CHAPTER-VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The pan-plain of West Khasi Hills and East Garo Hills of Meghalaya while uninterruptedly running along the length from east to west touches a couple of districts (Kamrup and Goalpara) of Assam and before the pan plain ends its journey transversely, it merges with Brahmaputra valley on its north. The meeting points between the two are marked by a series of hillocks and undulated plains, which merely on the geo-political ground, is termed as Southern Foothills of Assam- the area that is the focal point of our study.

The highest concentration of prehistoric sites in Northeast India is found at the upper reaches of Meghalaya. On the basis of archaeological evidences, these sites can broadly be divided into post Pleistocene Mesolithic (Hoabinhian) and Neolithic. The earlier is marked by Cobble-flaked-Tool tradition and Stone-Block-Tool tradition (Ashraf, 2010), while the latter is marked by aceramic and ceramic neoliths. The Southern Foothills of Assam, mainly their western parts have yielded a number of ground stone artifacts along with coarse and ill-fired handmade pottery (Chapter-4 and 5). Cord impressed pottery, which was hitherto considered as the only criterion to establish the ceramic Neolithic of Assam and that too, in the light of Southeast Asia has now been swap by an indigenous handmade pottery named as Coarse Brown Ware. This pottery type is an integral part of the Bambooti Neolithic assemblage. Sites under the study area are generally located on the bank of a perennial stream and more often on hill slopes having a gradient of not more than 6º to7º. The above assertion is further confirmed by the newly discovered site at Bambooti near Tengasoth of Dudhnoi subdivision of district Goalpara (Locality-1). Material support from Bambooti excavations includes high concentration of celts and abraders clustered with coarse, ill fired, plain hand made pottery. The assemblage together with the presence of a Kitchen Midden in the site itself suggests a sedentary way of life based on food producing economy along with other food acquiring devices.

A comparative study of the archaeological findings, particularly the stone artifacts recovered from the foothills region of Southern Assam exhibit more or less a common pattern; but at the same time some pottery type and studded-celt exhibits distinctiveness in typo-technological aspects and these traditions of prehistoric origin make its way into the contemporary period. The stone artifacts are dominated by the celts in this region; the raw materials of which are mostly, slate, sand stone and rhyolite.
Tapered thick butt and convex working edge having a plano-plane contour with faceted lateral sides, made of varied raw materials can be recognized as a conventional pattern for the ground tools in the foothills of Assam (Chapter 5). On the other hand, the ground tools of highland counterpart (Meghalaya: Rongram in particular) exhibits the same conventional pattern with convex working edge but unlike the foothills belt here the contour is bi-convex and the tools are invariably made of dolerite. It is to be noted that certain differences in the morphological aspects of the tools between foothills and highlands are due to the variations in local ecological setting and in basic subsistence strategy. In other words, foothill’s subsistence was based on food producing followed by gathering economy while in the highland it was just reverse, i.e. gathering was followed by food producing economy. In this context, it should also be pointed out that contrary to the differences in raw materials and overall typo-technological variations in certain tool types, the shouldered celts in particular have shown a sort of integration between the highland and foothills in respect of morphological characters. This signifies some sort of continuity of common cultural traditions that arose out of unadventurous isolated ethnographic setting since time immemorial. Subsequently, in spite of varied ecological setting, some common traditions exist in both foothills and its highland counterpart. On the other hand, the functional variation of the stone artifacts between the highland and the foothills can be identified through the cultural environment that surrounds their mode of occurrence. The Bambooti excavations shed light on this regard. It helps us to establish the multiple functions of the stone artifacts especially in respect of shouldered celts. It is a common functional pattern of some of the shouldered celts that have been termed as the “studded celts” (Chapter-4) which is absent in the neighbouring highland. The Kitchen Midden at Bambooti itself is an evidence of the functional variations of these celts. Comparatively, similar celts, which were earlier recognised as agricultural tools, now can also be placed in a different category under the household implements used in various day-to-day activities. Large elongated triangular and quadrangular adzes (Plate: 4.6 i) made of limestone are examples of innovation on traditional tool types to cope with the foothills’ ecosystem for survival. The shape and size of these implements together with their association with pottery indicates the practice of hoe cultivation at the water soaked creeks lying in between the hillocks (Plate1.1). Interestingly, this simple but effective agricultural practice is still discernible in the foothills belt; but the only difference is that at present, hoe-blades are made of iron. The absence of pottery in the highland prehistoric sites may indicate an earlier phase of the same edge ground tool tradition of Neolithic period. While the presence of pottery together with stone artifacts (edge ground celts) points towards a later technologically developed stage of Neolithic period with the strong cultural influence of the highland counterpart. Platters, culinary bowl, shallow bowl, deep bowl, storage jar, pot and pitcher in the habitation site at Bambooti are typologically comparable to the pottery types used by the present neighbouring inhabitants of Bambooti. Another amazing finding regarding the pottery in the Locality-1, 2 and 3 of the foothills areas is the absence of cord marked pottery; instead, coarse, unslipped, ill fired hand made
pottery, occasionally designed with incised lines especially on the rim part, is a common sight. Thus the archaeological evidences of the southern foothills of Assam dispel the earlier notion. The earlier notion (Sharma, 1979, 1984-85:22, Rao, 1977: 204, Hazarika, 2006:25-44) was based on the presumption of the association of cord marked pottery with shouldered celts and quadrangular adzes as the characteristic feature of this zone. In fact, in the present study, the undecorated plain coarse ware has been found to be the hallmark of the Neolithic tradition instead of cord marked pottery in the foothills. However, the presence of only two pieces of cord marked body sherds in Bambooti indicates its existence and establishes the technical know how of making cord impressed pottery. However, this was not a popular type in the region. It is to be noted that the spouted vessel encountered in archaeological context in the Southern foothills, including the post Neolithic site at Marakdola1 (Rao, 1977), and its common use among the present day Karbis and Rabhas of Assam as an important ritualistic article, clearly signifies the continuity of an age old tradition.

