

Anthropological Interface between the Hills and Plains: An understanding from Assam –Meghalaya Border Region

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Abstract

Traditional practices are always informative and can be used as a tool to reconstruct the past culture. In many societies of Northeast India such kind of practices still continue to exist and which had many elements passed on from ancestral generation. The Assam- Meghalaya border area towards the southern part of Kamrup district of Assam is inhabited largely by Khasi, Garo, Karbi and few other caste populations. The subsistence pattern, economic as well as socio-cultural practice and geomorphological location of the region drew attention which leads to exposure of many significant ethnographic and archaeological data. In Assam –Meghalaya border region, there is the prevalence of traditional market system, where there is the evidence of age old practice of barter exchange in the form of Basket exchange, especially by the women, locally known as Hora Solua. Prolific occurrence of ceramic sherds of which the reconstructed versions show close resemblance with respect to shape and size with the utensils used by the present day inhabitants. Erection of megaliths in the memory of deceased clan members has raised the anthropo-archaeological significance of this area. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of the area the researcher tried to analyse the findings from the ethno-archaeological perspective. The present study reveals that though the culture under study is chronologically modern but economically and anthropologically they are Neolithic or may be later.

Keywords: *Trade, Pottery, Megalith, Ethno-archaeology, Tradition*

Introduction

Trade is always been a fascinating and engrossing affair for anthropologists as it can give an insight about the economic condition of the society. Trade can be defined as the “mutually appropriate movement of goods between hands” (Renfrew 1975). Apart from economic condition it can provide information about socio-cultural practices, the changes that happened within it and interregional contact over time. Many such studies done on trade and exchange of stone, ceramics and metals in Europe, especially in the Mediterranean region, Near east and North America reveal important information about their raw material procurement, fashioning techniques and socio-economic condition of the society. Trade is recognized in archaeological record by the discovery of objects

exotic to the material culture or economy of the host society. For instance Glass was never manufactured in Sub Saharan Africa during prehistoric times, yet the evidence of imported glass beads was common finds in archaeological sites of 1st millennium A.D. (Beack and Schoefield 1958). Anthropologists always tried to establish a cultural biography for the exchanged goods, starting from the anthology of their raw materials and ending with their disposal. Thus the study of trade through artefacts and raw material is critical to archaeology, as it provides a unique opportunity to examine the mechanics of trading networks and the changing social institutions that regulate them (Fagan 1987).

Anthropologists have defined three modes of exchange: reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange. Reciprocity refers to balanced exchange between relatively equal individuals, whether it involves everyday items or a gift that creates an obligation for a reciprocal return gift later on; this exchange occurs in all societies. Redistribution, however, requires a centralized organization in the acquisition of goods and typically is associated with chiefdom or state-level societies. The centralized authority may acquire goods through control of production, taxation, or tribute collection. Market exchange combines the existence of a central location where trade can take place with a socio-political system in which free bargaining is possible.

Trade originated from human communication in prehistoric times. Trading was the main facility of prehistoric people who exchanged goods and services from each other in a gift economy before the innovation of modern-day currency. Peter Watson dates the history of long-distance commerce from c. 150,000 years ago (Watson 2005).

Polanyi (1964) noted that the institution of market was fairly common since the late Stone Age. Adam Smith and Herbert Spencer contended that some of the traits found in "market economy" was present even in barter system of economy although it was more compatible with modern economic system. Market existed in preindustrial, pre urbanised tribal and primitive society also. In economic anthropology, for a comprehensive understanding of market system, distribution and exchange has become fundamental issues. It is argued that market should be studied as interacting social phenomena where the exchange process is the focus of attention. Market can be considered as a cohesive entity in the society as a whole not merely an economic institution. Epstein (1982) also opined the market should be understood in its socio-cultural aspects. When markets become one of the controlling forces of the entire society it ultimately gives rise to a market society. In the market society social organization has to adapt to market needs to acquire goods (Dalton 1961).

When people started to settle in an area and the community started to grow in size the exchange of different goods became necessary for survival. This process of exchange gradually took the shape of barter and ultimately it gave rise to system of trade in any particular area. In the beginning trade was in the form of barter that is exchange of goods (or service) against goods (Gupta 1969). The Vedic hymns clearly indicate that barter trade was known to the people of early Vedic period (Raychoudhary 1997).

