medhi** and **S. K. Roy** deals with various changes taking place in North-East India. They argue that any worthwhile involvement within this region should be based on a well researched enquiry into the various nuances of culture and environment in North-East India, in which Anthropologists have a decisive role to play. **Ganesh Chandra Sharma Thakur** in his paper on *Tribes and Castes of North-East India – Socio-Political Changes in Pre and Post Independence Period*, studies in detail the situation of tribes and castes in North-East India which is different from that of the other parts of the country due to its unique socio-political, geographical, and historical background. The author's observation is very heartening that due to the role played by the great Vaishnavite preceptor Sri Sankaradeva the rigour of social barrier and extreme form of casteism is not traced in the North Eastern states, more particularly in Assam. **Vincent Darlong** in his paper identifies and analyses the contemporary social, environmental, and development challenges faced by the tribals of North-East India in the context of NRM based development interventions.

In his paper *Indigenous Knowledge of Agricultural Management and Changing Trend among some Tribal people of Manipur*, **R. P.**

**Athparia** takes a look at some of the Indigenous knowledge practices and resource management of the hill tribes of Manipur, especially the Nagas and Kukis with regard to water Gharat or Pani Dhenki, locally known as Twichangsui-in by the Kukis and Rashong by the Tangkhul Nagas. **Mari Lollen** in his paper entitled *Changing Village Economy of the Galo: A Study on Zirdin Village of West Siang District in Arunachal Pradesh* takes a close look at the village economy, and the various changes observed in the recent past, especially the moving away from Jhum to terrace cultivation. **Peter Haokip** while writing on the major challenges opines that while the rest of India seems to be still not only unwilling to accept the Mongoloid races of the North East India as full-fledged Indian, the people of North- East too seems to have no sense of belonging to the rest of India, emotionally and psychologically.

In the joint paper by **Birinchi K. Medhi** and **K. Jose SVD** entitled *Indigenous Resource Management among the Tribes of North-East India with special Reference to Usage of Bamboo* an effort is made by the authors to study the various major utilities of bamboo which is profusely available in North-East India. Bamboo, a multipurpose agro-forestry product, has been an integral part of the Indian culture. The authors say that, undoubtedly bamboo can revolutionize the economy of the North-East India ensuring employment opportunities to a large number of people. **Arifur Zaman** writes on the *Concept of Property among the Garos of North-East India*. In India Garos mainly occupy the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya; Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam; and certain parts of Tripura, North Bengal and Bangla Desh. The author observes that the age-old concept of property among the Garos of North-East India have undergone conspicuous changes. **Kedilezo Kikhi** discusses on *Angami women and Matrilineal Inheritance with special reference to Zounuo-Keyhonuo Group* which provides a system of unilineal descent to be more particular, comprising a segmentary lineage system, patri-virilocal residence, where the general devolution of productive and immovable property is agnatic. The study finds out that this practice of matrilineally inherited land from a mother to her daughters is a unique feature of the Zounuo-Keyhonuo group, not prevalent in other groups of the Angami society or any other Naga groups.

**Ashan Riddi** demonstrates the impact on Indian Administration on economic life of border tribes with special reference to the Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh. He observes that prior to 1950, all the essential items were imported from the Tibet, by the Tagins by barter system. However,

the establishment of Indian administration and economy ruined the economic self-sufficiency of the border Tagin. The Constitutional guarantee for better education during Ahom Period, British Period, and Post independence period and its impact is studied by **G.C. Kakati** and **B.K. Barman**. *Health of Tea Garden Workers: A Case Study in Upper Assam*, is undertaken jointly by **Sarthak Sengupta** and **Bhaskar Das**. They observe that the health of a person or a community is a function of several factors, viz., hereditary, environmental, and socio-cultural. This data based study conducted in a upper Assam show alarming cases of anaemia, rheumatism, gastroenteritis, skin diseases, respiratory problem, gastric ulcers, mouth ulcers, helmenthiasis, stroke, tuberculosis, epilepsy, diarrhoea, chest pain, toothache, bleeding gums, gingivitis, abdomen pain, cold and cough, giddiness, hysteria etc.

**Tarun Mene** and **Sarit K. Chaudhuri** enquire into the Idu Mishmis of Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley Districts of Arunachal Pradesh. From the whole discourse it is evident that like many other tribes of the state, Idu Mishmis are also passing through the phase of transition. However, amidst such changes, Idu Mishmis in general, are conscious of retaining some of their core identity markers, which have given them a distinct space with in the varied cultural mosaic of the tribes of a frontier state. In the paper entitled *Socio-Cultural Change among the Rabhas*, **Upen Rabha Hakacham** and **Rupak Kr. Rabha** explain, how the Rabhas in the earlier times followed matrilineal system in property inheritance. Presently there are many Socio-cultural changes taking place among the Rabhas. Changes in the field of inheritance, food habits, religion, dress, language, and other aspects of life are the major ones among them. **Barnes Mawrie** in his study entitled *Khasi Society and the Impact of Modernity: Challenges to Identity and Integrity*, argues that since the advent of Colonialism and Christianity and along with them modernity, the Khasi society has never been the same. The subjugation of Khasi chiefs to the British rule has had its consequences on the traditional political system while Christianity on its part has brought in tremendous changes through evangelization and all activities associated with this.

