

SYNOPSIS

Introduction

The discovery of the first-ever Neolithic tool from Assam by Lubbock (1867), at Biswanath, was followed by a series of exploratory work that led to the discovery of several prehistoric sites in the region. Such discoveries by Steel (1870), Barron (1872), Brown (1914), Hutton (1928), Worman (1949), Barua (1939), Chaudhuri (1944), Dani (1960), and many others, not only put Assam in the prehistoric map of the world but also provided significant insights about early settlers of the region. These studies attracted new scholars from Assam as well as from other parts of India to carry out research in this region. The first stratigraphic excavation was, however, carried out at the site of Daojali Hading in 1962 (IAR 1962-63), which was followed by a series of excavations at other important sites in the region (IAR 1968-69, Rao, 1976; IAR 1987-88, 1988-89, 1989-90, 1997-98, 1999-2000, 2008-09, 1992-93, 1996-97, 1997-98, 2000-2001, 2012-13). Besides providing first-hand knowledge of the region's cultural development from prehistoric to historical periods, these preliminary studies paved the way for later scholars to investigate various aspects of cultural development and their connections to other contemporary cultural entities. It is with this specific background under consideration that the present research endeavours to examine the parameters that have been untouched in previous research, also taking into consideration some of the new developments. The data for the research will be collected with the help of new field surveys and the examination of materials that are housed in various departments of colleges and universities. The study area largely covers part of the Brahmaputra Valley and its surrounding hill districts (Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong). Geographically, the study area lies between 25°44' and 27°55' N latitude and 89°41' and 96°02'E longitude. The primary focus is given to the potential areas belonging to both prehistoric and historical periods.

Problem Statement

The volume of archaeological work in Northeast India is extensive and several sites have been recorded since Lubbock's discovery of the Neolithic tool. Despite such progress in archaeological research, a definite cultural chronology for the whole region is still not available, mainly due to the lack of sufficient dating. So far, we have a single absolute date from one prehistoric site. Unsurprisingly, most of the earlier works did not even attempt to propose such a cultural chronology. The cultural sequence we get from previous research is based entirely on relative dating, which has various pros and cons.

Since relative dating relies mostly on corroboratory evidence, proper documentation and examination of the material evidence are extremely necessary to find an appropriate cultural sequence. Looking at the gaps in our knowledge of the cultural chronology of Assam, there is a need to re-examine and methodically re-document all the cultural material excavated and explored so far, along with new exploratory evidence, and co-relate them. Data from new sites should also be corroborated with the already existing records.

Moreover, site formation and settlement archaeology form another important aspect of research that has been neglected in the archaeological work of this region. To arrive at a proper understanding of these processes, all the recorded sites from the region were studied from a single regional perspective, irrespective of the differences in their cultural evidence. This provided a good understanding of sites inhabited by people through different periods.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to identify sites belonging to the prehistoric and early historical cultures and to understand the archaeological potentiality of the greater Brahmaputra Valley as well as the surrounding hilly region of Garo, Khasi, Naga, and Mikir hills, by focusing on a specific zone. The objectives of the research are as follows:

1. Understanding the site formation processes of previously studied and newly explored sites in the study area, that is, the Brahmaputra Valley and its surrounding hill districts. In this way, the study also looks at determining the area's accessibility to past inhabitants belonging to different cultures.
2. Investigating the region's geomorphology and its environment by studying select natural zones, which will provide insight into the relationship between humans and land in different cultural periods.
3. Studying material culture to uncover missing links between the prehistoric and historical periods and to establish a relative chronology by examining material remains and comparing them with those found in other cultural contexts.
4. Understanding how the migration of different ethnic groups over different periods influenced the development of regional cultural entities.
5. Documenting the ethnographic data of different communities of the region to understand the current settlement pattern and their ability to adapt to the landscape. This will provide the blueprint to study the past cultures.
6. Helping develop a broader regional archaeological picture.

Methodology

Based on previous findings, explorations were conducted in the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Golaghat, Sibsagar, Karbi-Anglong, Dima Hasao and Sonitpur. Village-to-village survey and systematic survey involving field walking were used as methodologies. Artefacts were collected through a random sampling method. Simultaneously, materials housed in various museums and Anthropology departments in different universities (for instance, Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University) were studied, which provided first-hand information on previous works. The material evidence was analysed with the help of drawings and photographs. Furthermore, a typological and chronological chart of artefacts from different excavated sites was prepared and a comparative study was conducted to understand the cultural affinities of the material with other excavated sites.

Outline of the Thesis

Chapter I: Introduction

This chapter provides an outline of the present archaeological scenario of Northeast India, in general, and Assam, in particular. The cultural setting of the study area, which falls within the present political boundary of Assam, has specifically been discussed while introducing the archaeological parameters and the scope of the present work. The chapter also discusses the major objectives of the research. Both primary and secondary data were used in the research, and the different methodologies employed for the collection of data have been discussed in detail.

Chapter II: Physiography of the Study Area

The physiography and the environmental parameters of an area determine the settlement pattern and cultural landscape of a region to a great extent. This chapter deals with these specific aspects, particularly with a focus on the study area. To understand distinct cultural patterns, the study area has been divided into different environmental zones. Different cultural zones have also been identified based on the respective environmental parameters.

