

Southeast Asian Elements in the Archaeological Evidence of Northeast India

In this article, **Sukanya Sharma** traces archaeological evidence of the movement of man, material, and ideas between Southeast Asia and Northeast India.

Introduction

It is an undoubted fact that cultural affinities exist between Southeast Asia and Northeast India, and they can be attributed partly to peaceful migration and adaptation to a similar environment. The majority of people in this part of India are of the Indo-Mongoloid stock, and speak various dialects belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.

Map of Northeast India



This region can be called the Southwestern boundary of the Mongoloid inhabited areas of the world, which further extends westward along the Himalayas until it reaches Tibet. With population movement, cultural traits also travel. Dispersal of the Mongoloid population to different areas of South, Southeast and North Asia is believed to have taken place during the final phase of the prehistoric period. During this period, the first wave of Mongolians must have entered Northeast India, carrying with them the technique of making pebble tools and amorphous flakes. Consequent migrations brought in the Tibeto-Burman and the Mon-Khmer language. Migration into the area continued till the 13th-14th century CE. The last recorded group is the Ahoms who is believed to have migrated from Thailand. Various folktales of the region are based on these migrations and distant lands from where they come indicating movement of population. Under these circumstances, affinities in the archaeological record between the two areas are expected.

The prehistoric lithic assemblages of Northeast India

The prehistoric lithic assemblages of Northeast India have been an issue of debate among social scientists of the region for quite some time. This is mainly because material evidences of the prehistoric period from Northeast India do not typologically conform to the mainland Indian text. The most convincing evidences are double-shouldered celt and chord-marked pottery. The best evidence comes from the site of Daojali Hading, which was excavated by Prof. T.C. Sharma and Prof. M.C. Goswami in 1961-63. A detailed study of the cultural material from the site was undertaken by Sharma (1966) and the conclusions drawn are:



Shouldered celts



Chord-marked pottery

(i) This is the only evidence of the occurrence of the Neolithic cord-impressed and basket pattern pottery so far found in India. After this discovery, the boundary of the East Asiatic “Corded ware” Neolithic culture can undoubtedly be extended to include northeastern India. Moreover, it confirms the earlier hypothesis developed on the basis of typological study of stone tools that the Neolithic culture of Assam is closely linked with the East Asiatic Neolithic complex (Worman, 1949: 188-89; Dani, 1960: 77).

(ii) All the stone tools found at the site are closely comparable to those of the late Bacsonian, an industry in Vietnam. The close relationship between these two cultures can also be firmly established on the evidence of the cord-impressed pottery, which is common in both the cultures.

(iii) The Daojali Hading assemblage can be correlated with the Late Bacsonian of Indo-China. Another closely comparable site is Tam-Toa in Annam (Sharma, 1966). In size, form and technique of manufacture, the small axes and the shouldered axes of Daojali Hading are almost indistinguishable from those of Tam-Toa. Other common implements are the grinding slabs; polishing stones for wooden and bone implements, and the mullers or rubbers. The cord-impressed and some of the incised pottery of both the sites are also identical. There are, however, some differences between Tam-Toa and Daojali Hading. The former seems to contain a Somrong-Sen type of incised pottery that is absent from the latter. As Annam lies between two important cultural zones, Bac-Son on the north and Somrong-Sen on the south, intrusions from both the zones can be expected at Tam-Toa. Daojali Hading also shares some similar types of stone tools and pottery with Somrong-Sen. These are the shouldered axes and the cord-impressed pottery.

The next category of tools that are typically Southeast Asian in character is the short axes. These are chipped axes, sometimes also grounded, which are made on truncated pebbles. Workers in the area had earlier discarded this tool as broken parts of chipped celts, but the occurrences of similar type of tools in other parts of Southeast Asia prove that this is a typical variety of axes found only in the Southeast Asian stone tool assemblages. Short axe, the most frequently occurring pebble tool, is a classic Hoabinhian (a Vietnamese industry) artefact.



Short axes

Amorphous flakes and flake blades are other varieties of tool type reported from Garo Hills. They were earlier relegated to the position of being debitage of the celt manufacturing process ignoring their stratigraphic position, as retouching was absent or minimum and the shapes amorphous. In Thailand, the occurrence of flakes and incipient blades with the Hoabinhian pebble tools is a marked feature. The occurrence of flaked artefacts with the short axes and Sumatraliths has also been reported. In the cultural level I of Spirit Cave in northern Thailand, the retouched and utilized flake category is by far the largest and most interesting group of artefacts (Gorman, 1970:103). Such an association was also reported from the Sai Yok cave of western Thailand dated to the early Holocene (Heekeren and Knuth 1967:23-38). Within India, the typical flake-blade assemblage with the pebble short axes and the bifaces have no parallel.

