

INTRODUCING  
HERITAGE CULTURE OF NORTHEAST INDIA

Dilip K. Medhi

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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 gamochâ* (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