

**The  
Andamanese  
Nicobarese  
And  
Hill Tribes  
of Assam**

NE

301.4510954

MEE

**a.m.meerwarth**

The Andamanese, Nicobarese and  
Hill Tribes of Assam.

By **Dr. A. M. MEERWARTH,**  
*Asstt. Curator, Ethnographical Museum, Petrograd, Russia.*

*With a new introduction by*  
**DR. N.N. ACHARYYA**

**SPECTRUM PUBLICATIONS**  
PAN BAZAR, GAUHATI

4251  
Sole Distributors  
UNITED PUBLISHERS  
PAN BAZAR, MAIN ROAD  
POST BOX No. 82  
GAUHATI-781 001, INDIA

Released

301.4510954  
MEE

First published 1919  
This Reprint with a new Introduction 1980

NBU Library  
Acc. No. 94912  
Acc. No. A.....  
Class. by.....  
Sub. Handling by...  
Cat. by.....  
Transcribed by.....

Published by Krishan Kumar on behalf of Spectrum Publications,  
Pan Bazar, Gauhati 781001, and printed at Pauls Press, B-258,  
Naraina Industrial Area Phase I, New Delhi 110028

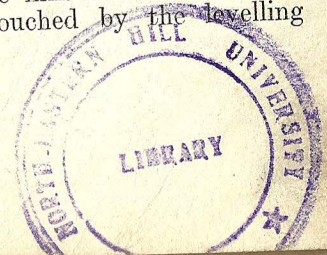
F233  
315

## INTRODUCTION.

Man is the only tool-making, tool-using and especially tool-improving animal. It is, therefore, the task of a properly arranged ethnographic collection to show, by the use of which tools—in the widest sense of the term—man protects himself against the surrounding forces of nature, makes himself their master and uses them to his advantage. This struggle with nature, which has been going on since the dawn of human life, and will probably only end with the last human being, forms the basis of what is generally called material civilisation. Besides and in consequence of his relations with the forces around him, man has always been at pains to get into connection with a world which is perhaps the creation of his own mind, the spiritual world. Here are the roots of religion and mythology, the beginning of mental civilisation. Often religious imagination expresses itself in idols, symbols and other concrete objects, thus providing the student with very valuable and durable material. Ethnographic collections are, therefore, roughly speaking, made up of implements (including clothing and housing as well as tools and weapons) and of concrete expressions of mental civilisation.

It is mainly the lower stages of civilisation that attract the ethnologist. Here he can watch the gradual awakening of the human intellect; here he is present at the birth and development of all those things without which life would be unthinkable to us; here he can observe the great principles of human civilisation working themselves out on simple and direct lines.

The political organisation common to men of low civilisation is the tribe. This term may be defined as meaning a number of families bound together by the ties of race, language and custom and by the idea of a common ancestor. It is, therefore, natural to arrange the objects exhibited in the big central show-case of the gallery and forming the subject of this guide-book, according to tribes. On the other hand Calcutta seems to be the obvious scientific centre round which these tribes group themselves geographically. To the South, in the Bay of Bengal, are the two island-groups, the Andamans and Nicobars. To the East are the hills of Assam, full of ethnological interest and hardly touched by the levelling



civilisation of the plains. The Munda and Dravidian tribes to the West and South-West of Calcutta must for the present be omitted from consideration.

The collection in the ethnological gallery of the Indian Museum and the corresponding chapter in this guide-book, representing each tribe, is arranged on the following plan. After a short note on the geographical position, number and divisions of the tribe, its place amongst the great races of mankind is defined and the physical appearance of its members described. Where possible life-size models have been exhibited for illustration. It must, however, be borne in mind that these models give only an approximate idea of the anthropological features of the persons they are meant to represent, being the work of ordinary craftsmen and not of scientifically trained artists. The next item may be conveniently called "wearing apparel." It comprises both clothing and ornaments. Three main factors domineer the clothing of primitive men: climate, the ideas of decency (which are by no means the same everywhere) and the desire to attract. Thus, this exhibition shows a wide range of possibilities, from the practically nude in the Andamanese to the Angami Naga with his four to five heavy blankets in which he wraps himself during the cold weather. Houses and huts are shown in models where such are available; otherwise photographs must fill the gap. In studying the next set of exhibits—the utensils of daily use—attention should be paid to the great part which natural objects play in the household of primitive man. Shells, gourds, bamboo joints, empty cocoanuts, to name a few examples, are an inexhaustible source for vessels, spoons, knives, etc. It is also interesting to observe how clearly artificial implements show that they are the children of nature's products. Comparing a bottle and a gourd one can not overlook the striking family-likeness. These collections tell us also that the crafts, which form now the common property of nearly all mankind, have come to man not at once but gradually, one evolving out of the other. The oldest craft seems to be basket-making. Akin to it is mat-weaving, which by degrees leads to the great art of weaving. The principle remains the same from the simplest mat to the finest texture, only the methods are more perfected. The cover of clay occasionally put on a basket to make it fire-proof led man to the invention of the cooking-pot. The potter's wheel is a late improvement and unknown to the primitive tribes under discussion. Hollowing out trees or sections of them for boats and vessels was first done by fire and has always been a fatiguing process without metal imple-

