CHAPTER 2
THE NEOLITHIC AND THE NORTH EAST CONTEXT

Meaning and Concepts

The conventional term 'Neolithic' is defined in archaeological literature as a 'cultural label'. The Neolithic period marked a significant shift in the mode of human-cultural developments which, to a large extent, distinguished itself from the other developments that took place throughout the entire Stone Age period preceding it. The period can also be synonymously defined in terms of the evolution of an entirely new mode of human survival-strategy resulting in the birth of a new concept in prehistoric studies known as the 'Neolithic culture'. The term 'Neolithic', is an evolutionary scheme, a form of economy, a set of social relations and on the whole a cultural phenomenon. The Neolithic cultural phase had come to occupy a very significant place in history of human cultural evolution for two basic reasons; firstly, it stood as a watershed between the stone-age culture and the age of metal, and secondly, it has been used as the decisive measuring index which consciously or unconsciously enabled us to measure the rate of human technological progress spanning throughout the entire Stone Age period.

1 B. Narasimhaiah, *Neolithic and Megalithic Cultures in Tamil Nadu* in the Foreword by B.K. Thapar, (Delhi 1980).

Archaeologists, generally use the term ‘Neolithic’ to imply a purely technological rather than an economic phenomenon. Thus, the use of ground and polished tools, pottery and agriculture came to be seen as inextricably linked. Hence, the Neolithic is basically understood as a sub-division of the Stone Age and the stone tools associated with the period, unlike those of the earlier phases, are grounded and polished\(^1\).

In recent years, there has been a shift in perception of Neolithic and greater emphasis being placed on socio-economic change that took place in the evolution of human culture and has been associated with the beginning of sedentary life, and domestication of plants and animals\(^2\). Thus, a definition which was conceived purely from a technological basis is too rudimentary to explain the vast dimension of cultural changes that took place during the Neolithic period. For generations, the term Neolithic has been used as a means of describing a variety of different phenomena: tools, practices, animals, monuments or people. There is a strong desire among archaeologist to come up with a clearer definition as to what actually constitute a Neolithic society, and how it can be represented as a coherent entity determined by a single historical or evolutionary process. In the light of such argument, the following definition spelled out a clear illustration about the Neolithic;


"The shift in the mode of subsistence to agro-pastoral farming remains the only process which is relatively closely defined, geographically widespread and sufficiently archeologically detectable to act as signature of the Neolithic".1

The pace of development which took place during the Neolithic was revolutionary to human mode of cultural-material progress2. The term ‘Neolithic Revolution’ received additional meaning from the post-processualist, who has defined the Neolithic as the period when people were being tamed and domesticated, not only mechanically, but metaphorically3. But the greatest change witnessed during the Neolithic period was that human settlement and domestication of animals have been identified through the conceptual separation of the house from the untamed world4. The building of stable houses, the aggregation and even delimitation of settlement, the more elaborate and cultural treatment of the dead, is a clear and secure separation of the domestic from of the wild5.

1 M. Zvelebil, "The Agricultural frontier and the transition to farming in the Circum-Baltic region". In D.Harris (ed) The Origins and the spread of agriculture and pastoralism in Eurasia. (London University, 1996), pp. 323-325
Chronology

The transition to agriculture—and to settled village life—occurred at different times in various parts of the world. The Neolithic period made its first appearance at the end of the Pleistocene period where the first evidence of human exploitation of the wild precursors of domesticated sheep, goat and cattle were reported from the sites of the Indo-Iranian, notably from the caves in the valleys of the Hindu kush (site of Aq Kupruk) dating to the period of 7000-10,000 years ago.\(^1\)

Plant domestication on the other hand, emerged from foraging economies in many parts of the world during the early Holocene period (12000-10000 years ago). In south western and south eastern Asia, Mesoamerica and South America, seed producing and starchy root plant were brought under human care and propagation by 10000 to 8000 years ago. But because the archaeological records of vegetables and fruits were impoverished by preservation problems, the chronology and location of domestication for some of our modern food is still unknown.\(^2\)

Within the Indian subcontinent, the Neolithic transition did not occur simultaneously across the entire region; rather, Neolithic ‘pockets’ developed at different point of time in certain key areas within the subcontinent.\(^3\) On the basis

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of the stray carbon dating from the aceramic stratum of the site of Aq Kupruk-II in northern Afghanistan, the Neolithic period in the sub continent goes back to 10000 BC. In the Indian mainland, Neolithic culture was recognized by around 7000-5000 B.C. where traces of sedentary settlement, was established in the Indus basin, as evident from the site of Mehrgarh (Period I). Neolithic cultures did not appear in other region of the subcontinent before 4000 B.C. In northern India, the earliest signs of Neolithic appeared at around 2800-2500 B.C. on the basis the aceramic culture from the site of Burzahom in the Kashmir valley. The carbon dating of Kodekal and Utnur reveal an entirely indigenous Neolithic culture which appeared in the South India around 3000 B.C. and lasted till about 2100 B.C. In the north east India (which will be dealt separately in the next paragraph), survey-explorations and few excavation, have brought of Neolithic culture across the region.