The OSL dating of the pottery from Bambooti has established the age of the Stone of Age culture in the foothills of southern Assam at least up to 2700±0.05 years or approximately 686 BC or 2700 B.P. The time period refers to the Later Vedic period. It has been confirmed that the Neolithic tradition was continuing in Northeastern region during the contemporary Iron Age cultural period operating in the other parts of the country. Ashraf (1990) has established the existence of ferrolithic2 stage in Northeast India. It is to be noted that Spirit Cave includes polished stone tools and cord-marked pottery at 6800 B.C. (Solheim, 1970). The assemblage of later phase including quadrangular, partly polished adzes, polished slate tools, cord-marked and incised pottery is supported by the similar assemblage from Formosa, in an undisturbed level with a Carbon-14 date of around 2500 B.C. (Chang 1966: 141-142; 1969; Solheim 1969: 130-131). Similar assemblage from the southern foothills implies strong affinities of the Stone Age cultures of this region with Southeast and East Asia and that continued till the early historical age. But if we consider the chronological space in the occurrence of comparable cultural materials in the regions mentioned above then it would be apparent that in Southeast Asia and East Asia it was operating around 2500 BC while in South Asia (Northeast India) it was around 686 BC. Thus merely citing affinities between the two without considering the chronological aspects may lead us to a blind alley. So a gap of around 1800 years itself speaks a lot and that must be addressed before we arrive at any conclusion. Within this big gap of two, cultural similarity might

1 Marakdola Rao (1977) and Maragdola are synonymous. The correct spelling of the name of the place is Maragdola (‘Marag= exited elephant bull, dola=den/place i.e. masked elephant’s den’ in Karbi dialect)