Recent discoveries at the Lang Rongrien and Moh Khiew in southern Thailand reveal that a distinctly non-Hoabinhian flakes tool industry existed in southern Thailand about 30,000 years ago. The fact that a somewhat similar industry, with dates in the 20,000 BP range, is now recognised in Vietnam (at Nguom and Mieng Hosee Ha) suggests that medium-sized thin tools made on flakes may have been quite widespread during the later Pleistocene in Southeast Asia. The majority of these flakes and blades were not retouched, and are amorphous in shape, but they all showed indications of utilisation. This adds credence to the claim that the lithic flake tools in Southeast Asia were complemented by a non-lithic and, therefore, perishable material such as bamboo and wood (Ronquillo, 1981:10). A similar situation existed in Northeast India, which also explains the gap in the archaeological record. The specialized tools were made from organic materials that have not survived. What remains is the evidence of a generalized tool kit, which mainly consist of processing tools. The presence of a stage called "Lignic" in Southeast Asian prehistory had been proposed in a developmental scheme for the prehistory of Southeast Asia. Existence of such a stage in the prehistory of Northeast India can be hypothetically stated based on the observations made on the contemporary Garo society.

The growth of this similar type of industries might have been the result of contact or as a reaction to similar type of ecological conditions. Tools made from Jadeite have been found in Assam and Nagaland. The nearest jadetite sources are in northern Myanmar and southern China. Tools made on fossil wood were first known from Myanmar, the Anyathian culture but in northeast India too fossil wood have been used for making tools, especially in Tripura, as this is locally available.

Kaolin Pottery and Chinese Glazed ware

Kaolin pottery is a Chinese invention that has been discovered in many archaeological sites of the region. It is produced with decomposed granite named after the Kauling area by Chinese geologist (Chen et.al, 1997), and there are very few places in the world where this clay is found. Kaolin is also said to be a 'corruption' of the Chinese "kaulilzg", meaning high ridge. The pottery was found abundantly in period I of Ambari excavation in Guwahati. Period I is approximately dated from 7th to 12th century. The radio carbon date is 1030+130 CE. Kaolin pottery are found in and around Guwahati city in the Navagraha, Saraniya and Kamakhya hills. It has also been reported from some sites in Nagao and Tezpur as well as from the excavations at Bhismanagar by Raikar in Arunachal Pradesh. Similar type of pottery have not been found elsewhere in the country, and based on its wide distribution all across the region, it can be taken as a distinct characteristic of the archaeological evidence of Northeast India. This indicates a very early Chinese contact. Ideas had travelled during the early historic period. Ching-teh-chien [Jingdezhen], located in the northeastern part of the Kiangsi [Jiangxi] province, is a well-known site for porcelain manufacture in China. Porcelain is made by mixing Kaolin with another mineral. The history of Ching-teh-chien as a porcelain centre can be traced back to 800 CE. Thus, use of Kaolin predates this period. The occurrence of Kaolin implies the movement of ideas from China as early as 10th century CE. Chinese Glazed pottery has been found in subsequent layers broadly dated to 13th-18th century in several parts of Guwahati, but it has been remarked that there is every possibility of the Chinese celadon ware reaching the

Brahmaputra valley earlier than it did in other parts of the country because of the proximity between Assam and China.

Remains of Sri Surya Pahar

Sri Surya Pahar is located 12 km east of Goalpara town, the western-most district of Assam. The archaeological remains of Sri Surya Pahar are of religious nature. Remains till now unearthed consist of rock-cut sculptures of both Hindu and Buddhist and Jaina faith, and stupas,



*Votive stupas and lingas
made on the same platform
in Sri Surya Pahar*

lingas and yoni-pitha, sandstone pillars, stone slabs and small square caverns cut on artificially flattened rock faces. Amongst these remains, the votive stupas – with sizes ranging from 30cms to 3cm in diameter – are the most prominent. The majority of these stupas have been carved on flattened gneissic platforms together with a linga of almost the same size. This occurrence of the linga and stupa on the same base is not known in other parts of India, but the co-existence of Brahmanic and Buddhist religious practices is a common phenomenon in Southeast Asia. There is a popular Indonesian cult of "Siva-Buddha" where



*Votive stupas and lingas
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Buddha is considered locally as the younger brother of Siva. Probably in Surya Pahar under the influence of this cult, lingas and stupas were carved on the same base. This cult is believed to have emanated from India, perhaps from ancient Bengal to Southeast Asia (Bapat 1959). Sri Surya Pahar may have been an area where this cult was practised. The Brahmanical sculptures are product of the ninth century idiom of the eastern school which developed as a result of the integration of the Gupta Classical heritage with the autochthonous (Borpujari ed.1990:463).

Ahom Architecture

The establishment of the Shan kingdom in Assam in the 13th century opened up avenues for assimilation of the ideas of the two trends, Indian and Southeast Asian. The Shans, better known in India as Ahoms, carried with them cultural elements from their country of origin. The echo of this contact can be felt in certain architectural types, which appear queer when projected against the medieval development.