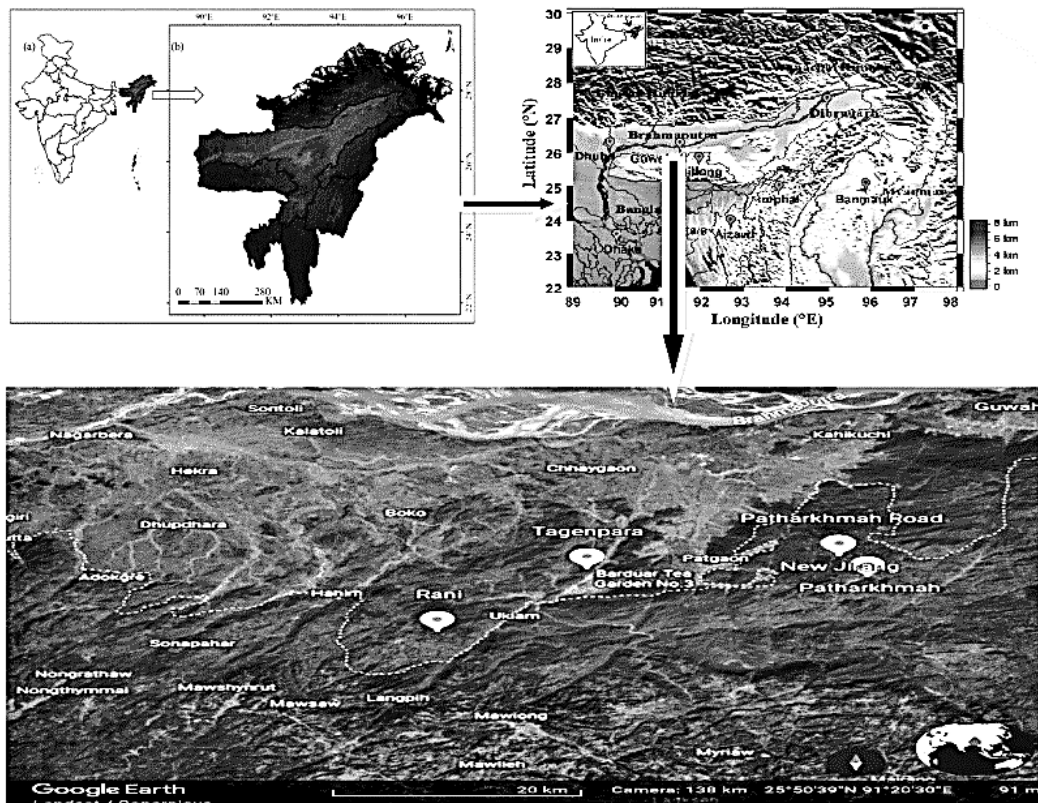
Trade is a natural economic activity where there is flow of commodities from producers to customers. It is transaction of goods or exchange of things for the purpose of earning and meeting

needs. Exchange of things can take place in kind and cash. Socio-cultural relation and economic linkage developed automatically for mutual benefit of the persons or groups involved in the trade activity. Trade is the result of law of comparative advantage and exchange of relationship and goods between people having different mode of production. However different physical and cultural environment of the borders govern the intensity and nature of border trade practice (Das and Purkayastha 2000).

Markets played a vital role in socioeconomic life of people since time immemorial. Market were the place where agricultural, forest and other produces were being exchanged and sold (Mawnai 1984). Markets also served as a meeting point for people, as information centre to circulate messages issued by competent authority (Bareh 2001). Therefore market can be viewed from different angles. It can be studied as a centre for business transaction, venue for flow of goods and currency, a forum for exchange of socio-political ideas, a platform for inter-ethnic communication and a place for recreation (Dasgupta 1984).

In this paper an attempt is made to understand the Anthropo-archaeological significance of Assam–Meghalaya border region under aegis of prevalent trade system, pottery remains and megalithic practice.

Fig.1 Location map of the study area



Material and Methods

The study was conducted in Assam-Meghalaya border area located about 45 kilometres away from Guwahati towards south west direction adjoining Rani in Assam –Meghalaya Border. The study area is located on the south bank of the lower reaches of the river Brahmaputra towards the western part of Assam. The area is bounded by Brahmaputra River in the north, Meghalaya in the south, Kamrup district in the east and Goalpara district in the west. Five weekly markets i.e. Rani, Sukurberia, Tagenpara, Jirang and Patharkhama had been considered for the present study. All the markets are located near Assam- Meghalaya border area.

Exploration had been conducted in the weekly market places, jhum fields, in the neighbouring villages, exposed road cutting sections, towards the bank of Umchi Rani and at megalithic sites. Survey schedules were used both with sellers and buyers to collect data from the markets. Anthropological methodology, such as, non participant observation, interview with both structured and unstructured schedules and case study method were used to collect relevant information about *jhuming* system, implements used and final outputs from the field. Interviews were conducted with knowledgeable elderly persons who were continuously engaged with trade in the markets, persons involved in market committee, sellers and buyers who came from different neighbouring villages. Interviews were also conducted with villagers who are associated with megalithic practice.