Chapter III: Accounts of Previous Research: A Review

This chapter presents a review of previous studies conducted in the context of archaeology of the broader region of Assam (understood in general as Northeast India). Studies beginning from the pre-Independence times to the modern times help identify significant aspects of the different cultural periods. A major part of the chapter is dedicated to studies concerning the use of literary evidence to acquire knowledge about the land during the historical period as well as the various dynastic rules. This has sparked interest in the archaeological parallels of the materials recovered so far from historically significant sites.

Chapter IV: Explored Sites and Material Culture

This chapter deals with the archaeological data collected from earlier studies and also the data collected during the present research. A detailed description of all the sites studied (newly explored and materials housed at the universities) has been provided. The analysis of archaeological material and its interpretation is the focus of this chapter. Materials have been documented in the form of drawings. Ceramics have been analysed based on fabric, colour, and form. An attempt has been made to set a relative chronology of the cultural periods based on the analysis of the material evidence.

Chapter V: Site Formation Processes

This chapter examines all the factors that contribute to the formation of sites through various cultural periods. It is primarily important to comprehend the selection of the location as well as the accessibility of the area in terms of geography, landscape, geomorphology, and water sources. Some of the living communities from Dima Hasao have been studied to draw an ethnographic parallel. The ethnographic study has provided ample contextual evidence for the formation of settlements on hilltops, adjacent river valleys, and plain areas of the hills.

Chapter VI: Cultural Relationship with Other Parts of the Indian Sub-continent and South-East Asia

This chapter deals with the distribution of cultural material and its extension to sites in other parts of India and South-East Asia belonging to the contemporary cultural periods. It also develops a core and periphery model to understand the geographical openings and barriers (e.g., the geographical-cultural transmission model).

Chapter VII: Discussion and Conclusion

The major findings and a summary of research findings are presented in this chapter. It discusses the significance of the current study, its limitations, and future prospects.

STATEMENT-I

(Statement showing the particulars in which the work is based, the discovery of new facts and of a new relationship between facts observed by others and how the works tend to help the general advancement of knowledge)

The region of Assam, which once encompassed all states of North-East India, is a significant landmass that has long served as a connecting route between mainland India and South-East Asia. This link has been discovered among the ethnic communities and material cultures from several parts of present-day Northeast India. Studies on the region's prehistoric period began in 1867, with the discovery of the Neolithic tool made of Jadeite by Lubbock, followed by various stray collections of prehistoric artefacts and excavations starting in 1962-63 (IAR 1962-63). However, there are still several gaps in our understanding of the cultural sequence of the region through different periods. While the prehistoric sites have been categorised in a specific cultural sequence with the help of tool typology and relative dating, the many excavations that have been carried out on historical sites have also failed to provide any dated chronology for the historical period. As a result, understanding the chronological development of sites from one cultural period to the next has been a matter of curiosity. Furthermore, in the context of these areas within the geographical boundary of the present political division of Assam, how the sites were formed in different periods and how the environment influenced their choice of location is still an unexplored area of research. The current study is an attempt to comprehend these complex processes, and it will propose establishing a relative chronology based on data collected and information obtained from immediate sources.

This study incorporates the following advancements in current archaeological knowledge of the Assam region:

1. More than 15 sites are investigated and re-investigated in this study from various cultural periods. The newly discovered sites have material evidence such as stone tools, stone jars and ceramics. The geo-coordinates, physical environment, and geomorphological settings of each site have properly been documented. Materials in

the custody of Anthropology departments in various universities have been documented in the form of detailed descriptions, drawings and photographs. As per the present investigation, a great majority of prehistoric occupation in the current political boundary of Assam is concentrated in the hill districts of Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong and are close to the foothills near the Meghalayan plateau. Mostly stone artefacts are not found in bulk or within the contexts; instead, they are dispersed in various places on hill slopes and small river channels. This demonstrates the population's flimsy habitation at the time. On the other hand, sites from where ceramics have been recovered have a clearly defined physiography that are located primarily on the modern flood-prone areas. Ceramics are datable from the early historic to early mediaeval periods. In some places, the river appears to have changed its course recently, indicating that habitations in the past were a little away from the river but within an accessible distance.

2. In order to establish a theoretical foundation for the current research, a more methodical review of the literature was conducted. It reveals that in order to understand the region in a broader sense, it is necessary to re-investigate the sites and re-study the material culture, as well as accumulate both archaeological and literary evidence from early dynastic rules, Puranic connections to the land, and travellers' writings to illuminate the scenario from all angles. To develop an overall understanding of the scope of study, it was necessary to assess the sites from a geographical point of view rather than confining within the current boundaries of the political state of Assam. Although archaeological surveys began in this region in 1867, attempts to understand the cultural sequence through excavations began only in 1962. Despite these studies, no reference materials with regard to ceramics or stone tool types are available for this region. However, literature survey from this area supports the view that presence of occupation existed from the Gupta period onwards.
3. The entire study area has been divided into different environmental zones, and cultural materials have been linked to each zone using both archaeological (from previous reports) and literary evidence to understand the adaptation strategies of cultural groups. The present Assam valley is broadly divided into three macro zones: Brahmaputra valley, Barak Valley and the Hills. The Macro zones are further subdivided into fourteen micro zones on different physiographic grounds such as geology,

geomorphology, rainfall pattern, agriculture and drainage pattern; although some of them overlap. These micro environmental zones are designated as Zone 1 to 14.

