

# Man and Environment in NE India

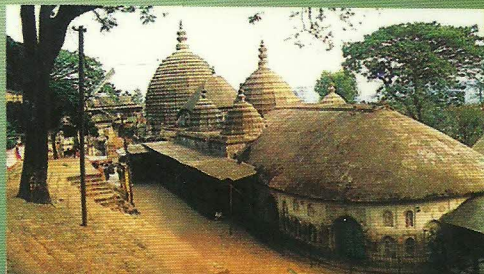
## Volume III



Heritage Issue # 1



- **Archaeology**
- **Anthropology**
- **Heritage**



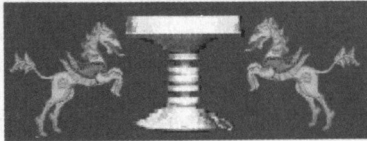
**Dilip K. Medhi**  
Editor

**MAN AND ENVIRONMENT IN  
NORTHEAST INDIA**

Volume - III

# MAN AND ENVIRONMENT IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Volume - III



Heritage Issue I

Anthropology, Archaeology and Heritage

*Editor*

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**EBH Publishers (India)**

**Guwahati**

***Man and Environment in Northeast India, Volume III, Heritage Issue # I*** (Anthropology, Archaeology and Heritage) is aimed at giving an insight into the art and culture of Northeast India, which is long been considered as a little known territory of the World. After the successful production of Volumes I & II in the year of 1993 and 2002 respectively, this Volume will highlight the enormously rich art and cultural resources of Northeast India or the Assam Region into the knowledge of academicians in India and abroad as well. It is 3<sup>rd</sup> in the series of a project that Dilip K. Medhi initiated and conceived in the eighties of last Century.

*Logo:* Designed by Darpan Kaustuv Medhi (Dol) and Dilip K. Medhi with initial assistance from Dilip Changkakati

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## FOREWORD

**Richard a. Engelhardt**

What is now referred to as Northeast India comprises the area formerly known for centuries as *Assam*. This region is situated between the Chinese landmass on the north, the Southeast Asian river valleys on the east and the Indian sub-continent on the west. With the Brahmaputra River running through it, this region has for millennia been a corridor for the passage of animals and men; for armies and ideas. Dr. Dilip K. Medhi in his own words defines Assam as the 'Great Indian Corridor in the East'; a passage for the migration of people to and from China, Southeast Asia and mainland India. Geography and history explain why today the region embraces a diverse population whose elaborate cultures draw and mix traits from all three neighbouring regions. The awesome beauty and bountiful climate surely were powerful attractions to the many different ethnic communities who came to this region. A Subtropical warm and humid climate with maximum precipitation keeps the hills green. The Brahmaputra, one of the largest rivers in the world, waters the region, flowing from China through the plains of Assam in between the Northern Himalayas and the Southern Hills.

The strategic importance of Northeast India (or the Assam Region) to the understanding of human cultures is, however, a topic that is not yet appreciated by the scholarly world at large, because it has not yet attracted the research attention it should.

Dr. Medhi is making a valiant attempt to bring historic Assam to the attention of the scholarly world through a series of volumes entitled "Man and Environment in Northeast India". He has already completed two volumes and now has published a most welcome third volume in the series devoted specifically to culture heritage issues.

I have enjoyed a long association with Dr. Medhi whom I met through our membership in the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association. Through our association, I have had the privilege to make several research visits to Northeast India into the present Indian States of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. Dr. Medhi's passion to bring to light the cultural heritage of Northeast India is inspiring. From the Nortieng Prehistoric Megaliths to the Neo-Vaishnavite Sattras Culture of Majuli River Island, Dr. Medhi's pursuit of the cultural history of the region is as tireless as it is wide-ranging.

This Heritage Issue of "Man and Environment in Northeast India" comprises seven articles on different key heritage issues in Northeast India. Dr. Medhi leads the volume with his own contribution entitled: 'Introducing the Culture Heritage of Northeast India' in which he attempts to identify the different culture areas of Northeast India through a study of personal material culture such as jewelry and other ornamentation. (This is a theme which will be carried into Volume 4 of the series.)

The second article in this volume is a presentation by the Late Professor Maheswar Neog on Saint Sankardeva. This article tells about the life and religion of the great Saint who founded the Neo-Vaishnavite religious culture of Assam. Professor Neog was the leading authority on Saint Sankardeva and therefore provides the reader with a definitive study on the Saint, which will stand for years to come.

Dr. Sujit Choudhury writes in his article about the legendary 'Bhuban Hill' in the Surma Valley in Cachar District of Assam State. From time immemorial, the hill has attracted a wide range of Hindu devotees to the existing shrine on the hilltop. The identification of the people who developed the Bhuban Hill sanctuary is the key issue discussed by Dr. Choudhury in his learned article.

Dr. Pradip C. Sarma writes on 'Temple Architecture in Assam'. He identifies the places of temple origin with their probable foundation dates. Before the spread of the Neo-Vaishnavite religion of Saint Sanakardeva in 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Assam Region had a number of temple structures built with patronage of the royal families and wealthy merchants of Assam. Included in the study are the famous now-ruined temples of Bamuni Pahar and Dah Parbatia at Tezpur, of Deo Parbat, Negheriting near Jorhat and other temples at Sibsagar. Together they reflect religious concepts embodied in architecture amalgamating the indigenous Tai Ahom style combined with elements from the earlier Gupta Style and the concurrent Mughal Period.

Mr. Promod Goswami, a former United Nation's official in the agricultural sector, discusses the natural heritage of Assam's forests and wildlife. Northeast India is in the Subtropical warm climatic zone of Asia whose characteristic vegetation is the preferred habitat of many varieties of large herbivores, such as the endangered one-horned rhinoceros. It is not surprising that these impressive animals figure prominently in the mythology and iconography of the region's cultures, as well as in their repertory of medicines, food and for other economic uses.

Dr. Biswanarayan Shastri writes on the important *Purâna* tradition in the life of the people of Assam. Myth, legend and

stories are contained in the different *Purâna* epics of India which are very popular in the Northeast. Dr. Shastri glosses his discussion with frequent references to Sanskrit sources.

The cultic role of the temple dancer is prevalent throughout India. Assam had a similar institution of its own headquartered at the 'Dubi Temple' near Pathsala which from there spread to other places. Dr. Jibon Krishna Patra writes on the local institution of the temple dancer, popularly known as *Devadâsi* in most of India, but referred to as *Natis* in Assam. Today the Assamese tradition of *Natis* is no longer practiced, but the memory remains of beautiful young girls dancing in front of the temple deity under guidance of elderly musicians.