2 Ferrolithic is a cultural stage where Neolithic intrudes into the iron using stage (Ashraf, 1990:37-40).
have taken place independently without interfering with each other under the demand of universal uniformitism, which acted upon strongly allied natural conditions or as an act of culture contact. Development of the latter stage can be assessed only after working out the degree of continuity and variation of the elements at the source. The gross disparity in the time-plan between them points towards parallel development without having any type of direct contact. According to Rao (1977: 204) the Neolithic stone industry and the typical ceramic technology characterized by cord-marked or carved paddle pottery of North-eastern India have no close parallels in the rest of the country rather they exhibit close similarity with Southeast Asian cultures of the Neolithic and Bronze Age. He opined that Sarutaru and the post-Neolithic culture of Marakdola, relating to their essential elements of shouldered celt and cord-marked pottery, can be compared with the similar cultures of Southeast Asia, such as the Non-Nok Tha of Thailand (Higham 1972), the Lungshanoid of China (Clark 1969), the Sham Wan of Hong Kong (Joukowsky 1973), and other cultures of the Philippines (Solheim 1970), Taiwan (Chang 1970), and Burma (Movius 1943). The formation of these similar characteristics was due to population movement, culture contact and culture convergence. This stands as a concrete material evidence of the legends and folk beliefs of ethnic communities inhabiting the southern foothills regarding their migration from Tibet in the remote past. On the basis of legends and folklore, the Khasis, a linguistic group, had entered this region from Burma through the Patkoi range (Gurdon, 1975) during the prehistoric period. This westward movement of people seems to have started in Neolithic times, in contrast to the "widespread diffusion of ideas and techniques; or perhaps, the actual movement of people eastwards out of India in the late Stone Age period" (Glover, 1973). The continuity or survival of the Stone Age technology, however with some variations, comes from the material evidence such as the peculiar shaped hoe (Mo-khiu) of the Khasis - the proto-type of the single shoulder- headed celt found in Malay Peninsula and Chotanagpur (Gurdon, 1975). Similarly the iron blade of the Garo Hoe (Gitchi Plate: 3.2 g) is a replica of a triangular celt found in the Garo Hills as well as foothills of southern Assam.

The southern foothills region of Assam is chiefly dominated by the Tibeto-Burman linguistic communities and thinly populated by the Austro-Asiatic linguistic community (Chapter-3). Among them two tribes predominate namely, the Garo and the Khasis in Meghalaya. Consequently, many cultural traits are found in common and shared by all the ethnic groups living in the foothills of Assam-Meghalaya. So far as the present material cultures of these people are concerned, bamboo articles are dominating (Chapter-3). The earthenware on the other hand, also played a major role in their socio-religious life. Use of bamboo tubes for cooking is reported from the second level of Spirit cave- a Hoabinhian site of Thailand (Gorman, 1971). Later, it has played a dominating role in their material culture as one of the prime raw materials. Frequent use of bamboo tube for cooking and storing is still a common practice among all the foothills tribes of Assam (Chapter-3). Another substitute of pottery present among the
The use of gourd utensil, which suggests an age-old practice of horticultural activity of the people in concern. The process of domestication of bottle gourd and other related vegetable species were already completed during Hoabinhian period (Gorman, 1971:316). So the domestication of those plants and their use as pots provided a counterpart of pottery during Neolithic period too (Roy, 2004:149). It is to be noted here that the use of these items is so much intertwined with the socio-cultural and religious life of the people that no other metallic utensil can serve the purpose of these natural objects even at present. The strong emotional attachment with these articles exhibits a significant degree of continuity of this tradition that originates in the Neolithic and perhaps beyond. At the same time it can be used as an indicator to assess the techno-economic adaptation and development in relation to the interrelationship based on nature and culture. This is apparent in Neolithic and the existing ethnographic cultures in different parts of Northeast India and Southeast Asia (Roy, 1977:129-138).