**A.C. Sinha** in his paper entitled *Negotiating Cultural Transformation in Tribal North-East India* takes a passionate look at the concept of culture in the context of North-East India. He says, culture provides something like an all inclusive web of world view, which makes the life comprehensible to the common man/women of the society. The anthropologists have provided a set of definitions of culture as a conceptual

tool for them to understand their subject and inform the readers of their significance. *Types, Distribution, and Religious Significance of the Megaliths of the Karbis of Dimaria, Assam*, is a study by **Birinchi K. Medhi** and **Kalpana Choudhury**. Among a few tribes of North-East India, erection of megaliths in the memory of the deceased members with elaborate rituals is a living culture. The Karbis of Dimoria area still erects megaliths to commemorate deaths. The ethnographic studies undertaken on various contemporary megalithic builders provide valuable information for understanding the complexity of the beliefs involved in the erection of megaliths. **Archbishop Thomas Menampampil SDB** in his paper *Cultural Contacts: Problems and Possibilities* explores various issues involved in the phenomenon of culture contacts. He says cultures separate people more sharply than political boundaries. He concludes by inviting everyone to continuously learn from varied cultures and traditions in our homeland, and in fact from every culture and civilization on the globe. **Saroj Chaudhuri** in his paper, *Problems of Cultural Contact* explains how Tripura is perhaps one of those few states that have experienced continuous and mammoth influxes. And yet, it may sound incredible, but the fact remains that there is hardly any difficulty in dissemination and assimilation between the two cultural streams.

*Folksongs as a Mouthpiece of Tea-Tribes During Colonial Period*, is an article jointly written by **Baijyanta Keot** and **Parag Nath**. Through typical folk songs the writers present the woes of the tea workers. They observe that though at the very outset, the indigenous Assamese labourers worked hard in the tea estates, a change of attitude was evident as soon as the hegemony transferred to the East India Company. *A Brief Sketch on the Santals' Customs and Heritage* is a paper by **Bharat Tudu**, who opines that the Santal is one of the communities in our country, about whom elaborate studies are not done. The author highlights some of the main drawbacks of education as well as the reasons of economic backwardness among them. **O.L. Snaitang** enquires into the Impact of Christianity on the Khasi-Jaintia people of Meghalaya to find out the impact of Christianity upon the Khasi-Jaintia people upon the assumption that while the new faith has played a significant role in major cultural change among the hill people in Northeast India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and well before 1947, it however tended to divide the people on denominational and administrative lines in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Luke Daimary** in his write up on *Hinduisation of the Bodos* says that Bodos are a unique group of people who have an exquisite and

enviable culture, rich tradition and unique language, melodious songs and colorful dresses and dances. For centuries together they lived within their own cultural and social limits untouched by any process of proselytisation. Hinduisation of the Bodos brought about significant changes in their social and religious outlook. **Nabajit Deka** throws light on the pith art of Assam. He says, Assam, the land of enchanting beauty and cultural diversity had a very rich tradition of visual art since very ancient times, one such living tradition of folk visual art in Assam is the works done on pith in the region of erstwhile Goalpara district. The author calls for a systematic and comprehensive study and documentation of the tradition for the promotion, continuation and proper evaluation of the tradition and the art form.

**Nirmal Das** in his paper *Tribes of Tripura and National Integration*, argues that in Tripura, tribals are rapidly proceeding towards modernity. We can find the change in education, in dress, religious persuasions, forms of worships, sports and recreations, home life, social-customs, in their attitude towards different forms of labour etc. **Ganesh Ch. Ojah's** paper focuses on the *Constraints of Development among the Tiwas of Assam*. The Tiwas formerly known as the Lalungs are found in Kamrup, Morigaon, Nagaon and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. In the context of Assam, in general, and the Tiwa in particular it is difficult to estimate and draw clear picture of development as there are minimum evaluation studies done on tribal development programmes. **Samir Kumar Das** in his contribution entitled *Tribes and the Politics of National Integration in India's North-East* seeks to track the official and conventional understanding of National Integration in India, with special reference to North-East India while examining the changes that such understanding has undergone in recent years – particularly since the mid-1980s. **Lakshmidhan Murasingh** studies on his own ethnic community. He says, the Murasinghs of Tripura have four branches, viz., Murasinghs, Dongros, Mosbang and Totaram. The author opines, Mura could be a word cognate with 'Mora', that is dead, and Sing is the word for horn. He also highlights some of the stories of their origin. **Nanigopal Chakraborty** writes on the *Funeral Rites of the Harbong Tribe of Tripura*. He studies a peculiar practice of funeral which is exclusive to the Harbongs. This practice speaks of a highly philosophical attitude towards life, an enquiry into the source of which can be a fascinating study for the researchers. The author calls for a team work among inter-disciplinary sciences to unearth the rich pageant of unity in diversity that is north east of India.