For a long time, the Neolithic cultures of North East India have been associated with those of South West China and South East Asia. This is due to fact that much of the Neolithic activities of North East India bear the Neolithic trademarks of South East Asia and South West China. From the evidence of mainland sites of South East Asia, Chester Gorman made a general review showing that the initial date of the Hoabinhian occupation might be placed at 13000-14000 B.P. and the

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period between 12000-2000 B.C. witnessed a shift in subsistence base from hunting, gathering to cereal agriculture\(^1\).

South East Asia was earlier thought to be the cultural backwater with little innovation until the Chinese and Indian influence became instrumental in the development of the Funan and Khmer states in the historic period\(^2\). As far as the Neolithic revolution in South East Asia is concerned, the reports from the Spirit caves in North East Thailand have established through excavations, the stratigraphic context of the Neolithic level. The excavation has revealed five superimposed natural and cultural layers with the latest layer was dated to 6000 B.C. Potteries decorated with cord impression and grounded Neolithic stone implements like polished adzes and bifacial knives began to make their appearance from about 7000 B.C, suggesting a strong economic change. Evidence from this site clearly suggest that food plants as well as other botanical remains like gourds, nuts, pepper, and broad beans were found to have been cultivated and not collected. The evidences from Thailand are of great importance, as they have helped to reveal that horticultural activity in South East Asia had started very early\(^3\). The earliest evidence of cultivated rice (Oryza \textit{sativa}) in South East Asia was also reported from the Spirit cave and the C\(^{14}\) dates of rice sample placed the

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\(^1\) Chestor Gorman, “The Hoabinhian and After: Subsistence pattern in Southeast Asia during the late Pleistocene and Early Recent Times”, \textit{World Archeology} Vol.2 No.3,(1971), p. 320


date of the site to 6600 B.C. and 5500 B.C. 1. From North East India, the C-14
dates from the site of Khas-Kalanpur which also yielded microlithic tools along
with Neolithic implements has been dated to 1500 B.C. 2

History of Neolithic Studies in North East India

The earliest reported archaeological investigation in the North Eastern parts of
India that proved the existence of prehistoric remains in the region goes way back
to year 18673. The region is considered to be archaeologically as terra incognita in
spite of its potential as the area for the domestication of variety of food vegetation.
When A.H. Dani4 used the term ‘Neolithic’ for the stone implements collected
from Northeast India that are housed at the Pitts Rivers Museum, Oxford, it was
not readily accepted by earlier scholar(s), since no potteries were reported in
association with stone tools5. It was only when pottery was found in association
with the ground and pecked tools, that use of the term became justified6. It is
however not a misnomer to associate the term ‘Neolithic’ for the Northeastern
stone implements, since potteries cannot be the only measuring index for the

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2 T. C. Sharma, "Prehistoric Situation in North-East India, Jai Prakash Singh & Gautam Sengupta (eds)
Archaeology of North-Eastern India, (New Delhi 1991), pp. 52.
3 Sir John Lubbock report about a blue jadeite celt which he acquired from a Namsang Naga. In “The Stone
5 F. R. Allchin was one scholar who did not accept the use of this term in the context of Assam (meaning
6 Ibid.
presence of Neolithic culture in the region. Ethnographic studies clearly reveal that bamboo and other vegetative products are extensively used by the people of the region for storing and even cooking purposes, to the extent that, these material could have easily been supplements to potteries, at least during the early phase of the Neolithic cultural stage in the region.

Following John Lubbock’s report, there were sporadic finds of smooth stone tools from different parts of the north-eastern region by E.H Steel¹, Barron² and Godwin-Austin³. H.C. Dasgupta was the first among the local investigators who made a report about the discovery of two shouldered tools from Assam⁴. The first systematic classification of tools from North East India was attempted by Coggin Brown⁵ in 1917. J.H. Hutton⁶ also made a systematic study on the collection from the Naga Hills. He made a classification of three main types of tools from the region and categorised them as; Triangular, Rectangular and Shouldered. Hutton even attempted to correlate the affinity of the Triangular type with those types that were found in Peninsular India and the Shouldered types with those discovered in

Burma and beyond. Although, his work lacks technological details, his effort is not without any significance. In 1929, J.P.Mills\(^1\) and J.H.Hutton made sketches of six Neolithic tools (three of them shouldered tools) and developed a theory that the shouldered varieties of stone tools derived their origin from metal types which they encountered on their visit to the Naga hills or the small Khasi hoes which were used for cultivation of sweet potatoes. E.C Worman\(^2\) paid special attention to the Neolithic condition of Assam with a view to substantiate his theory of the eastern Asiatic origin of the Neolithic Celt.