The substitute raw material of the pottery during prehistoric period and its continuity indicates a similar favourable climatic condition for growing up of the same vegetation pattern for a long period of time. The temperature, rainfall and humidity of last 50 to 100 years (Chapter-2) also indicate the same favourable climatic condition for such kind of vegetation pattern which is not different from the present vegetation pattern of this region. Meghalaya, the highland counterpart of southern Assam also bears more or less common climatic features with the southern foothills of Assam even in micro level, this is because of the fact that geologically southern foothill of Assam is an extension of Shillong plateau. However, since both these two regions are located in two different ecological setting within a common geographic unit, the process of the utilization of the nature in both the ecological zones are to some extent different. That is why the subsistence strategy of the inhabitants of these two regions varies at primary level in accordance with the given situation. Although the cultural adaptation of an ethnic group is mostly influenced by the ecological factors, but the magnitude of the sentiments of the people attached to the traditional mode of inheritances over material elements cannot be ignored. In this regard, the best example is the Rabhas who, besides adopting wet cultivations after coming down to the foothills, never abandoned the old practice and loved to carry out jhum cultivation even in scarcity of cultivable land for this shifting mode of dry cultivation. Some other tribes, like Tiwas, Karbis, Garos who settled down in the foothills long ago have the same propensity like that of the Rabhas. Based on archaeological evidences, V.Gordon Childe and K.C. Chang are of the opinion that nomads of Danube valley and the farmers of Formosa practised shifting cultivation during Neolithic period (c.f.Devi 2012:389). The antiquity of the method of shifting cultivation has been traced back to 1300 B.C. to 3000 B.C. (FAO, 1957). The practice of shifting cultivation by the foothill dwellers, therefore, could be attributed to the continuity of the prehistoric tradition. SolheimII (1970) believes the domestication of dogs and fowl took place during the late Hoabinhian. The material cultures related
with subsistence strategies and household activities are almost similar in their shape, size, function, and manipulation and even in selecting raw material (Chapter 4). The common pattern of the material culture has given a separate identity from the highland dwellers. The archaeological evidences also support this assumption because the stone artifacts reported from this region exhibit a different pattern from the stone artifacts of the neighbouring highland counterpart. It substantiates that the foothill dwellers of southern Assam has been continuing a separate identity since the prehistoric past. The present intangible evidences among these people support the same. Their socio-religious practices and food habits have indicated the continuity of some prehistoric fundamentals with some variations. The present animistic beliefs and practices, megalithic practices, etc have been carrying these elements (Chapter-3). Examples may also be drawn from the tradition of worshiping of stone, river, hills, rain, etc. The formal procedures of worshiping these objects are quite archaic in nature and these are still in vogue among all the ethnic communities of the foothills. Erection of huge stones as that of a menhir by the Karbis, expertise in acquiring and processing of innumerable forest products for consumption and other purposes have had their footing in the prehistoric past. Procuring and consuming of various types of insects, wild roots, tubers, leaves, tradition of making rice cakes in earthen salver (Chāru)/shallow bowl (Mōla)/culinary bowl and bamboo tubes, fishing by hand among the Tiwas, revitalizing traditional exchange system once in a year through Junbeel Mela (highly charged ceremonial swap fair) by the plain and hill Tiwas, Karbis, and Khasis are worth mentioning. Solheim II (1970) stated that the plant remains of piper, areca, curcumas, Chinese water chestnut, almond, bean, pea and butternut have been reported from Spirit cave which indicate that somewhere in this general area domesticated and tended plants were being grown for use as food and other purposes from 11,960B.P. Here we can quote SolheimII’s(1970) another comment regarding the origin of some vegetables and nuts “.... Chang has translated a paper by Hui-lin Li listing cultivated plants originating in North China, South China, Southern Asia (Burma, Thailand, Indochina) and Southern Islands (Malay Peninsula, and the Malay Archipelago) (Chang 1970). When one combines those plants listed from what we consider as Southeast Asia (south of the Tsinling Mountains) the list is awesome. Chang adds to this list a number of bamboos, broad beans (Vicia faba), and the peanut. The latter two have been found in Lungshanoid sites, and of course a Vida was also reported from Spirit Cave. Chang remarks that “the bottle gourd (Lagenaria vulgaris) figures prominently in the creation myths throughout Southeast Asia and must have been in use in the region since antiquity (Chang 1970)”. Lagenaria was also recovered from Spirit Cave” (SolheimII, 1970:156). The production and consumption of these plants, fruit, nuts and vegetables are a common practice and food habit among the foothills dwellers of southern Assam since time immemorial. However, bottle gourd is produced not for consumption but for using it as serving spoon, primarily in religious events.
The following observation can fairly be made on the basis of examples drawn from half a dozen of ethnic communities brought under this study. The origin of traditions are always obscure and its extensions, continuations, variations, and organization through the ages is a natural decaying process hypersensitive to two basic factors, (i) It spouts naturally out of necessity to propel the way of life at rhythm--thus it is a rhythmic cultural module which keep the society on track and to generate solace by performing certain act which may or may not have any pragmatic value, but bolstering strong psychosomatic satisfaction that derived out of executions of the specified task. Thus, a tradition turns into a habit unnoticed and move animatedly towards the formation of both tangible and intangible heritage. (ii) Traditions continue to exist through the passage of time until it remains undisturbed, but starts fading at varied pace as and when it encounters assimilation and integration through relocation, incursion, and swing of socio-ecological equilibrium in relation to a particular population group. The last one is quite apparent in this region with the opening up of Forest Ranges by the British in the seventeenth century.