Dr. Medhi is undoubtedly one of the great guardians of the heritage of Northeast India. With his background in the academic fields of anthropology and archaeology he is well suited to the task of bringing together the many diverse strands of the region's heritage and to weave them into the fabric of our understanding. Although Northeast India is still a relatively remote and isolated region, the impact of modernization and globalization are relentless. Cultures inevitably change, and in the process of moving forward into the future, we rely on the guardians of local cultures everywhere to preserve for us the memory of what has been and where we come from. Dr. Medhi's contribution to this effort through the publication of these scholarly volumes on the cultural heritage of Northeast India is immeasurable.

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*Dr. Richard a. Engelhardt holds the position of UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific at UNESCO Regional Office at Bangkok, Thailand. Dr. Engelhardt visited Assam and Meghalaya with a 21-day programme at the invitation of Dr. Dilip. K. Medhi. His maiden trip to Majuli River Island was much significant towards a proposed status of 'UNESCO Heritage Site' to the Island.*

## EDITOR'S NOTE

My joining graduate Honours Courses in Anthropology in Cotton College, Guwahati in 1967 was a turning point in bringing out this project of producing a series of volume on Man and Environment in Northeast India because it realized me the importance of the erstwhile Assam in the field of anthropological and archaeological studies. Our teachers cited to us several examples and illustrations from Africa, Pacific Islands and America in our lessons, and I did understand the vast reservoir of similar information from Assam. We studied Geography in our early education in Primary to High School standard and so I did learn about the land and the people of the region, and this knowledge in me gave me a projected acquaintance in respect of anthropological studies of the region. I joined Gauhati University for my Master's degree in Anthropology and completed it with similar experience. Meanwhile I did three field studies, one amongst the *Mikirs* (now *Karbis*) from 1968-70, another with the *Rongdani Rabhas* surrounded by the *Boro*, the *Garos*, the *Koch-Rajbongshi* and the *Hajong* in 1970, and finally in the Garo Hills amongst the *Garos* during 1971-1972. All these studies of tribal communities enabled me to get first hand knowledge regarding the primitive culture of the people. Earlier I had a long association with the *Boro Kacharis* of my native place, Bhawanipur in Barpeta besides my archetypal rural life. Later on I had the opportunity of conducting a number of field studies for our undergraduate students during my teaching career from 1973-2004. On every occasion of a field study I remember Late Professor D.N. Majumder whom myself along with many in the field of

anthropology consider as the foremost anthropologist of the last Century in India. Professor Majumder is popularly known as D.N. Majumder Jr. in India and abroad. I learnt many things in Anthropology from him after my anthropological fieldwork in 1970 in the Garo Hills with him and Professor M.N. Phookan along with a prolonged association of studentship with them.

The present Volume in the series of Man and Environment in Northeast India figuring as 'Heritage Issue # 1' is one of my humble attempts to explore the little known territories of Assam Region in the fields of Anthropology, Archaeology and Heritage. In fact this be a long cherished academic venture of mine that I started in the seventies of last Century. For a meaningful production of this series I moved from pillar to stone with lot of mixed experience when my own teacher refused to contribute any article to the Volume I. However I was ready to confront any eventuality and at that point of time, Dr. Thanesar Sarma, a Professor of Sanskrit and a friend of mine at Gauhati University congratulated me for taking up the project and sent me a Card. Finally I could see the day of my success on December 06, 1993 when the 'first-cum-introductory volume' was released with a beautiful speech presented by Shri Madan Jha, Vice-Chancellor of Arunachal University in the presence of a number of dignitaries including Dr. N.K. Choudhury, then Vice-Chancellor of Gauhati University, Dr. Md. Taher, Dr. Dulal Goswami, Dr. A.C. Bhagbati, Dr. Gopal Bordoloi, Dr. Phani Deka, Dr. Ajit Neog and others at a small and tidy function at Hotel Prag Continental, Panbazar, Guwahati. Shri Jha spoke much eloquently; everybody enjoyed his talk about a topic on man and environment. My third elder brother Late Surendra Nath Medhi who was a Senior Advocate of Supreme Court of India and a politician was also present on that occasion. Shri Ramesh Kumar Virmani and Shri Satish Kumar Virmani, owner of Omsons Publications, Panabazar and

New Delhi hosted a dinner to celebrate the occasion. The function began with lighting of earthen lamps by the guests present. On 7<sup>th</sup> morning Shri Jha joined me at a breakfast at my invitation, and me, my wife Anju, our two kids Pol and Dol along with our family friend Shri Zahid Husein enjoyed the occasion with great enthusiasm. I am happy to tell everybody that the Volume was well received by the academic World. When the second Volume containing eight of my personal articles was

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Dear Dr. Medhi ,

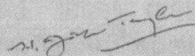
It was most kind of you to send me a copy of your first volume on "Man and Environment", which reached me about three weeks ago. It does not surprise me that the preparation of the book has taken longer than you anticipated, for the work must have involved much energy and effort on your part, not least in securing the cooperation of so many distinguished scholars. It is a privilege to have had the opportunity of contributing the foreword.

You have certainly gathered a wide and very useful collection of articles for this first volume. I have been reading them during the past few days and found them full of interest, learning much that I did not know before. I must congratulate you on this timely and important enterprise. I hope you will be able to continue with the production of further volumes and successfully enlist the cooperation of other scholars.

To receive this book naturally brings back to memory those fascinating years I spent in N.E. India, including a very stimulating period as V.C. of Gauhati University. I trust the University continues to prosper. My wife and I made many friends, and are still in touch with some of them. We send our warmest good wishes to you and your colleagues.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,



H.J. Taylor

published in 2003, a teacher of mine who refused to contribute in the first volume pointing at my capabilities asked me whether I brought out a print out of the Volume II I concentrated myself upon the need of the students of anthropology and archaeology, and brought out articles on specific component of courses in syllabi in them. I therefore look forward to receiving good response from the students and teachers of the two disciplines. Professor W.G. Solheim II, former Professor of archaeology in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, USA and currently working as a Consultant Professor of Archaeology Programme in the Philippine University, Dilman, Quezon City wrote an excellent 'foreword' to the volume II with an appreciation to the entire production.

I am proud to quote a letter of Dr. H.J. Taylor, former Vice-Chancellor, Gauhati University, who wrote the 'Foreword' to the Volume I here. I sent a copy of Volume I to Dr. Taylor who kindly wrote me back the aforesaid letter that reveals his response about the Volume. He is no longer alive but I would remember him very much in my life.