In 1949-1959, a typological study was made on 132 Neolithic tools from the eastern and northeastern parts of Assam and Garo hills (64 tools came were collected from the surface of Rongram area in Garo hills)\(^3\). The author(s) found that the tools from the Kamrup collection are made of slaty shale and compact clay material while those from Garo hills are made of dolerite, quartzite and fine grain granite. They have even speculated that celts made from softer material like clay and slate are not suitable for use and may have ritual origin\(^4\).

On the basis of the materials housed at the Pitt Rivers Museum, A.H.Dani\(^5\) claimed that the Neolithic pattern of Assam can be studied on a regional basis. The

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\(^4\) Ibid.
author claimed that the technique of tool manufacturing is common throughout the region with only a slight variation in features. The regional identity is however clearly distinguishable by the raw materials used for making tools. On the basis of typology, Dani, classified the tools into seven classes (1) Type A-Facetted Tool (2) Type B-Rounded-Butt Axe (3) Type C-Axe with Broad cutting edge (4) Type D-Splayed Axe (5) Type E-Shouldered Tool (6) Type F&G-Tanged Axe and Wedge-Blades and (7) Type H-Grooved Hammer-Stones. He further argued that the square cut forms, recovered from the region was obtained using a wire cutting method (he meant metal wire) and postulated that they are the stones copies of metal prototypes\(^1\). This idea was however refuted by T.C Sharma on the ground that the wire-saw implies a much higher level culture than what the tools reflect. Instead, the latter, suggested that a sliver of bamboo with sand as an abrasive material, was enough to produce the tang of the rectilinear shouldered axes\(^2\).

The first regular exploration and excavation in the region was conducted by M.C. Goswami and T.C Sharma and a team from the University of Guwahati at the site of Daojali Hading\(^3\) in North Cachar Hills, during two seasons of systematic excavation between 1961 and 1963. According to the excavators, the site yielded a four cultural sequence described as 1.Hoabinhian 2.Early Neolithic

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\(^{2}\) Ibid.,p.225.

3. Late Neolithic and 4. Aneolithic. The Neolithic deposit consisted of corded ware pottery, shouldered celts, miniature quadrangular rounded celts of the Belan type, splayed axes and chisels. A total number of 212 numbers of stone implements (65 from excavations, 60 from road cuttings and 77 from the surface of the site) and over 600 sherds were collected from the site. The stone implements were mostly made of shale and sandstone. According to H.D. Sankalia, the most important contribution of T.C. Sharma was ‘the systematic classification of the entire Assamese collection taking into consideration the sub-marginal features, and the part played by the raw materials. On technological grounds, the Neolithic of Assam included three large groups of stone tools 1. Edge Ground stone implements 2. Pecked and edge ground stone implements and 3. Fully ground implements. He also pointed out the affinity of the Assamese with the Peninsular on one hand and the South-east Asian on the other. Although no radiometric date has been assigned to the cultural materials from Daojali Hading, the excavator(s) tentatively dated the Neolithic phase of the site to 5000-2000 B.C.

T.C. Sharma also attempted a systematic classification of the Neolithic potteries of Assam and divided the pottery collection recovered from the site of

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3. Ibid, p.285


Other excavations in the region was conducted by S.N. Rao between 1971-74 at the two sites of Sarataru and Marakdola situated in the area bordering the Khasi hills on the south and Kamrup District on the North. From a 33cm thick single cultural deposit, the Neolithic site of Sarutaru revealed evidences of ground stone tools made of slate of dark grey colour and sandstone of cream to buff colour. The tools were classified as shouldered and round-butted. Hand-made potteries of brown and grey varieties with patterns such as (a) simple cord impressions (b) twisted cord impressions (c) herringbone patterns and (d) zig-zag patterns were found by the excavator. From the post-Neolithic site of Marakdola, the excavator collected archaeological materials in three layers measuring to a maximum depth of 60 cm. The cultural materials from this site included wheel made pottery, a shouldered celt and terracotta objects. Layer 3 of the site has been dated by C-14 dating to 658+93 years B.P. that is 1292 A.D.