Findings

Mostly the area is inhabited by Garo, Khasi and Karbi people. Agriculture is the primary source of livelihood and *jhum* cultivation is practiced extensively by the people living in the border region. The *jhuming* activity is carried out with simple implements like hoe, chopper and digging stick etc. They produce food grains, vegetables and also cash crops. Among the food grains coarse varieties of rice is the principal crop, followed by maize, millet etc.

Table 1: Implements used in *Jhum* Cultivation

Name of the Implements	Primary used	Local terms
Axe	Felling the big trees while jungle is cleared	<i>Rua</i>
Two varieties of hatchet	Clearing jungle , branches of the trees and undergrowth	<i>Athe , athe-mangren</i>
Hoe	Turning up soil to make ready for cultivation	<i>Gitchi</i>
Digging stick	Making holes on the ground for planting the seeds	<i>Matham</i>
Rake	Collecting leaves, small branches, unwanted weeds scattered all over the field	<i>Ku-sohkrak</i>
Winnowing fan	Separating the food grains from the unwanted particles	<i>Beleng</i>

Apart from different varieties of rice, vegetables like pumpkins, cucumbers and varieties of yam have also been cultivated in the *jhum* field. Few varieties of fruits and herbs like chillies, ginger, indigo and also tobacco are grown apart from seasonal leafy vegetables. Noteworthy to mention here that the population in the study area live in a low technological level, where they try to follow their subsistence economy with very simple implements (Table 1). By and large, these products are

sold in the market by which the people get cash money or other daily commodities. Apart from cultivated items, livestock like pig, goat, duck, chicken, fish are also sold by the villagers. Moreover locally prepared food items like dry fish, smoked pork, rice beer, *Bakhar* (ingredient use in rice beer preparation), *teel pitha* (local snack) are also brought by the villagers and sold regularly in the markets.

Both male and female participate in the market system. Sometimes they bring the items from the villages or sometimes they buy few items which are in demand in early hours and sell those in high price during peak time in the market.



Fig.3 Women with traditional basket

Women from neighbouring hills also visit these markets with a traditional basket known as *Hora*, filled with varieties of items like leafy vegetables, nutritious herbs, rice beer, dry fish etc. In these five markets there is an age old traditional system of barter known as *Hora Solua*. In this barter system the women from the hills exchange their basket (*Hora*) with the items they needed from their plain counterparts. In present day modern economy where money plays a vital role in the market system, the villagers along with the neighbouring hill population maintain their age old tradition of Barter and Exchange which not only makes them economically sufficient but develop cordial relation among them.

Apart from the traditional market system where the researchers record the evidence of barter system, another important discovery, with importance on historical grounds is the remains of pottery fragments. Since prehistoric times, various tribal societies have been culturally involved in the manufacture of pottery. In this view, we can see the earliest traces of pottery reported from the North Cachar Hills area in this region in the site Daojali Hading (Goswami and Sharma 1963). In

the later phase , many such traces of pottery was reported by different scholars and particularly significant of them are the Sarutaru and Marakdola (Rao 1977), Bambooti (Ashraf and Duarah 2014). They sites lie in Assam – Meghalaya Border region (Bezbaruah 2019). A brief account of pottery recovered from Jirang is given below.

Ceramic remains from Jirang :

Pottery remains of small to medium size have been recovered from the Jirang village near the foot hills of Khasi hills. The stream Umchi- rani flows near the site and a portion of the site is swept away by the high energy condition during rainy season. As a result potsherds have been scattered not only in the exposed section but also in the hilly foot track towards Khasi hills. The prolific occurrence of potsherds from this area becomes significant from archaeological perspective as it provides a basis on which past economic condition and technological level of the population can be outlined. Recoveries were made in two conditions: i) Exposed road cutting - section I & II; and ii) River bed of Umchi- rani.

A village road was constructed near a mound in the foothills and this led to two exposed sections due to road cutting. Intensive system exploration in the road cutting sections resulted in recovery of numerous potsherds in embedded situation. The GPS reading of the site is Elevation =175 meter and the Coordinates are 26°01'189"N latitude 91°35'937" E longitude.

Road cutting section I

The vertical extension of the road cutting section 1 is located towards western direction about 5.41 meters vertically and horizontal extension is about 0.88 meters. From this section 1 total 30 numbers of potsherds were recovered. Out of which 14 pieces were sherds with rim, 3 were sherds with neck, 6 pieces were sherds with body and 7 pieces were sherds with base.