This letter was an accolade to me. I did receive similar appreciation from a number of scholars from India and abroad. Professor W.G. Solheim II appreciated the Volume very much and so did Professor S.N. Rajaguru, Professor V.N. Misra, Dr. Eberhardt Fischer of Reitberg Museum, Zurich, Switzerland, Dr. Richard A. Engelhardt, UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific, UNESCO Regional Office at Bangkok, Professor Mike Robinson, Department of Tourism and Cultural Change, Sheffield Hallam University, U.K., Dr. M. Taher, Dr. Birendranath Datta and many including my brother Late Surendra Nath Medhi. Professor V.N. Misra, former Director, Deccan College, Pune gave me his comment on the Volumes in his letter to me cited next,

*"Dear Professor Medhi,*

*I have received copies of your two books and I am deeply thankful to you for sending the same to me. I have gone through the books and I give my brief comments below.*

*Northeast India, comprising Assam and six other states- Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura - is a fascinating land in many respects, its geology, geography, flora, fauna, and most particularly its people with their many languages, customs, music, dance, colourful costumes and ornaments. Unfortunately, the region is inadequately known to people outside it because of the lack of easy transport facilities like roads and railways, and also because there is a limited literature on it. The two publications by Professor Medhi and his colleagues, entitled *Man and Environment in North East India*, contribute greatly to filling this lacuna.*

*The first volume, an edited one, covers the topics geology, archaeology, ecology, man, society and language, similarities and differences among the tribal and non-tribal peoples of the region, traditional system of medicine and medicinal plants. The contributors are all well-known experts in their fields. Professor Medhi, the editor, himself is an internationally known scholar of archaeology, particularly ethnoarchaeology to the pursuit of which he has devoted several decades. The contributions are well written and are very informative.*

*The second volume is a collection of articles of Professor Medhi written over last three decades or so. It covers a number of topics on both prehistoric and historic archaeology of the region, the Garos of Meghalaya,*

*ethnoarchaeology, techniques of making stone tools and traditional system of medicine, etc. The articles, based on first hand fieldwork by Dr. Medhi, are marked by intimate knowledge of the author about the archaeology and people of the region.*

*The two volumes will contribute greatly to making the environment, archaeology and people of the north east region of the country better known to people outside the region both within the country and outside. Professor Medhi and his colleagues deserve our congratulations for bringing out these highly educative and important volumes.*

**V.N. Misra, 23.03.2004"**

Today I remember Late Pradip Chaliha, a most dedicated researcher in the field of art, dance and culture of the region. Before his sad demise, I had long discussions with him regarding my introductory article in this Volume, and, he was kind enough to help me with lots of ideas, which I consider much useful. He was an authority on art, dance and culture and I am indeed grateful to him for his kind help and inspiration in the production of this Volume as 'Heritage Issue # 1'.

I would like to refer a photograph that was printed on the cover flap of Volume II. That was a picture I photographed at Bhoksong in Karbi Anglong district of Assam and depicted a composite picture of wet and *jhum* (Slash-n-burn) cultivations. This I mention here because there was no reference about the photograph in any part of Volume II. For this Volume, myself with our son- Dol with the kind assistance of Shri Dilip Changkakati composed a logo on the basis of Saint Sankardeva's *kala-kristi* (art and culture). The logo would appear as a registered emblem in all the forthcoming Volumes on 'Man and Environment In Northeast India' and heritage issues.

I am grateful to Dr. Richard A. Engelhardt, UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific for kindly writing the 'Foreword' to the volume III.

Before I conclude, it will be appropriate to tell the contributors and reader of this volume which appears very late due to an indifferent attitude of Shri Ramesh Kumar and Shri Satish Kumar of M/S Omsons Publications, who started making this volume in 2003; but in 2007, Shri Satish informed me that its publication was not possible. Over telephone Shri Satish said, the volume was destroyed. It was unfortunate. Somehow, I managed to retrieve the manuscript from my desktop at the initiative of EBH Publishers, Guwahati. I am indeed grateful to EBH for bringing out the volume.

Finally I am sincerely thankful to all the authors of the articles. I also remember all kinds of cooperation and help of my wife Anju and two sons- Pol and Dol. Shri Dhritiman Sarma, my Research Scholar, co-operated me in checking the proof; I am thankful to him.

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**INTRODUCING**  
**HERITAGE CULTURE OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

**Dilip K. Medhi**

***One***

Former Assam and the State of Tripura currently have a common territorial terminology – the *Northeast India*. It is more an administrative term, which neither conveys any meaning to the people and their colourful cultures of the region. Many overseas as well as Indian scholars are much skeptic about this terminology and ridicule it since the new name never carry any meaning to the people and the land of this interior territory situated between the mainland South Asia, the Southeast Asia and China. This author has given a new nomenclature to this landmass as the 'Great Indian Corridor in the East', in consideration with the importance of the region in respect of human migration between mainland the Southeast Asia and China together, and because of its major role in admixing the Indo-Aryan and the Mongoloid cultures.

Primarily aimed at throwing light on the heritage culture of Northeast India, the writer first makes an attempt to understand the meaning of heritage and consulted the New Webster Dictionary of the English language by Mario Pei who defines 'heritage' as "comes to or belongs to one by reason of birth; as, the *heritage* of longevity; a legacy, as of culture or tradition; something allotted to or reserve for one; as, the heritage of a

title; law, that which may be inherited through the legal process, as property or land". Concerning the perimeters of this article, the writer adopts the term *heritage* that means, 'a legacy of culture or tradition'. The heritage is further divided into tangible and intangible ones. This in anthropology is understood as material and spiritual culture of man respectively. However it is the legacy, a culture or a tradition of human beings who develop it in a certain environment that suited them to live in. Henceforth a kind of ecological setting is developed, which tells about a man-plant relationship in an area of the planet earth.

Man is the only cultural animal of the Universe; he with his free hand and with an opposable thumb accompanied by a high brain capacity (1,650 cc) is capable of managing any kind of environment of the globe. Human being is so much technologically developed today compared to the remote past, can make anything possible including the production of human life with a most sophisticated technique of *cloning*. A discipline of genetic engineering is already in the hand of man, which made him capable of rectifying the erring genes in him. Dr. Hargobind Khorana, a scientist of Indian origin first made a synthetic **gene** and was awarded Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1968. But these are not the spontaneous and obvious behaviours of man since he requires highly sophisticated ability, and therefore not possible for man to inherit them in an ordinary way. Already the Governments of U.S.A. and U.K. have banned the human cloning and also a number of countries go against this piece of science. My son Darpan Kaustuv Medhi who is studying genetics and microbiology at the University of Sheffield, is optimistic of a great use of gene knowledge for rectification of erring gene of human being and thus in treatment of disease and ailments soon.