The North Eastern Neolithic; its Origin, Divergence and Cultural Affinity

E.C. Worman believed that the smooth stone celts of the ‘Neolithic’ appear to have been derived from the eastwards, as the eastern part of India fairly belonged to the South and East Asiatic area throughout which the evolution of the post-pleistocene prehistoric cultures were more or less similar\(^1\). The Neolithic evidences that have been reported from the North eastern region of India so far, are generally linked with those of China and South East Asia and not with the Indian sub-continent. The shouldered celts and the cord- impression wares which are typical to the Neolithic culture of the region probably originated from the Lungshoinoid farming culture of China which was developed prior to the Shang period in the beginning of the 2\(^{nd}\) millennium B.C. and from where it was believed to have spread gradually into South China, South East Asia and beyond\(^2\). But against the generally accepted view, T.C. Sharma supported the view of Colani that the shouldered axes were not derived from the Shang dynasty of North China, but have more affinity with the Hoabinhian culture whose proto-type are the naturally occurring pebble\(^3\).

\(^3\) H.D. Sankalaia, *Op., cit* pp.298.
The shouldered celts and the faceted ground stone axe are the characteristic tools of the Eastern Indian Neolithic which also include the cord-marked grey ware pottery. These artefacts are widely distributed across Bihar, Orrisa, Bengal and Assam. According to Dani, the shouldered tool type came to Assam through Cachar hills zone from Burma. In the interior it degenerated into irregular variety as in the Khasi hills, Brahmaputra valley and Garo hills zone, and this irregularity suggested that they are the rough copies of the original specimens\(^1\). The source of this technology is from Sichuan in south China, where the fully developed shouldered axe and cord-marked ware (found in pre-Neolithic contexts) had already appeared right from the Mesolithic phase\(^2\). H.D. Sankalia believed that the Neolithic of North East India drew their inspiration from Southwest China and Indo-China and the major role was played by the upper Yangtze valley of Szechwan and Yunnan in developing the Neolithic of the region. He further showed that the ‘pecked’ and ‘edged’ ground axes and jadeite axes of Naga Hills were introduced into the region from China\(^3\).

While tracing the origin of the Eastern Indian Neolithic, it is valuable to bring in the Linguistic hypothesis put forth by George Van Driem;

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The manufacturing techniques characteristics of the Indian Eastern Neolithic were introduced into Eastern India by the Western Tibeto-Burmans speakers who are technologically more superior than, the presumably Austro-Asiatic speakers whom they met with and with whom they mingled in the process of migration. These Neolithic technologies were adopted by the Austro-Asiatics who came to master the technique, albeit imperfectly. In fact the Austro-Asiatics were held responsible for the spread of Eastern Indian Neolithic technologies in the region as far south west as Orrisa beyond the areas colonised by the ancient western Tibeto-Burmans.

The axe with the broad cutting edge found in the Indian Eastern Neolithic presents technologies which the Austro-Asiatic population already possessed before the advent of the Western Tibeto-Burmans for unlike most of the Eastern Indian Neolithic assemblages, these implements have many parallels in other parts of India (see Map No.1. Hypothetical Map, courtesy: Geroge Van Driem) 1.

The Neolithic artefacts from the Eastern India are grouped under two heads;

(1) The Bihar-Bengal-Orrisa culture complex

(2) The Assam culture complex.

The first complex represents the typical Indian types while the second complex represents a mixture of foreign types from South East Asia 2. Although no

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1 George Van Driem, Op., cit., p 72. (In connection with this paper, he put forth an opinion that the correctness of the hypothesis that ancient Austroasiactics might have expanded from Southeast Asia cannot be taken for granted).

ANCIENT TIBETO-BURMAN MIGRATION

Indian Eastern Neolithic
7000-2000 BC

Silhuan
Neolithic and
Mesolithic
11500-2000 BC

Hypothetical map
Courtesy: George Van Driem
"Neolithic Correlates of Ancient Tibeto-Burman Migration"
chronological information has been established till date, but, on the basis of the assumption that manufacturing of shouldered axe required the aid of metal, the Eastern Neolithic was assigned to a relatively later period about the second half of the first millennium B.C.\(^1\). Other archaeologists however, stretch the date of the earliest phase of the Eastern Neolithic to a much earlier period going to the period as early 5000 and 10,000 B.C.\(^2\). Till date, the earliest radio metric dating of the Neolithic from North Eastern India comes from the late Neolithic deposit of Khas-Kalyanpur in Tripura where C-14 placed the site to year 1500 B.C.\(^3\).