The Tai entered Assam in two major waves; the first wave was in the early part of the 13th century under the leadership of Chao Lung Siu-Ka-Pha. The Aiton, Khamti, Khamyang, Phake and Turung, representing the second wave, entered Assam between the middle of the 18th and early 19th centuries (Buragohain, 2009).

Archaeological evidences of the Ahom period are strewn all over the state. They had built and repaired temples, water tanks, ramparts, and quarters for the officials (e.g., the Borphukans house in Guwahati), royal graves or “maidams”, two palaces – one at Gargaon and the other at Rangpur – and an entertainment hall at Rangpur.

The Rong Ghar at Sibsagar consists of an oval roof with an elongated octagonal shape. The roof gables are encrusted with a rising projection of a snake or a dragon. The central elongated projections form a structure like a pagoda or small house. This type of architectural design is seen among other Tai groups in Myanmar, Yunnan and northern Thailand.

Shihabuddin Talish, who accompanied the Mughal invaders to Assam in the 17th century, wrote an account of Assam. He mentioned the existence of huge wooden houses used by the Ahom royalty. They were called Kareng and Hawlung. None of these structures have survived but from the account of Shihabuddin Talish, it is clear that they were built in the Tai or Thai patterns of architecture, and are similar to the structures in northern Thailand and Yunnan. They are characterized by roofs resembling fish scales, tall, decorated post and many-tiered roof.

Even the Ahom royal insignia is a winged lion similar to that of the Zhou period of old China. The Lanna Tai of northern Thailand also uses a similar symbol.

The list of affinities between the Ahoms and other Tai groups in Southeast Asia is long but in the archaeological record, these are the major evidences that indicate contact.

Discussion

In 1969, Wilhelm G. Solheim II defined "Southeast Asia" as composing of two distinct parts, and identified the boundaries demarcating the region. According to him, mainland Southeast Asia was the area within the 30th Parallel or the Yangtze River, south through Singapore. Island Southeast Asia included the islands off the coast of the mainland Taiwan through the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The area extended to Assam and eastern India, and a portion of western New Guinea (Solheim, 1969: 126-127).

Historians have pointed out that there was a northerly land route from India to China through Assam, Upper Myanmar and Yunnan. Historical evidence shows it to have been in use as early as 128 BCE. Steps were taken to develop it, and for better control and protection, China founded the prefecture of Yung-Ch'ang in 69 CE. across the Upper Mekong, with its headquarters east of Salween, about sixty miles from the present border of Myanmar. Along this route, envoys travelled from the eastern part of the Roman Empire to Yung-Cha'ng in 97 CE. The Buddhist I-tsing tells us that it was used at the end of the 3rd century by twenty Chinese monks, who went to the court of Sri Gupta.

In the 4th century CE, China relaxed her hold on the Myanmar frontier to such a degree that in 342 CE, the Yung-Cha'ng prefecture was closed until Ko-Lo-Feng (748-79 CE) of Nanchao reopened it, and thereby promoted much economic development in northern Myanmar as well as contacts between the Pyu of Myanmar and T'ang Court in China. Evidence discovered in Pyu site tends to show that some Indian influence penetrated into Upper Myanmar overland. By the same route, Indian influence came also to the Ta'i kingdom of Nanchao (Hall 1955:23). Prior to this, the Chinese silk industry entered India via Central Asia into Kashmir and North India on one hand and via Sikkim, Manipura and adjoining regions into Assam and Bengal sometime after the 1st-2nd century BCE (Lad, 1983:16).

During the 7th century CE, Indian traders reached Burma (Myanmar), Siam (Thailand) and Champa via eastern Bengal, Manipur and Assam

by sea route. Bhamo, on the banks of the Irrawady in Upper Myanmar was a very important trade centre on the trade route connecting China and Southeast Asia. From Bhamo traders could cross the Patkai range of mountains and enter the Brahmaputra valley, and thence to north India. The Sukhothai kings of Thailand, especially during the reign of Rama Khamheng (1283-c1317 CE) made contact with the Buddhism of northern India by the trade route through Assam, and the influence of Buddhist and Sena art upon their own in the extreme north of the Menam basin is easily recognizable (Hall, 1981: 187).

During the British period, this route was explored for assessing its possible economic advantages, but due to political reasons the British rulers of India and Myanmar did not encourage movements. After the independence of India, the marine routes were used for maintaining contacts with Southeast Asia. The territorial route through Northeast India and Myanmar was abandoned and forgotten. Cultural similarities between the Tibeto-Burman speakers, the dominant majority of Northeast Indian and Southeast Asia have always been known, but that they were part of the Southeast Asian cultural pattern was not recognized. With archaeological evidence, it is now confirmed that this part of India is culturally Southeast Asian.

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Photographs and illustration by Sukanya Sharma

Sukanya Sharma is an Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. She teaches Culture Studies, and has worked on cultural affinities between Northeast India and Southeast Asia during prehistoric times for her doctoral research. Sukanya is still continuing her research in this sphere, and has started looking at issues relating to both the historical period and contemporary times too.