In the essay *Social and Cultural Dynamics of the Totos of West Bengal*, **Rajib Chatterjee** explores the ethnic environment of the Totopara which has changed especially due to migration. At present the total non-Toto population of diverse communities exceeds the Toto population and as a result Toto Para has become a multi ethnic village. In recent times a socio-political tension between the Totos and non-Totos has gradually build up. **Mandakini Barua** makes a study on the Mishing society with special reference to status of women. She observes that the women are not included in the decision making bodies of the village though they are active participants with regard to agricultural operations. **Dilip Kumar Kalita** in his study on *Gender and the Family in the Context of Matrilineal Society* observes that in primitive societies the man did most of the outdoor and hazardous works while the woman stayed back at home and looked after the children and feeding of the family. But in case of the matriarchal societies the picture is a bit different than that of the patriarchal societies.

*Impressions of Permanence: A Study of the Kherai Ritual of the Bodos* is a study by **Madhurima Goswami** based on her continuous observation of Bodo folk religion. In the Kherai festival the trance dancer 'doudini' propitiates deities through various dances relating to different gods, especially Bathou. This paper presents folk religion in a new light by placing it in the broader context of social structure and cultural consciousness. In the next article **Chandan Kr. Sharma** argues that the Assamese identity is a product of a historical process in which both tribal and non-tribal groups played equally important roles. **Walter Fernandes** discusses the impact of this interaction on the customary law, tradition and identity of some tribes. While customary laws are practiced in North East India, the author calls for a search for an interface with modernity that can update their tradition while avoiding the negative effects.

We take this opportunity to congratulate **SANSKRITI - North Eastern Institute of Culture and Religion**, an Anthropological Research Wing of the SVD (Divine Word/*Oisho Bani*) Society for taking efforts to contact a number of select scholars who contributed papers on some of the most timely and pertinent themes. The above mentioned papers are some of the major ones presented in the three day National Seminar organized by Sanskriti in November 2007. Following the great traditions of late Dr. (Fr.) William Schmidt SVD the founder of Anthropos Institute, Germany and his long time collaborators in SVD and other academic fraternity, and late Dr. (Fr.) Stephen Fuchs SVD the founder of Institute of Indian Culture, Mumbai and a number of renowned faculty members and

great stalwarts like Archbishop Thomas Menampampil SDB, Guwahati and others we hope to establish this Institute for scientific study of the people with special reference to this region. This Seminar was a part of our net-working with many well known professors, scholars and others in North-East India. Participants and the collaborators namely, Anthropological Survey of India – Kolkata, Indian Council of Social Science Research – Shillong, Archdiocese of Guwahati, Divine Word/*Oisho Bani* Society, North-East India, and Diocese of Agartala and others deserve appreciation for making this event a very successful one. Now it is hoped that these papers will generate meaningful discussion at various levels so that the themes dealt within this volume will make a substantial contribution in the lives of the tribals on whom this elaborate exercise is made.

15/03/2009

Guwahati

Prabin Chandra Das

Birinchi K. Medhi

R. P. Athparia

K. Jose SVD

**Prof. Birinchi K. Medhi** is a well known Anthropologist in North-East India. Being a social anthropologist he penetrates into hidden aspects of human cultures of the world with special reference to North-East India. He is also novelist, poet, columnist, and lyricist in Assamese language. Medhi sees man not as an anthropologist subject only; as a novelist and short story writer he tries to understand the agonizing and devastating impacts of modernity on life and cultures of North-East India. Medhi has a number of publications in Anthropology, both in Assamese and English, to his credit. At present he is a Professor of Social Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology, Guwahati University, Assam.

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**Fr. K. Jose SVD** is the Founder Director of Sanskriti- North Eastern Institute of Culture and Religion. He is a life- time member of Divine Word Society (SVD) which has a number of Anthropological and Folklore Reseach Institutions world wide. He is currently doing his doctoral studies in Anthropology from NEHU, Shillong. He has presented several research papers in various international, national and regional seminars and has recently organized a national seminar on tribes and castes of North-East India. His areas of special interest are mapping cultural change among the people of North-East India, indigenous knowledge systems for sustainable development, and symbols as transmitters of culture of the people.

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