Human aptitude accompanied by an innate mental capability in a spontaneous way, can produce some kind of materials (tools or weapons) as well as non-material spiritual ideals for his subsistence, and, which as the life-style or as a prestigious means of life is adopted by his next generations. This life-style in course of time is termed as the heritage of a human community in a particular ecological setting of the world. Man universally made stone implements and the earthenware at different corners of the globe mostly without any kind of first hand communication between them; he made them automatically with a concerted effort followed by a kind of need. Here applies a popularly used statement, 'the psychic unity of mankind' propounded by Adolf Bastian (1826-1905), a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Polymath is best remembered for his contributions to the development of ethnography and the development of anthropology as a discipline; however the author would like to modify it to another form- 'the spiritual homogeneity of mankind' ([www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org)). According to Bastian, the contingencies of geographic location and historical background create different local elaborations of the "elementary ideas"; these he called "folk ideas" (*Volkergedanken*). Bastian also proposed a lawful "genetic principle" by which societies develop over the course of their history from exhibiting simple sociocultural institutions to becoming increasingly complex in their organization. The postulate of "the psychic unity of mankind" states that all human beings, regardless of culture or race, share the same basic psychological and cognitive make-up; we are all of the same kind. Adolf Bastian, the "father of German anthropology", who was a classical German humanist and a cultural relativist and one, who believed in the intrinsic value of cultural variation. Bastian passed it on to his similarly minded student, Franz Boas, who, as the "father of American anthropology", transmitted it on to all of his students. Edward B. Tylor introduced it to 19<sup>th</sup> century British evolutionist anthropology, where it became a fixture, defended by all the major British evolutionists. The postulate,

indeed, was essential to the great comparative projects of evolutionism, which would be futile if cultural differences were determined by differing biology. For the same reason, it has been central to later comparative projects, e.g. Radcliffe-Brown's, Barth's, Steward's, Godelier's and others. Today, the postulate is shared by all anthropologists, and this author too does excepting the wordings in the statement.

After man separated himself from the Primate, he began his terrestrial life at different situations with the strength of a common gene pool in him. Complexity that appeared in human being due to evolutionary processes also resulted in multiplication of genes in equal proportions. All sorts of development in an environment were scanned well in his vision. Matters were analysed in his mind, and they were all appropriately appropriated to benefit his adaptation. An appropriate matter was accordingly harnessed or systematised according to a kind of need i.e. for his subsistence. Emile Burns mentioned about matter and mind in his book 'What is Marxism'. Gordon Childe elaborately discussed on Social Evolution. Gene flow shall generate a common cerebral command resulting in production of same kind of tools, weapons including other material and spiritual matters as well. Therefore the author wants to modify the statement as stated above. To me Bastian's statement has strong psychological bias than ought to be anthropological. Nevertheless linkage of Anthropology with Psychology is undeniable. However in the opinion of this author, universally similar syndrome that appear in human being requires an exclusive anthropological interpretation.

E.B. Tylor and L.H. Morgan were the pioneers to work on human evolution particularly on human culture and of human society. Humankind irrespective of race, colour, caste and creed characterises a common physical make-up. Evolution physically advances man and did advance him in building cultural set-up

from simple to complex in various environments. Handaxes of Meghalaya and those found in South America look similar. Choppers made on huge pebbles at the foothills of Eastern Khasi Hills bordering Assam and discovered in December 2007 look similar to the Oldowan choppers, and if the entire December 2007 discovery (choppers and other tools) is mixed with Oldowan tool assemblage, it would be very difficult to isolate them from the Oldowans.

Man at a number of great centres of Mesoamerica, Middle East and Southeast Asia made varieties of tools and produced different kind of foods through domestication of a wide variety of plants, animals and birds. These types of habits percolated from generation after generations and were identified later as an inseparable way of livelihood. With a dependable economy, man concentrated on a number of spiritual aspects of life like producing art form and to believing in the existence of souls; such kind of ideas afterward became a part of the day-to-day life of mankind. Finally man began to believe in some kind of supernatural powers, which they associated with varieties of natural disasters, and began to develop some contrivances to appease those powers. Many inanimate objects were later identified as the abode of divine powers and finally they become some kind of god to man who propitiated them and looked forward to receiving help and security from their survival. Consequently in course of time spiritual codes were framed in human society to worship supernatural power(s) or a god(s).

The writer likes to refer to E.B. Tylor who while giving a 'definition of culture' did include any kind of identifiable human traits and his mental capabilities acquired in a society of his kind. In 1874 Tylor in his classical definition on culture said, "Culture or civilization is that complex whole which include knowledge,

beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Therefore any kind of material expression of man and his spiritual ideas give rise to 'human culture' that persists in the remote past and also continues to the present. They are manifested in mankind, which becomes the subject matter of heritage studies later.

Cultural traits of man remain trapped in an area of his habitation and also flourish if the occupancy continues in the same locality for a substantial occasion. However the migratory habit of man made to carry their cultural mannerism to different localities of the World; for example the cord-impressed pottery and the shouldered Celts are the two distinctive traits of the Neolithic culture in Southeast Asia, which are found to spread to Assam (currently Northeast India) with the migratory human progenies from the latter. Further the *sarâi* (a kind of plate with a stand made of cane and bamboo with its modern variety in bell metal and brass), which this writer could see in the Philippines, is also found extensively in the hills and plains of Assam. Therefore culture has a spatial and an itinerant dynamics as well. Traces of a culture in an area though look dead did never end in itself since nobody is certain enough about its dead characteristics and also about its proliferation during its existence. Illiot Smith (1911) was talking about the 'theory of diffusion' on the support of his studies in Egyptian cultures. Lewis R. Binford (1983) attempted to draw a connection between the past and the present though building of a 'middle range theory'. This writer asserted that 'present reflects the past', which tells about a cultural continuum in an area on the basis of supportive and collaborative traits of the present day surviving culture in that area (Medhi, 2002). It becomes a unique situation to draw a conclusion on continuity of culture via the 'middle range theory' or the theory of 'present reflects the past'. Nevertheless, situation

arising out of a past static culture i.e. the ruins in an area without any living index to tell about its ongoing development or about its genesis, which however may be possible to draw with similar kind of ruins discovered elsewhere in relation to a contiguous culture of that area or away from it. A culture in continuity or a sporadic one is becoming subjects of research in archaeology under normal circumstances, and becomes special issues of research when they are considered as the heritage matter to a country and its civilization.

Having said about a *sarâi* that has much significance in the Assam region, another two items of heritage culture of the region include a *gamochâ* and a *jâpi*. *Gamochâ* with floral design is a prestigious towel produced in indigenous handlooms by the lady weavers of the region. *Jâpi*, is made of bamboo, cane and palm leaf, and the peasants use it on their heads as a traditional sunshade and a rainshade as well. This traditional sun-cum-rain umbrella with a little construction variation than those of Assam region is common in entire Southeast Asia and China. Today a *phulâm gâmoichâ* (Assamese towel with blossom design and decoration) and a *phulâm jâpi* (a showpiece version of a sun-cum-rain umbrella with unique design and decoration) are high-status souvenirs of Assam presented while paying ovation to a distinguished guest or an eminent personality, and, people of the region keep them in the residential drawing rooms along with the *sarâi* of brass as ornamental pieces. These two items of Assamese heritage culture were first made popular to the common masses when *Rupknowar* Late Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla put them in the settings of *Joymati*, the first film in Assamese language produced in 1935 in this part of India.