Factors regarding the progress of Prehistoric studies of North East India

The focus of this investigation is to understand the distribution of Neolithic sites within the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya in order to work out the settlement and movement patterns of Neolithic people in these hills. The finding from this research is also expected to throw some light about the region’s Neolithic culture and its relation with the Neolithic culture of the neighbouring sites of the Khasi and Jaintia hills. Till date, the Neolithic phase in the area under this research has not received due attention from investigators in spite of the Neolithic evidences found repeatedly.

\(^{1}\) Ibid., p. 226.


While trying to highlight the present status of Neolithic studies in the region, it is also crucial to understand some of the decisive factors which have probably slowed down the pace of archaeological investigation in the region:

The moist and humid climatic condition which is not suitable for the preservation of archaeological materials either because of the acidic nature of the soil or the large scale erosion activity which has disturbed both the context and the content of the materials is one of the most discouraging factors for archaeological exploration in the region.

The problem of safety and security is further aggravated by the rise of militancy in the region. In the light of the above mentioned factors, the progress of archaeological investigation in the region would rely heavily upon the initiative taken up by local researchers. The region has great archaeological potential which not only can contribute to the progress of archaeology in India, but of South Asia as a whole, since the region is located on the cultural-transition belt linking mainland India with South East Asia.

A Brief Review on Archaeological Research in Khasi-Jaintia Hills

Archaeological research in the central Meghalaya plateau especially in the Khasi and Jaintia hills have not been brought to the limelight, in spite of its potential for prehistoric investigation. The discovery of large numbers of Neolithic and pre-

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1 Firstly this condition speeds up the rate of decomposition of archaeological materials and secondly, the heavy erosion has caused a major displacement of the archaeological material from their original context.
Neolithic sites in the adjoining Garo hills\(^1\) clearly indicated that there was a possibility of locating similar sites in the Khasi and Jaintia hills also, owing mainly to their geographical proximity from each other. The first reported discovery of Neolithic implements from the Khasi-Jaintia hills dates back to the year 1875\(^2\) and 1879\(^3\). After this initial breakthrough, there was no report of any further discovery of Stone Age implements from the region. Another team of investigators from the Anthropology department of the Gawahati University in 1979 reported about a Neolithic site at Umiam-Barapani which lies in the heart of Khasi hills about 17 kms from the capital of Shillong. Exploration at the site continued till 1995 and various scholars have collected stone implements from the site adding to a total of 84 tools\(^4\). Random surface collections of stone implements were made from the confluence of Umiam and Umshing streams on the eastern edge of the present Barapani Lake below the dam. The artefact assemblages reported from the site included, typical axes, a shouldered celt, flakes and blade tools which are made from indurated shale\(^5\). The site has been designated by the

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3 J. Cockburn, Notes on stone Implements, Khasi hills, etc. *Journal of Asiatic society of Bengal* part I (48) (1879), pp. 133-143

4 Zahid Hussain, “Significant characteristics of a Neolithic site at Barapani (Khasi Hills)” *North East India Historical Association,* 17th Session, Aizawl, (Shilong, 1996) pp. 111-117.

investigators as a factory site\textsuperscript{1}. Although quite a fair amount of tools have been collected from the site of Barapani over the years, no serious attempt has been made to understand the Neolithic culture that flourished at the site which could otherwise help to understand the Neolithic culture of the region under study. In spite of repeated mention of the site in various articles\textsuperscript{2} on Northeast prehistory, no effort was made to understand the historical and archaeological relevance of the site. Strictly speaking, the Neolithic culture of the Khasi and Jaintia hills still remained untouched and there is a great potential for archaeological exploration in this region with a scope of generating data about the Neolithic culture of these hills in the context of understanding the man-land relationship.

As far as the excavated sites are concerned, only the site of Sarataru and Marakdola\textsuperscript{3} which are located close to the Khasi hills have been systematically studied. The two excavations have provided some information about the Neolithic industry of the region and offer significant insight into the Neolithic culture of the area under study.

The site of Daojali Hading is another important Neolithic site in the context of the area under study. This site is close to the area under study and was subjected to regular excavation, between 1961-1963 in the course of which artifacts

\textsuperscript{1}Dilip Kumar Medhi, \textit{Op.cit.}, p 39

\textsuperscript{2} The following are some of the important articles which made reference about the site:
(1) Dilip Kumar Medhi, “Prehistory of Assam”, \textit{Asian Perspective}, Volume XXIX No.1, 1990, p. 39

\textsuperscript{3} S.N. Roa, \textit{Op.cit}
recovered from the excavation were clearly recorded and analysed. The site is significant, as it can help to provide some insights into the movement patterns of the Neolithic people in the lower Brahmaputra valley thereby, allowing scope to correlate the relationship with the Neolithic culture of the area under study.