PREFACE

The present work entitled- The Neolithic Traditions in West Karbi Anglong, Assam- represents the consequent of a comprehensive study conducted in part of west Karbi Anglong, Assam, on the archaeological evidences retrieved from excavation at Bichhikri vis-à-vis on the swidden cultivation with its *modus operandi* and the attended rites and practices of the Hills Karbi. These are synthesized to embody the trajectory of the Neolithic traditions of the area. The area where the research has undertaken is a part of the contemporary Northeast India and situated between the plains and the hills, the points where the central Brahmaputra valley and the northern Meghalaya hilly ranges merged. Such geographical zones have variously been identified as a relative isolation zones in contradistinction to area of attraction (floodplain) and area of isolation (hilly plateau) and endowed with tremendous significance from the points of view of culture contact. The development of socio-economic and socio-cultural pattern in the distinct geographical zones of hills and plains, stand out as two distinct entities, but there are some areas of contact where the two traditions melt or underwent the process of ‘salad bowl’ principles of integration. *Bichhikri* and *Moring Morong* sites represent the perfect archetype of one such centre as reflected via the artefacts retrieved as well as the material aspects of the living culture group.

To understand the relative nature of development of Neolithic tradition in the province in general and west Karbi Anglong in particular, two discrete units of data: the ethnographic and the archaeological, have been taken into consideration with equal emphasis. For the purpose of interpretation of this tradition, Neolithic celts retrieved from household living around *Bichhikri* and pottery artefacts retrieved from excavation have systematically been analyzed. The pottery artefacts with their basic attributes including technical attributes were compared with secondary sources available, i.e., *Daojali Hading, Selbalgre, Ambari* and *Maragdola*. This is done so because development of pottery tradition is believed to have originated with the origin of farming technology. This is a historical process. The basic configuration of any culture can be understood by understanding the code embedded in pottery matrix. In this study pottery has been viewed as a tangible expression of culture which is potent with information in terms of socio-economic, rituals and cultural aspects over and
above the technical aspects involved in it. To attest this fact, the significance of pottery in Karbi society vis-à-vis shifting cultivation has been incorporated.

The present work has been divided into seven chapters in order to distribute adequately the data incorporated in this study and also to facilitate adequate analysis of the same in the following pattern.

First chapter encompasses concept of Neolithic in general and that used in the text followed by the theoretical background of the origin of agriculture together with the theoretical perspective of tradition and also the historical background of research in Northeast India as well as the study area and finishes with the hypothesis, aims and objectives of the present work.

In the second chapter an attempt has been made to give in brief the physical and ecological milieu of the territory by highlighting the massifs and plains deposits as well as the vegetation patterns with the emphasis on the climates in the study area from recent past to the Present and also the mechanism of man influencing their immediate environment.

The third chapter deals with the culture in terms of tangible and intangible perspective. The tangible aspects include specialization in craftsmanship with special emphasis on pottery including textile and wooden crafts and the intangible aspects cover social organization with clan systems and their customary laws. The most significant part of this chapter is the documentation of farming vocabulary of the Karbi vis-à-vis Jaintia’s and Tiwa’s with the literal translation in English. The aim is to highlight the possibility of sharing or borrowing of terms that are related with agriculture among people living in a close physical proximity.

The fourth chapter dwells on the swidden cultivation practices by the hills Karbi and incorporates facts like the modus operandi which includes different stages of operation that start with selection of new plot of land through to harvesting and threshing to paddy conveyance into granary with its accompanying rites and rituals. This is followed by the discussion on the division of labour in which the role of Lad’s association (Jirkedam) is brought to the limelight. Discussion is also made on the beliefs and practices which are part and parcel with the agricultural activity like hachha dance after the harvest. Then conclude with the premise that the tradition under study is a population practice brought down from the past into the present.
The fifth chapter is especially devoted to the process and the result of excavation conducted at *Bichhikri*. It introduces with the process of excavation followed by recording of the stratigraphy which is subsequently explained layer after layer in the order of encounterance and its matrixes were explained with the help of Harris Matrix.

The sixth chapter deals with the archaeological materials which consist of pottery artefacts and the neoliths. Of the analysis of neoliths particular emphasis is given on use-wear traces on the cutting edge and hafting contrivances over and above the overall morphological dimensions in order to determine the possible function of the ground tools. Analysis of the earthenware remains consideration has been made on the parameters like fabric types, construction technique, firing technique, styles, and application of slip so as to have the optimal ideas about the technological, functional, organizational and distributional processes. These pottery artefacts were then compared with the secondary sources available in the region in order to understand the technical and functional relationship so as to reveal cultural interactional or diffusional pattern.

The seventh chapter summarises the whole work and finishes with conclusion by synthesising both the ethnographic and archaeological data which are viewed as complimentary rather than contradictory entities.

From the archaeological perspective Neolithic period or culture has its specific time range as it is commonly known; but economically this state of affairs continues till date in the cultures distributed in the isolated hilly pockets of this territory. Continuance of this type of economic conditions favours the survival of culture retaining Neolithic character in technique and forms. Most of these forms and techniques may easily be observed in the *Bichhikri* pottery. The survival of pottery designs and techniques as well as the Neolithic type of economy may be taken as continua that bridge up the gap between prehistory and history of the territory.

The similarities noted among the earthenware’s pottery within the region, suggests that there was frequent inter-ethnic contact and trade among the communities of the region during the Prehistoric and Early Historic Age. This may be due to a regional trade in earthenwares or a movement of people (e.g., intermarriage) and/or ideas, which resulted in the addition and mixing of pottery styles or a sharing of ideologies/artistic ideas. But it should be kept in mind that stylistic similarities may result not only from exchange, but also from shared elite symbolism and participation.
in the same alliance systems. However, there were also some very unique vessel types at each of these sites, suggesting that the areas were independent polities with their own local industries or local trade in specific wares. For example, the Bichhikri and Dikisir sites had a number of round bottomed pots with carination at the shoulder that resembled the pot called Phule that still used by the Karbi today. It is, however, not known who were the people behind the development of this culture and the resemblance may perhaps be coincidental. But it will not be irrelevant to assert that this local difference may also be a form of ethnic expression, i.e., as a way in which ancient communities maintained their ethnic identity, such as noted among contemporary textile weavers of the region. Such intermixing of cultural elements can also be observed empirically in the Swidden cultivation context. More detailed comparative research should help sort out the reasons for the particular patterns that we see in earthenware styles and distribution in the region. A further research in the region would recalibrate or reconsolidate this hypothesis.

The ability to absorb new technology and strategies relates to the need for continues adaptation to a rigorous environment. It is consistent with traditional practice for the Karbi to incorporate the artefacts and materials of other cultures into their own systems. What is traditional about the Karbi is their ability to adapt to the different environments. In the past, the main focus of adaptation was to the natural elements. Now the major challenges involves the acceptance of modern ideas, institutions and artefacts while still maintaining their way of life of the Land.

At the end it may well be described the Karbi Culture with its land and forest based economy as a deep, flowing river. Starting from its own headwaters far back beyond human memory, it has flowed down through the ages, carrying with it those values that provide physical and spiritual nourishment and guidance for its people. Then, quite recently, the river encounters another river, much larger, much stronger, that sweeps in from the side. It, too, is a culture with its own very different value systems. There is a sudden violent turbulence as the two waters clash together, each one trying to retain its own identity. At first the new river completely dominates the smaller river. But gradually, over a period of time, the smaller river fights back. Finally, many miles downstream, after a long period of turbulence, the chaos begins to subside, and waters and value systems mix together and the two rivers become one river.