Similar to the meaning and definition of a culture, 'heritage' may also be either 'a tangible one' or 'an intangible

one'; tangible comprises the material evidence of a visible way of life whereas the intangible consists of spiritual aspect of traditions like music, arts and any other finer traits of mankind, which are reconstructed on the basis of certain evidence of culture- mostly material ones. Besides the material cultures of Neanderthal man, a number of finer achievements of them have been identified in respect of dress and food habits, man-to-man relationship, music and a belief in the existence of soul. That the Neanderthal man used a kind of dress in order to prevent them from the severe cold of Pleistocene times was evident from the side scrapers they made of stone and used to scrape out the flesh from the animal skin and trim it as well, which was used as a kind of earliest garment in the history of dress and ornaments of mankind. Analysis of coprolites tells about the use of meat in major proportion by them. Neanderthal man loved to sit closely and to cuddle each other's hair and head with fingertips and hand. They also produced a kind of music, may be to attract the animals to hunt. They put flowers on the dead body is an evidence of believing in 'soul'. All these traits referred to are the heritage of mankind, which flourished in different parts of the World independently or in contiguity with other cultures.

With this much of introduction to heritage culture of mankind in the light of its worldwide attributes in brief, the writer begins his journey in the present day Northeast India or the former Assam into the heritage culture of the region in the following.

The Assam Region or the Northeast India is an enchanting landmass with enormously beautiful hills and the plains inhabited by people with different sets of colourful cultures since the dim distant moment. The population is basically the tribals and the non-tribals; the former has an origin in Southeast Asia and China

and the later in the mainland India. Before the advent of the Hinduism and later the Christianity, the tribal people were animist and believed in an animistic world with a number of supernatural powers those were believed to be bestowed in plants, animals and other inanimate objects like rock and hills. The tribals paid them great respect and propitiated them in their own way during certain parts of the year or when there appears a crisis in the society and to its members. Males of a particular community assemble together at a fixed place in their village where their supernatural power is believed to live in an organic or inorganic life form and propitiate the particular object with offerings of rice wine and sacrifice of fowls and pigs. Such kind of places is commonly seen in any tribal village of the Assam Region. Emergence of Hinduism with Aryan culture introduced a concept of worship to different gods and goddesses inside a cave, rock-shelter or a temple, and finally the propagation of *Neo-Vaishnavite* religion by great Saint Shri Shri Sankardeva resulted in the construction of *Nâmghar* and a *Sattrra* complex where the devotees performed mass recital in the form of *nâm-prasnaga* to pray Lord Krishna. So among the Hindus too there exist different kinds of temple complex that acted as a platform for expression of their religious faiths. So from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD onward, the former Assam could see the construction of a number of temples and later from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century AD, *Nâmghars* and *Sattrras* almost in every villages in the plains of Assam. Besides these tangible heritage in Assam Region, there are numerous intangible oral traditions in the form of music, dance, plays, devotional prayer, enchanting *mantras* and Sanskrit *slokas* which are intimately connected to those institutions including the animist societies of various religious traditions. Music and allied developments form the great oral masterpieces

of mankind. In a trip to Lijiang, P. R. China, the writer and his wife attended two great sessions of 22 hundred years' old *Naxi* Music of South China, and could see the participation of a number of artists in the age-group of 90 years+. This type of situations, I am afraid although available, but definitely not older like that of the *Naxi* Music in this part of India, is gone unnoticed and untapped. However Assam has more than 500 years old *Sâttriya* music and dance Saint Shri Shri Sankardeva created and developed in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century AD. *Manipuri* dance is another form of national dances of *Manipur* that was developed in 17<sup>th</sup> Century AD. Both the *Sattriya* dances and music and also the Manipuri dance are recognized form of National classical dance and music of India.

The temple of *Mâ Kâmâkshyâ* or *Mâ Kâmâkhyâ* at the Nilachal Hill, Guwahati is one of the oldest places of pilgrimage in Indian Subcontinent. It is considered as the great *Yoni Pith* of mother goddess. Lady Parvati represents the goddess of *Shakti* in Hindu mythology. *Brahmakunda* near Sadiya in Upper Assam is another holy place of the Subcontinent. Lord *Parsurâm*, one of the 10<sup>th</sup> incarnations of *Vishnu* in his endeavour to make himself free from heinous peccadillo of killing his mother, scot-freed the course of the River Brahmaputra from a gorge called the *Brahmakunda*. They, the *Kâmâkshyâ* temple and the *Brahmakunda* or *Parsurâmkunda* attracted plenty of visitor-devotees from different parts of mainland India since the days of early historic times. Devotees have great reverence in them as the important places of pilgrimage and assemble there at different esteemed occasions- during *Ambubâsi melâ* in June 22-25 to *Kâmâkshyâ* and at the time of *Makar Sakrânti* at middle of January to *Brahmakunda* every year. *Kâmâkshyâ* was reached through the *Purba Sâgar* (Eastern Sea) and via the

River Brahmaputra; devotees arrived at *Brahmakunda* via a land route on the north bank of Brahmaputra or may be partly by river and partly by the land route. Assam region has innumerable river network and the river transport served as a major transportation system in this part of India and it connected most of the temples and holy places of the region.

The great Indian epic *Mahâbhârata* mentions about the participation of the *Kâmarupi* Raja (King of Kâmarupa State) Bhagadatta who joined the battle of Kurukshetra in support of his son-in-law Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava. While taking part in the war, Bhagadatta led a major attachment of elephants with huge contingent of soldiers. It is a known fact that the Assam region is rich in feral elephants and elephant catching through *melâ-shikar*, a traditional practice of catching wild elephant was a major event in this part of India. Wild elephant were later tamed by local *mâhuts* for commercial uses. Assam has a famous lady Ms. Parbati Baruah from Gauripur, Goalpara, who earned her name well as the only lady trainer or *mahut* of wild elephant. Mention about the white elephant (albino variety) comes from the literary evidence particularly from *Hastividârnava* composed during the Ahom Kingdom at the patronage of Ahom King Shiva Singha and his queen Ambika Devi.