Road cutting section II

Towards the eastern direction the road cutting section II is reported, whose vertical length is about 3.10 metres and horizontal length is about 1.04 meters. Total 49 pieces of potsherds were recovered where 13 pieces were potsherds with rim, 20 pieces were potsherds with body, 7 pieces were potsherd with neck and 9 pieces were potsherds with base.

Umchi-Rani River bed

From the river bed which is directly connected with the newly constructed village road total 30 pieces of potsherds were collected, out of which 9 are potsherds with rim portion, 7 are potsherds with neck, 10 are potsherds with body and 4 are with base.

Table 2: Combined Inventory of Pottery

Sl.no.	Parts Recovered	Section I		Section II		River Bed		Total	Percentage
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1	Rim	14	46.66	13	26.53	9	30	36	33.02
2	Neck	3	10.00	7	14.28	7	23.33	17	15.59
3	Body	6	20.00	20	40.81	10	33.33	36	33.02
4	Base	7	23.33	9	18.36	4	13.33	20	18.34
	Total	30	100 %	49	100%	30	100%	109	100 %

From the three context all together 109 pieces of ceramics are recovered, where 33.02 % are potsherd with rim, 15.59 % are potsherds with neck, 33.02% are body portion and 18.34 % are ceramic with base (Table 2). Potsherds are analyzed considering various parameters like types of body parts, colour, texture, nature of firing, mode of construction, presence of carination and types of rim etc. From the collection of both the contexts, almost all the sherds exhibits corrugation marks which implies that majority are wheel made. The use of well levigated clay and controlled firing is another observable characteristics in the entire collection, which gave an uniform texture and colour. Inverted or out turned rim types show predominance with a few occurrence of different rim types like straight, recurved and everted types. Carination is also present in 50% of the total collection. Moreover, as most of the potsherds are highly weathered, it is difficult to give any opinion regarding their surface treatment. The reconstructed version of these potsherds indicates that probably these were used for storing, cooking and ritualistic purposes. The enthnographic data collected from the villages also support this as the reconstructed shapes and sizes of the pottery resemble the utensils used by the present day inhabitants of the study area.



Fig.3 Few Potsherds from exposed road sections and River bed

The Living Megalithic practice:

Megaliths are defined as stone structure, which may contain remains of the dead, burial goods generally constructed of stones. Renfrew (1983) emphasized that the concept of megalithic tombs may have emerged at the beginning of the Neolithic era in response to social changes associated with the introduction of new economies and ideologies. New pressure from agricultural groups across northern France from the east could lead to pressure on land and resources that stimulates the construction of monumental tombs that act as territorial markers. Megaliths are reported to be found in different parts of the world, especially in the European region of the British Isles, western France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and western Mediterranean islands, North Africa, Scandinavia, Myanmar, Bangladesh and India.

The prolific occurrence of megaliths in different parts of Northeast India leads to place this region in archaeological map of the world. It is one of the few places in the world where megaliths have survived as living trend. In North Eastern India, megaliths are found in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, also in few parts of Assam like North Cachar hills, Karbi Anglong, Nagaon, Morigaon and Kamrup district etc. The megalithic tradition of tribal societies in this region has attracted the attention of ethnographers and archaeologists for over a century. This tradition is still practice by the Khasis, Nagas and Karbis in Northeast India.

The pioneering ethnographers Godwin Austen (1872), H. Yule (1842), J.P. Mills (1926) and several others have rendered graphic accounts based on their direct observation of the megalithic rituals of the people. Austen while conducting geological investigations in Assam in the last century made profuse reference to the megalithic stone monuments of Khasis hill tribes. A systematic and detailed study of the megalithic culture of the Khasis with special reference to Mawion village was carried out by Bareh(1981). A Khasi historian Hamelt Bareh, wrote on the history and culture of the khasi people (1967), He had drawn close association of megalith of the Khasi people with their religion.

Ivor Evens (1927), a diffusionist, made a comparative study of the megalithic monuments from Malay Peninsula, with those of Indonesia and Northeast India. He observed close parallels in the monoliths and table stones found in theses three regions. Further he implied that all megalithic practice are associated in one way or another with the cult of the dead all over the world. Ruben (1939) surmised that the custom of constructing megalithic tombs reached India by way of Palestine and Persia in the early Iron Age and one of its branch moved eastwards as far as Chota Nagpur region and the other moved into southern part of India.