ments. With the production and use of metal tools and arms man made a gigantic step forward. He ceased to be a mere savage and attained the stage which we call semi-civilised or barbaric. Civilisation in the full extent of the term sets in with the art of writing. Therefore the Manipuris, who for three centuries have been under the influence of Hindu civilisation and have developed a written literature of their own, have to be considered a civilised nation. The same is true of that part of the Khasis in Assam who have adopted European civilisation together with Christianity.

A point of particular interest is the part which ornamentation plays in the objects of daily use. Here it seems that the psychology of the different tribes goes various ways. The Andamanese tries to cover his poor chattels as much as possible with rude but not inartistic ornaments, whereas the Nicobarese pays little attention to the decorative side of his implements. Again the Abor is singularly devoid of artistic feeling, whereas the Naga tribes simply revel in colour. Here an interesting problem awaits the student of primitive psychology.

From the domestic crafts, which are chiefly the domain of woman, we proceed to the chief occupations of primitive man, hunting, fishing and warfare. Agriculture is generally practiced by both sexes, but its origin has to be looked for in the search for edible plants and roots carried out by women. This can be observed among savage hunter-tribes to this day. Man has always been striving to invent tools and weapons with which to make the pursuit of these occupations easier and more effective. In most cases the same bow and spear which is used for hunting wild animals serves also the purpose of killing human enemies, and the bill-hook or chopper changes at a moment's notice its peaceful business of preparing the soil for cultivation or felling trees for the bloody work of felling the invading neighbour.

Games form an important item in the life programme of primitive man. They are either the direct development of the amusements, man's relatives of the animal kingdom indulge in, such as wrestling, leap-frog, chasing each other, etc., or they are playful imitations of life's serious business, such as shooting at a mark or fencing. It is not often that men in a low stage of civilisation have toys; one or two may be found among these exhibits. Pastimes that one can find all over the world are music and dancing. The question of the development of musical instruments has been dealt with in another publica-

tion relating to this gallery,<sup>1</sup> in which the close relation between the implements of daily life and the musical devices is shown. Music and dancing are often one of the expressions of man's religious feelings and can only be understood if we know something of his religious ideas.

The religion of the tribes described here—with the exception of the Manipuris and a considerable part of the Khasis—has been conveniently styled "animism." The animist ascribes a soul or a soul-stuff to every living being—man, animal, plant—as well as to lifeless things—stones, mountains, houses and implements of his own fashioning. His aim is to make these souls useful for himself or at any rate to prevent them from doing him harm. Hence his worship of trees, rocks, mountains, and other prominent features of nature that form his surroundings. Hence his worship of the spirits of the dead which, in the form of ancestor-worship, has been one of the main sources of highly developed religious systems, such as Hinduism, the polytheism of the ancient Greeks and the cult of the Chinese. The spirits of the dead, especially of those who had been cruel and vicious during life, are very soon feared as harmful demons. Hence the animist's numerous precautions and rituals to propitiate or keep away the forces of disaster that lurk in the forest or hover over waste fields, always lying in wait for the living to affect them with disease and madness or to drag them away to an evil death. Thus animism, practically speaking, is an attempt to overcome the harmful spirits in nature. It is true that there is an idea that good and helpful spirits exist besides the evil ones, but they have little power and do not care to restrain the mischief of the evil ones, and thus they receive very little attention. Sometimes vague notions from other religions enter into this system, either owing to contact with neighbours professing a different religion, or as reminiscences of missionary effort. Thus most Assam Hill tribes have adopted the Hindu conception of Yama, the King of the Dead, and worship him as Jomraj. Reminiscences of missionary activity we shall discuss later on in the chapter on the Nicobarese.