The former Assam has a past record of receiving visitors of World fame, and they were Marco Polo, three Chinese travelers- Fahien (5<sup>th</sup> Century AD), Hiuensang (630 AD) and I-tsing (700 AD) and also a record of two pilgrimage routes mentioned earlier, one through surface on the northern bank of the River Brahmaputra up to *Parsurâm Kunda* and another by *Purba Sâgar*, a sea of that time to visit *Kâmâkshyâ* temple of *Kâmarupa*; however they were completed partly via River Brahmaputra and the land route as well. Today the land route is

represented by the former *Gohâi Kamal Ali* of Ahom age. In textbook of Geology, existence of a sea called *Tethys* in the present day territories of West Bengal and Bangladesh is recorded and, *Tethys* might represent the *Purba Sagar* that touches *Kâmarupa*. Formerly the territories of Bengal were non-existent in the map of ancient India and it had no record in Indian epics, and the former Assam was directly connected to mainland India through those routes. In addition to those two routes, the Chinese travelers visited this part of India from Yunnan through Tirap frontier of present day Arunachal Pradesh, which is already termed as one of the famous *silk routes*. The other *silk route* was via central Asia through the Gobi desert and passing through the Pamir plateau reaching the Western Asia. There were more distinguished visitors who wrote about ancient Assam, and they were Damodargupta who traveled with Joypiba Lalitaditya (son of Lalitaditya who married Amritprabha of Assam) and later wrote *Kuttiniyattam* (755-786 AD), Minhajuddin who wrote *Tabakat-e-Nachiri* after traveling with General Bakhtiar Khiliji (13<sup>th</sup> Century AD), Captain Wales (18<sup>th</sup> Century AD) who came to subjugate the *Moamoriâ* rebels in Assam during the reign of King Gaurinath Singha, Sahabuddin Talish with General Mirjumla (January 4, 1662 to January 9, 1663) and Shouan-Shoyan (7<sup>th</sup> Century AD) during King Bhaskar Varma's rule in *Kâmarupa*. Ptolemy in addition to the different notes on Assam wrote eloquently about the region from secondary sources.

The region has a famous indigenous silk industry that made wide ranging varieties of dresses during the Ahom rule, particularly for its kings, queens and the ministers besides its current all India and overseas reputations. Assam's golden silk, a unique and exclusive to the region is famous World over. Noteworthy to mention is Assam had a *silk route* with China in the past. The former territories of Assam that shared a long

international boundary with China had indeed a good relation with the latter. North Eastern Frontier Agency or NEFA, currently called the Arunachal Pradesh situates close to Tibet and the southern provinces of China. Assam and China have almost an equal status in respect of the silk production. Women of Assam region very well nurture the silkworm and the *endiworm* in their houses; moreover State Sericulture Departments also largely cultivate them. At present China brings up large-sized silkworms, which almost double the size of the Assamese ones. Apart from two varieties of silk, *endi*, a warm cloth of Assam and, which every Assamese people own. The women folk further produce finest cotton textile in their indigenous handlooms. It is claimed that cloths produced by the Assamese weavers was of superb quality and could be desiccated in shade, and also could be held in a handgrip due to its finest textural excellence. Both tribal and the non-tribal populations of the region are equally adept in handloom profession over various kinds of handlooms available at different parts of the region. Womenfolk master the art of manufacturing varieties of dye with indigenous ingredients from local herbs and minerals. Women proficiently used alkali and alcohol bases to make a dye much durable and permanent. The tradition of making colourful dresses continues and its record comes from the *Vaishnavite* religious traditions when Shri Shri Sankaradev made a celebrated 60-yard long *brindâvani bastra* where His Holiness depicted the *pât of sât Vaikuntha*. It was produced at Tâtikuchi (present day Barpeta) and is currently preserved at the British Museum, United Kingdom.

Besides the expertise in the field of indigenous textile, women of Assam region equally mastered the storage know-how of cloths. Silk garments are a prestigious pastime of the ladies of the region. Women produce and use a wide range of colourful dresses, and take enormous care to preserve them in

their indigenous containers. Silk fabrics were preserved inside earthen pots- *debitâ* or *dâabâr* and those of cotton yarns either in *petâry* made of cane or in *perâ* made of bamboo. Potters of this region made large earthenware, mostly huge jars for such purposes. *Petâry* and *perâ* are two large varieties of storage bins with lids. While putting the cloths inside them, dry *neem* leaves as good in lieu of modern insecticide were put inside to prevent the cloth from the attack of vermin. This system of storage of clothing still continues in rural areas; however with the advent of the iron storage facilities during the British rules, such practices began to disappear in the urban localities with affluent families.

In the coming few lines the writer likes to describe the toiletry and luxuries connected to the beauties of women in this part of India. Beauty of an Assamese damsel makes a synthesis of the Mongoloid and the Aryan characters; their faces are mostly oval with high up cheeks and skin colour is fair. Plain (leiotrichy) black hair of sizeable length similar to those of Mediterranean region makes the ladies more charming and beautiful too. Consumption of fish protein in plenty is considered the primary factor behind the story of the beautiful long black hair. Fish protein and also the sour vegetables naturally make the skin colour flabbier.

Hardworking ladies in agrarian economy of Assam could barely attend to their toiletry and luxuries in an elaborate way excepting on a festive and other need based occasions like marriage ceremonies. Leaf, flower, stem and root ingredients contribute in this feminine pastime. Initially people of Assam particularly the ladies did use the sesame oil with additive fragments of *gondh birinâ* (Lemon grass; *Cymbopogon*) on hair to make their hair more blackish, shining and sweet-smelling. This oil was kept in wooden or bamboo container with an additive

ingredient for fragrance. There is a popular saying, *Hajor Natir Kibâ Kâm, Telor Târi Phani Khân*. Hajo is a famous pilgrim in Assam that embraces the Hindu, Buddhism and Islam religions. Hajo is a 'Panchatirtha' in Assam. *Devadâsi* or temple dancers of Hajo at its *Mâdhab-Kedâr Mandir* were well known in entire Assam. This saying is related to Hajo *Devadâsis*, which states that the *Devadâsis (Nati)* of Hajo were always busy in dressing their hair meaning oiling their hair and comb i.e. coiffure it always. While it is an obvious practice of a *Nati* at Hajo, the Assamese woman combed their hair after oiling at post-mid day meal as well as at night before going to bed. Assamese ladies use locally extracted sesame and mastered oils for massaging (*tel sonâ*) hairs. While shampooing hair, inner contents of a *ghilâ* (*Entada scandens*), foliage leaf of sesame plant, paste of *âkâshi latâ* (*Cuscuta reflexa Roxb.*) and mastered oil cakes were in weekly use. To make the black hair more shining, hair was treated with paste of black gram mixed with mastered oil. This treatment not only made the hair further black, but also equally helped in making the brown and silky hair more blackish. Pradip Chaliha who did considerable research on heritage culture of undivided Assam said, he was having brown hair while he was a young boy, and his friends often laughed at him when he was living in Sylhet of Bangladesh with his parents before pre-Independence India. Finally at the advice of a senior lady he made his hair black with the use of a paste of black gram and mustard oil (Personal communication, 2003). Paste of *Jetukâ* leaf (Henna plant) and betel leaf was another herbal mixture that was equally used for a similar purpose. Paste of *silikhâ* (*Terminalia citrina*) and *âmlokhi* (Emblic) was another device of treating the hair of female. Facial beautification and treatment was mostly made with mustard oil; however wash with tepid *Neem* water (water