According to Clark (1874), the practice of megalithic structures hae been widespread since prehistoric times, but megalithic structures in north-eastern India have not yet been dated. Sharma (1984) stated that the largest concentration of megaliths especially of menhir type in north-eastern India was found in the hills of Khasi and Jaintia in Meghalaya (Bora and Bezbaruah 2018). Elaborate associated rites and rituals are other significant aspects of this Megalithic tradition in North East India. In this context mention may be made about Shadap-Sen (1981) who opined “that the megalithic ritual were at the centre of the whole religious life of the Khasis- Synteng People in earlier times. At all these rites the Khasis express their clan solidarity.” An analysis of the hymns that are sung by the Karbis at the time of erection megalithic shows that in addition to propitiation of the soul of the deceased, there also is an implication of their fertility aspect (Bezbaruah 2012).

Table 3 : Combined Inventory of Megaliths

Megaliths recovered condition	Sites						Total	%
	Sukurberia	%	Tagenpara	%	Borjirang	%		
Erect	32	35.55	3	60	2	100	37	39.10
Totally fallen	49	54.44	1	20	-	-	50	51.63
Partially fallen	9	10	1	20	-	-	10	10.52
	90	100	5	100	2	100	97	100

Three megalithic sites were noticed in course of exploration in Assam –Meghalaya border region in western part of Kamrup district i.e. Sukurberia, Tegenpara and Bor-Jirang (Table 3).The GPS location of the site Sukurberia is 26°00'16.7'' N latitude and 91°33'23.8" E longitude with an elevation 55 amsl. From the site Sukurberia total 90 numbers of megaliths have been reported, out of which 32 are standing erect, 49 are totally fallen and 9 are partially fallen. The communal megalithic site is extended in about 32 sq. km located near road which leads to Jirang reserve forest. All the megaliths are oriented in circular fashion where largest menhir which is 203 cm in height and 140 cm in breadth is standing at the centre. From the ethnographic data it can be implied that this site is a communal site where the Karbis practiced to erect megaliths in the name of their clan members since ancient time.



Fig. 4 Few Megaliths from site Tegenpara

In present day also the Karbi People from neighbouring hills come to the site to perform few annual rituals in the name of their forefathers. Among them only a few families still practice this tradition in this site whenever any family member died. But majority of the population prefer to continue this tradition inside their house boundaries as the communal site is quite far from their residential area. This change of place has facilitated the Karbi villagers to perform the necessary rites and rituals more conveniently and also helps in looking after the megaliths under their own jurisdiction. Though stone erection practice in the name of deceased person in this site gradually decreased, yet the whole area occupies a significant place in the socio-religious life of the Karbi population. They consider the place to be sacred and perform the annual ceremony in order to propitiate their forefathers with rituals and elaborate feast by the villagers. Therefore from the findings it can be inferred that this long-established megalithic site holds a remarkable position in the minds and stands as a symbol of clan solidarity among the Karbis.

Five megaliths are reported from another village named Tegenpara, situated about 7 kms away from Sukurberia. The GPS reading of the site is 26°00'10.0" N and 91°30'19.6" E latitude and longitude respectively with an elevation of 46 amsl. Out of the total reported megaliths, 3 (60%) are found in standing erect position, 1 (20%) is found in totally fallen condition and other one i.e. 20% is found

in partially fallen condition. Another site reported at Bor-Jirang village, where two quite large blocks of stones were erected in the front courtyard of two households in memory of the deceased.

As numbers of megaliths are not very significant and neighbouring population also cannot provide information about its origin, so it is difficult to comment about this. But no one can deny about the fact that these megaliths, especially those of menhir type were quite old bearing untold history after them. In case of structural type, the monoliths reported from the present study are mainly menhir and menhir with stone platform. The tallest menhir is generally placed in the middle position. At Sukurberia menhirs are placed in circular manner while in Tagenpara they are oriented in a straight alignment. Further this reporting has lead to open a direction to explore more in neighbouring areas which will definitely give a more comprehensive clear picture about this tradition in this region.

Concluding Remark

From the present study it can be said that the tribal population living in the Assam –Meghalaya border region provide ample evidences which can be fruitfully utilized to reconstruct the past. Though they are living in modern era yet they follow few of their indigenous practices like traditional barter system in the form of exchange of basket (*hora salua*) in market place; a type of horticulture i.e. shifting cultivation with simple implements; use various types of utensils in their day to day activities, which have close resemblance in respect to shape, size and probable use with the reconstructed potsherd recovered from the study area. Further the reporting of megaliths and the ongoing practice among the Karbis residing in the foothills region provides another dimension to trace archaeological continuity from past to present. In this direction one cannot deny the fact put forward by Roy (1981) that chronologically, the culture under study is modern but economically Neolithic.

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