Something must be said about the material at the disposal of the museum. It will not escape the visitor that it varies considerably in completeness, and is, therefore, not equally representative in all cases. Sometimes it has been possible to give a fairly full and instructive illustration of the civilisa-

tion of a tribe, as in the case of the Andamanese and the Nagas, but more often important objects are wanting. Thus the collections of the Mishmis, Manipuris and Kukis show sad gaps, and the Nicobarese, Abor, Mikir, Khasi and Garo are far from complete. The reason for this is that the gallery has not grown systematically—hardly any museum does—but consists of a multitude of small, accidental collections. Therefore a list of objects the acquisition of which is necessary is given at the end of each chapter. It is to be hoped that such visitors whom work or pleasure may bring into touch with any of the tribes described in this guide-book will avail themselves of their opportunities in the interest of the science, of which this museum is a natural centre. The meanest object has often the greatest ethnological importance and ethnographical objects as a rule cost very little on the spot. Therefore, any offer, be it in the form of a donation or for sale—preferably of course the former—will be welcomed.

The object of this guide-book is not only to be the visitor's companion while he wanders through the Ethnological Gallery; we hope at the same time to awaken the interest in the fascinating study of man and his history, especially of those representatives of primitive humanity that are in close proximity to Calcutta. A short list of interesting and trustworthy works on each tribe is given at the end of each chapter. The best and most attractive general introduction to the subjects comprised under the name of Anthropology or Ethnography is still Edward B. Tylor's beautiful little book: "Anthropology, an Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilisation" (London, Macmillan & Co.).

<sup>1</sup> A Guide to the collection of Musical Instruments.

## NEW INTRODUCTION

The northeast is a land of abundant wealth and presents challenge and opportunity to anthropologists and philologists to prove their worth. The great diversity of races, peoples and languages within the territory of Assam and the neighbouring states has made the region exceptionally interesting. Along the hilly out skirts of this north east frontier land of India dwell a vast number of tribes, who have been earning a good deal of attention in recent times. From time to time many books and treatises have been written, portraying in details the curious ways of life of these hillmen.

Apart from taking into account the history of the different tribes of undivided Assam, this book gives an idea about those who are inhabitants of the Bay of Bengal islands of Andaman and Nicobar. Further, it provides for the reader a detailed note on such aspects as the geographical position of the tribes, their physical descriptions, their number and divisions and also their place amongst the numerous great races of mankind.

In giving instructive illustrations of the civilization of the tribes like the Andamanese, the Nicobarese, the Abors, the Mishmis, the Nagas, the Kukis, the Manipuris, the Mikirs, the Khasis, the Garos and many others, the writer has done comprehensive work. At the end of each chapter a necessary list of objects and a precise list of the works on each tribe have been provided for the benefit of the readers.

Thus, the aim of this book has been not only to be a guide, but also to rouse the interests of historians, anthropologists and researchers alike.

Dr. A.M. Meerwarth, the author of this guide book was a noted ethnologist from Russia. Awakenning the interest and attention of those connected in the study of man and his history, had been the author's main aim in mind. And in doing so he has been particularly concerned about those factors of primitive humanity which are in close proximity to Calcutta. Though modest in his objective, Dr. Meerwarth's book is an original research document which may be greatly helpful in focussing

attention on tribal aspects particularly when a number of new studies are at present being made on the areas covered.

I procured a copy of the book "The Andamanese, Nicobarese and Hill Tribes of Assam" while I was in England in 1955 in connection with my research work for the degree of Ph.D. of the London University. Since then I had been looking for somebody to come forward to take up the work of republication of the same. It has been a pleasure for me to give this introduction to a book which will be of use to all those engaged in research on the subject as well as to the casual visitor to the Northeast region.

Department of History  
Gauhati University,  
25th June, 1980.

N.N. Acharyya

## PREFATORY NOTE.

The present guide-book, though we hope that it will awaken popular interest in the subject, is not intended to be a complete compendium of, or even in a strict sense an introduction to, the study of Ethnography. It is a guide to a particular collection, not to the subject as a whole. As Dr. Meerwarth has pointed out, the different tribes with which he deals are represented very unequally in the Ethnographical collections now entrusted to the care of the Director of the Zoological Survey of India. We have, therefore, taken the opportunity to state in this pamphlet what are the chief desiderata from each tribe so far as the Indian Museum is concerned.