boiled with *Neem* leaf) was a major use besides occasional bath with *Neem* water was another way of treatment of skin. *Neem* water was further used in treatment of skin of a person after he/she has some kind of skin disease or may be after an attack by missals or chicken pox. Moreover Assamese ladies put on paste of turmeric, raw tealeaf, pilfer of orange and *Neem* stem in their facial treatment. Although knowledge about body perfume is much limited, pulp of sandalwood was definitely used for enhancing the body and facial beauty equally, and for fragrance as well. *Agar* plant grew plenty in this part of India and if the *agar* extract was made available for such purposes is not known. Scented herbs like *gondh birinâ* was in use as an additive to make the hair oil fragranced. *Keteki* (*Pandanus tectorius Soland.*) is a famous plant of attractive fragrance and was used with a few finger strokes at the two sides of the forehead and in fact, pollens of *keteki* brings the much attractive smell. Moreover flowers like *juti* (mogra), *kharikâjâi* and *tagar* were wonderful either to be put in water for bath or a facial wash as well, besides sometimes putting them in drinking water.

Assamese dress and ornaments are rated as one of the finest in the Indian Subcontinent and World over as well. Mention has been made about the quality of the Assamese fabric earlier. Ladies use a piece of *mekhelâ*, a *châddar*, a *rihâ* and a blouse as the national dress. However use of a blouse was confined with the royal and the aristocrats, and was never used by the common Assamese ladies before the British regime in India. Normally a lady in rural Assam uses a *mekhelâ* and a *châddar* with a veil. Dresses are made from both the cotton and silk yarn. Ornaments were of gold and silver. Assamese woman has varieties of ornaments that they wear on head, nose, ear, neck, wrist, arm, waist and at the ankle, and, every piece of them has

different names. A *jethi* which is called *chitipati* in Bengali is either a single or trident chain placed over the head of a lady and much particularly of a bride. A *jethi* having a single chain goes through the central furrow of head hair and the trident with three chains goes over the sides of the head besides one goes through the central hair furrow. Nose was adorned with varieties of *nâk-phool* made of either gold or silver studded with precious, semi-precious or fancy stones. *Kânphool*, *kerumoni*, *jâpi*, *lokâpâra*, *sonâ*, *kadam*, *jijiri kadam*, *thuriâ* or *keru*, *bâli* or *kân-bâli* and *kundal* either a *makar kundal* or a *karna singha* are some of the names of the different range of ear ornaments those vary from light to heavy in weight. Neck of an Assamese woman is adorned with a number of necklaces that are known as *galpâtâ*, *prajâpati hâr*, *jonebiri*, *benâ*, *dugdugi*, *shripad*, *moni*, *mâduli*, *dhol*, *charatiâ*, and *lokâpâra* may be exclusively on gold or with a combination of gold and beads of precious/semi-precious stones. Other may be made of beads and gold, gold studded with precious, semi precious or fancy stones. *Khâru* is a common word of wristlet (bangle). *Khâru* is either made on gold or silver and is equivalent to the size of a glass *churi*, a popular wrist ornament of ladies in the Indian Subcontinent. Assam has *gâmkhâru*, *muthikhâru* and *dhansirikhâru*- all massive bangles made of gold or silver and measures 6-7 Cms in length. *Gâmkharu* is a prized item of a wealthy lady and so also with the royal families and landlords. Precious stones are also embedded in them. A similar type of ornament is used at the upper arm and called the *baju*; and it may be a spiral bar of gold or silver. A golden or a silver chain at the waist made a thin waist of a lady more gorgeous. It has elaborate design and is called the *kardhani* or a *chandrahâr* or a *mekhalâ*, *kingkini* and *katisutra* are its Sanskrit equivalents. *Bhor-khâru*, *bhori-khâru*

or a *chele-khâru* is mostly a silver anklelet with ringers the Assamese ladies wear around their feet. A mother makes her child to wear it to detecting the child's movement. In Assam region gold was extracted from the silt of the Brahmaputra River and also at *Sowansiri* River, a tributary of the former. Finally an Assamese lady wearing a gorgeous silk dress along with all kinds of ornaments in her body and with a gorgeous hair knot gives her a magnificent heritage status. Moreover a blotch of vermilion at her forehead and also at the furrow of her head hair, and with the said fashion in case of a Hindu woman brings her more splendid look.

The woman of Assam region is well known for their magnificent hairstyle similar to those of the mainland Indian woman, and in fact, they love to dress their meticulously maintained long hair everyday. Enormously long hair could be seen in this part of India as a part of a prime beauty of a lady and such a bunch of hair grow beyond their knee-joints. To arrange a lady's hair in the form of a braid ranging from one to three pieces is a common practice in case of an unmarried damsel; these may be later put into a knot (*khopâ*), which is called the *chele-khopâ* or *chela-khopâ*. Knot or a *khopâ* is a significant hair pastime of the married woman, and specially to a bride.

A *khopâ* has varieties of category besides the 1. the *chele-khopâ* or *chela-khopâ*. They are, 2. *Koldiliâ khopâ* resembles a banana blossom; 3. *Negheri-khopâ*, an especially stylistic hair-knot the *Devadâsi* at *Negheriting Dol* near Dergaon proficiently made in the past. It is also known as the *Udhaniâ-khopa* (similar to the *Udhan* or an earthen fire-pillar in rural Assam), *Ucchal-khopâ* and *Natini-khopâ* (the hair-knot of a *Nati* or *Devadasi* or a temple dancer in a temple of Assam). These

two hair-knots are strikingly tall ones. 4. *Ghilâ-khopâ* meaning another hair-knot the woman makes like the seed of Entada. 5. *Ligiri-khopâ* is a quick hairstyle proviso the *ligiris* or maidservants made at a royal palace or at a landlord's place. *Ligiri-khopâ* was a tight hair-knot since the maidservant has to work at the palace like spindle and, therefore, hairstyle of the maidservants must never be deceptive at any moment. 6. *Doluâ-khopâ* is a compact hair-knot that a woman makes in their day-to-day life. 7. A *Kâcheri-khopâ* or a *Kachri-khopâ* is another style in hair-knots and is connected with the *Deodhâni* culture of tribals, and a *deodhâni* lady makes this knot while she dances in sitting posture before the altar. 8. *Kanâri-khopâ* is a not an indigenous hairstyle of the region. It is often found amongst the tea garden labour communities in Assam, who were brought from Kanara areas of mainland India. Specialty in this hair-knot, the hairs is tied on one side of the head. This is a common hair fashion found with the tribals living in the Chotanagpur plateau. Moreover in Assamese literature including the *Harmohan Upakhyan* in *Kirttan-Ghosâ* composed by Guru Shri Shri Sankardeva referred about the *Ucchal-khopâ*, an elaborative hairstyles of Assamese lady while narrating the wonderful beauty of a woman. Sometimes a beautiful lady makes a fabulous but loose hair knot with an inherent tendency to make a show of her sparkling long and massive bunch of hair together with her grandiose beauty in a voluptuous '*hansa-gâmini* foot step' meaning the stylistic footstep of a swan. Woman of Assam region are well versed with the art of maintenance of beauty, and could make grandiose appearance with beautiful dresses and ornaments together with emphatic hairstyle and with or without a vermilion spot on her forehead. Their gorgeous appearance becomes much attractive with beautiful dress and ornaments at the Bihu festivals, on the