The following characteristic features of the Stone Age culture of southern foothills of Assam could be discerned through observations and interpretations.

1. The Stone Age culture of the Southern Foothills of Assam is represented by ground celt in association with coarse, ill fired, plain ware without having any surface treatment but occasionally designed with incised lines.

2. Thick and tapered distal end with convex working edge having a plano-plane contour with faceted lateral sides recognized as a conventional pattern for the ground tools in the foothills of Assam. Varied locally available rock-types were used as raw material in making their tools.

3. The predominant stone tool type is shouldered celt followed by adze and chisel. Another dominating type is abrader. The blades, borer, scrapers, chopping axe etc are some other tool types that occur in less quantity.

4. The dominant rock types used in the foothills are slate followed by sand stone, rhyolite and limestone.

5. Celts, mainly the shouldered one with a knob or protuberance at the distal end is recognised as chief household implement used elaborately in their day-to-day domestic works. The large quantity of abraders encountered as associated finds in the Kitchen Midden signifies the reuse of the celts after re-sharpening. The abraders, which were basically used for sharpening, indicate prolonged use of
the celts. Frequent re-sharpening definitely reduced the original size of the celts. The method of manoeuvring of these artifacts, which is categorized, as studded celt is difficult to ascertain with the present state of knowledge, even the ethnographic parallel is silent in this regard. Nonetheless, the stud or the knob at the distal end suggests that a fixing device was in use while operating. It could be either a jerk cutting tool manipulated with the help of a shaft or a contact cutting tool by piercing the knob on a wooden or bamboo platform while operating. Another most likely probability is that it was nothing but a wrist operating tool and the Knob’s rounded outline provides gripping comfort and safety while operating the implement.

6. Unlike upper reaches, the foothills assemblages are devoid of two distinct Southeast Asian characters, (i) The Hoabinhian element and (ii) cord impressed pottery. Presence of corded potsherds at a negligible quantity indicates its unpopularity in the region, even though they had the technical know-how.

7. Techno-morphometric analysis of the celts provide scope to think that the Foothills celts may have had its footing in the upper reaches of Meghalaya which in turn was influenced by the Hoabinhian traditions of Southeast Asia.

8. Material evidences support a forest cum agricultural based sedentary mode of livelihood at the foothills; coupled with food collection and fishing. Hunting was not primary economy as like that of the upper reaches of Garo Hills. Interestingly, to a great extent same mode of livelihood still continues among the traditional inhabitants of the Foothills of Assam.

9. The time range of 3690±0.05 to 2700±0.05 years B.P can be assigned to prehistoric traditions of the foothills of Assam. The date has been obtained through OSL dating on excavated potsherd from Bambooti.

The following are some of the cultural heritage of the ethnic communities of Southern Foothills of Assam, which had their roots in the prehistoric past.

1. The use of handmade, plain coarse Brown ware.

2. Extensive application of bamboo tubes and bottle gourd for various domestic uses.
3. Prehistoric mode of agriculture in the form of dry and wet rice cultivation by using digging stick and hoe respectively are still on use in the Foothills belt.

4. The traditional horticulture includes peanut, broad bean, pepper, areca, cucumis, and butternut, etc.

5. Manufacturing of bark cloth.

6. Practice of Megalithic traditions in the form of erection of menhir and cist is still in vogue among certain tribes.

7. Traditions of preparing verities of rice cake, especially in bamboo tube and earthen utensil is an age-old process among the aboriginals of Assam in general and Foothills in particular.

8. Till the introduction of Vaisnavism and Christianity, all the ethnic groups have had strong faith on animistic beliefs.

9. Remnant of barter system can still be seen among the tribes living in the hills and the foothills.

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