A very large proportion of the specimens to be noticed here were collected under the auspices of the Asiatic Society of Bengal before the year 1875. The most important additions are comprised in the collection made in 1911-12 by Messrs. S. W. Kemp and J. Coggin Brown in the Abor country to the north east of Assam.

N. ANNANDALE,  
*Director, Zoological Survey of India.*

CALCUTTA,  
*The 29th April 1919.*

Only a few of the wilder parts of the world preserve such a variety of savage tribes of great ethnological interest as the mountainous valley of the mighty Brahmaputra in its course from Lower Tibet to the Bay of Bengal and very little was known for centuries about this vast region. It was in the British regime that military expeditions, surveys and investigations were carried out to gain geographical knowledge about the area and to acquire some accurate information regarding the customs, traditions, life styles, and the languages of these tribal people.

The book takes into account the history of the different tribes of Assam and the inhabitants of the Bay of Bengal islands of Andaman and Nicobar. Dr. A.M. Meerwarth, the author of this book was a noted Russian ethnologist. In giving instructive illustrations of the civilization of the tribes like the Abors, the Mishmis, the Nagas, the Kukis, the Manipuris, the Mikirs, the Khasis, the Garos, the Andamanese, the Nicobarese, and many others, the writer has done comprehensive work. He has described the geographical position of the tribes, their physical features, their number and divisions, and their place amongst the numerous races of mankind. At the end of each chapter a necessary list of objects and a precise list of the works on each tribe have been provided, to rouse the interests of administrators, histo-

*(continued on back flap)*

Rs. 45

*(continued from front flap)*

rians, geographers, anthropologists and researchers alike.

The original edition (published in 1919) was aimed to serve as a guide book of the Indian Museum, Calcutta. An introduction in this reprint by Dr. N.N. Acharyya of the Department of History, Gauhati University is the added feature and pin-points its research importance. The description of different plates and numerous illustrations recorded here are of fundamental research value and they have to be studied alongwith the present day exploratory works undertaken in the field. This shows the permanent reference value of this useful book.

THOUGH SCHEDULED FOR PUBLICATION DURING 1980, THIS TITLE IS ACTUALLY BEING RELEASED IN 1981.

Jacket printed at MUDRAK, New Delhi.

## RECENT BOOKS ON NORTH-EAST INDIA

|                       |  |         |
|-----------------------|--|---------|
| Sanjaya               | Assam - A Crisis of Identity<br>(1980)                                     | Rs. 35  |
| Dr. T. Mathew (Ed)    | Tribal Economy of North-<br>Eastern Region (1981)                          | Rs. 65  |
| Lt. Col. Alban Wilson | Sport and Service in Assam<br>and Elsewhere (1981 Reprint)                 | Rs. 90  |
| Dr. A.M. Meerwarth    | The Andamanese, Nicobar-<br>ese and Hill Tribes of Assam<br>(1981 Reprint) | Rs. 45  |
| Col. L.W. Shakespear  | History of the Assam Rifles<br>(1981 Reprint)                              | Rs. 125 |
| R. G. Woodthorpe      | The Lushai Expedition<br>1871-72 (1981 Reprint)                            | Rs. 95  |
| J.P. Mills            | The Rengma Nagas<br>(1981 Reprint)   | Rs. 110 |
| Dr. H.K. Barpujari    | Assam in the days of the<br>Company (2nd Ed; 1981)                         | Rs. 80  |
| Nirmal Nibedon        | Northeast India—The Ethnic<br>Explosion                                    | Rs. 95  |
| A.J.M. Mills          | Report on Assam (1980<br>Reprint)  | Rs. 360 |
| B.C. Allen            | Naga Hills and Manipur<br>(1980 Reprint)                                   | Rs. 90  |
| McCulloh              | Valley of Manipur (1980<br>Reprint)  | Rs. 50  |
| C. Becker             | History of the Catholic<br>Missions in North-East<br>India (1980)          | Rs. 125 |
| U. Bhattacharya       | Local Government in the<br>Khasi Hills (1980)                              | Rs. 70  |
| R. P. Singh           | Electoral Politics in Manipur  | Rs. 70  |
| Mahesh Joshi          | Assam—The Indian Conflict  | Rs. 60  |

*Distributors :*

**united  
publishers**

PANBAZAR MAIN ROAD, GAUHATI-781001  
MANUSHREE BUILDING, DR. MUKERJEE NAGAR, DELHI-110009