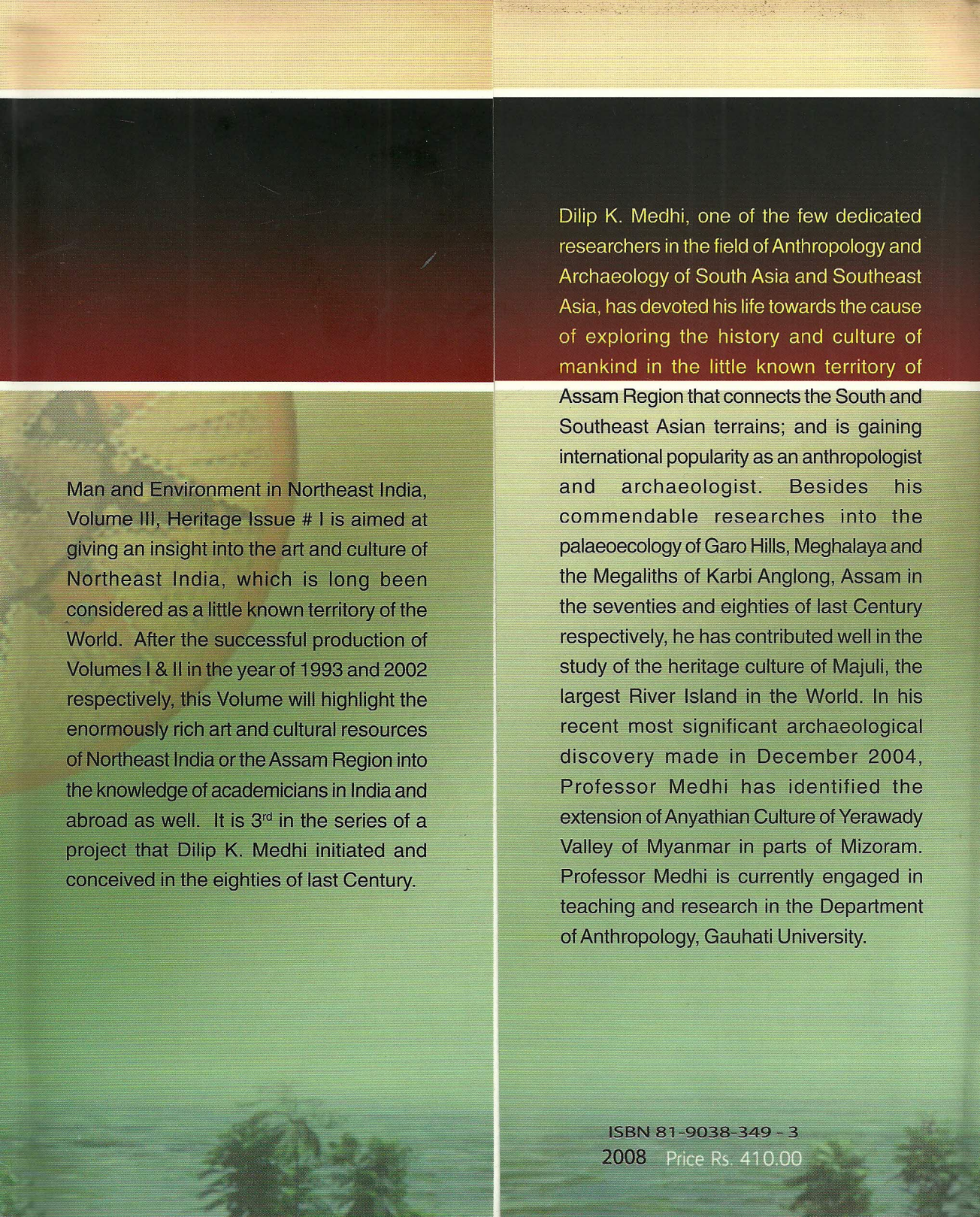
occasion of marriage ceremonies and other festivals of Assam region. Moreover they like to dress themselves beautifully at the time of paying social visits.

While describing the heritage dress and ornaments of an Assamese lady, the innumerable tribals of Northeast India have their individual dresses and ornaments and they are used on an occasion of their festivals. The Jaintia ladies of Meghalaya wear heritage apparel at the time of the *Nokrem* dance, which is held at Smit in Upper Shillong every year. It is a most prestigious dance of the Jaintias, and the King of Jaintias at Smit in Upper Shillong annually organizes the *Nokrem* dance festival at the premises of his traditional royal palace. The Garo woman has their own heritage attire with plenty of bead necklaces that cover almost two-third of the chest from neck to the waist and a kind of black dress. Garo damsels also wear colourful quill on their heads besides a cloth turban at the time of *Wangala* festival, the high-status national dance form of the Garos.

*To be continued .....*

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Man and Environment in Northeast India, Volume III, Heritage Issue # I is aimed at giving an insight into the art and culture of Northeast India, which is long been considered as a little known territory of the World. After the successful production of Volumes I & II in the year of 1993 and 2002 respectively, this Volume will highlight the enormously rich art and cultural resources of Northeast India or the Assam Region into the knowledge of academicians in India and abroad as well. It is 3<sup>rd</sup> in the series of a project that Dilip K. Medhi initiated and conceived in the eighties of last Century.

Dilip K. Medhi, one of the few dedicated researchers in the field of Anthropology and Archaeology of South Asia and Southeast Asia, has devoted his life towards the cause of exploring the history and culture of mankind in the little known territory of Assam Region that connects the South and Southeast Asian terrains; and is gaining international popularity as an anthropologist and archaeologist. Besides his commendable researches into the palaeoecology of Garo Hills, Meghalaya and the Megaliths of Karbi Anglong, Assam in the seventies and eighties of last Century respectively, he has contributed well in the study of the heritage culture of Majuli, the largest River Island in the World. In his recent most significant archaeological discovery made in December 2004, Professor Medhi has identified the extension of Anyathian Culture of Yerawady Valley of Myanmar in parts of Mizoram. Professor Medhi is currently engaged in teaching and research in the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University.



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