4. The site formation processes have been discussed for all previously explored and newly located sites in the Northeast in general and Assam in particular. The study revealed that in case of Prehistoric occupation, there is a horizontal development of culture, where the Garo hills of Meghalaya has the richest number of sites, followed by Khasi and Jaintia hills with reducing number of sites towards North Cachar and Mikir hills. This continues up to Nagaland and Manipur. The prehistoric sites of Assam are mostly found in hill slopes, which are presently used for Jhum cultivation. In general, the stone tools are recovered from the low hillocks, Mikir hills and the hilly areas near the rivers which originated from the Barail range. But most of the sites are not from find-spots. Moreover, there is a constant geomorphological change in the entire region because of heavy flood and continuous earthquakes.
5. A detailed examination has been done on sites containing various material remains (artefacts, features and structures) towards the foothill region of the Assam-Meghalaya border. One of the major lacunae in the study area was the lack of cultural continuity. Two sites from this belt; Bambooti and Sarutaru have chronometric dates. However, there is disparity in the date and material culture of Sarutaru. Therefore, for establishing relative dates of the sites in that region, Bambooti was taken as a reference site. Thus, typological comparisons of artefacts were done with those from Bambooti.
6. The extension and distribution pattern of Neolithic sites with shouldered celts, cord-impressed pottery and stone jars have been studied in relation to its sites, followed by linking them to the region. This provided insights into the core and peripheral zones of the cultural assemblages. This distribution shows a westward movement of population with shouldered celt cultural traits from Southeast Asian countries, as the sites there provide abundant evidence of settled ways of life in the form of cord marked pottery, bone artefacts, and habitational deposits. This study exhibits that the sites of Assam in particular and Northeast India in general, has the peripheral settlement pattern with their core in Southeast Asia.

7. In this thesis, a detailed analysis of pottery is carried out, which has not been previously done in the region. The pottery analysis covers descriptions of fabric, colour and forms for each piece as well as comparisons with sites in the surrounding geographical area. This can act as a reference material for future workers of this region.
8. This research has dealt with various confusions about the relative chronology of cultural materials and contextualized them. The ceramics industry shows a continuation of decorative patterns from Neolithic to early historic period with variances of fabric and colour. Based on these, the potteries are divided into groups and an inter- and intra-site relationship has been worked out.
9. Ethnographic documentation of two Dimasa communities living in two different locations, as well as one Zemi Naga community, was conducted, to understand their current settlement pattern. These people have settled near river valleys and on the top of hills. They mainly rely on agriculture, hunting and collection of materials (food and building materials) available in nearby forest. Small channels in between the hilly passes which are the offshoots of main river are their first choice of group hunting from where many a times stone artefacts have been discovered by the villagers. In most cases, they kept the skeleton of hunting animals as decoration in both inside home and outside the entrance as a sign of strength and prosperity. Different aspects, such as, traditional practices and their contribution to the preservation of ancestral heritage were investigated in this study. This research, thus, has generated new models for comprehending past cultures and their behaviours which reveals that they secluded themselves from other communities during their festive seasons. Menhirs which are generally believed as memorial stones are used by some of them as sacrificial stones and according to the size of the stone, the sacrifices are selected. Moreover, the present burial practices also resemble with many of the ancient remains from archaeological contexts.

STATEMENT-II

(Statement indicates the sources of information and the extent to which the thesis is based on the works of others and the portion of the thesis claimed as original)

The primary emphasis of this research was to investigate the material evidence of the prehistoric and historical period sites of the greater Assam region from two significant parameters: first, to study the cultural development of sites belonging to different periods and, second, to understand the site formation processes in relation to the geomorphology and environment. To bring the research objectives to fruition, both primary and secondary data were collected. To obtain the primary data, the researcher conducted several explorations in various districts of Assam between 2018 and 2022. A reconnaissance survey has been made with the help of topographical maps of the area prepared by the survey of India. Both systematic and random sampling methods are used for data collection according to the formation of sites. A literature review was also conducted, which provided the bulk of secondary data. The main sources of information were the IAR reports and various published data, which proved useful in providing data for further investigations.

A major portion of the thesis is based on primary data gathered by the scholar, while a minimal percentage of data has been collected from secondary sources. The portions that contain original contributions pertain to the documentation of new sites belonging to different cultural periods, the study of site formation processes of the newly explored sites, the analysis of artefacts, especially ceramics recovered in these current explorations, the systematic analysis of the gaps between cultural periods (from the prehistoric to the historical), and the study of different ecological zones to comprehend what the possible environmental conditions of earlier cultures might be.

The following is the list of selected references upon which the basic concepts of the thesis are formulated.

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