

## Archaeological Works of Arunachal Pradesh, India

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**Abstract:** Geographically, Arunachal Pradesh (earlier known as NEFA) is the largest state in northeast India. In term of ethnicity, culture and language, it has distinctive features differentiating themselves from the so called mainland India. It can be considered as 'a hot pot of cultural biodiversity'. The reports of archaeological related works had been made in the state since pre-Independence era of India. But, these were the accidental findings through surface collection. The first systematic excavation was reported to be conducted at Parsi-Parlo (1982-83). Since then, the excavation work was unheard in the state though there are reports of few archaeological related works on the basis of survey or surface collection. By seeing the geographical location of the state, all these archaeological evidences – historic and prehistoric remains can be the prime focus to study the past history of the region. However, the present paper will focus on the prehistoric contexts of the state and reports which are made over the years. This also attempts to initiate the apparent linkage of Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asian region through prehistoric findings from the state. It is worthy to mention that the initiative to study on this topic will give the insight importance of the region since prehistoric time, not only of the present day. This will enable to grasp the significance of archaeological study in the region and the values it gives in neighboring regions including northeast India (India as a whole) with Southeast Asian and East Asian region.

**Keywords:** Arunachal Pradesh, Archaeology, prehistory, northeast India, Southeast Asia

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## Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh is the northeastern most state of India, also known as 'land of rising sun'<sup>1</sup> falling in the eastern Himalaya region (Fig. 1). It was previously known as North East Frontier Agency – NEFA (Bose 1997) in 1954 till up to 1972 is also the largest state in northeast India with an area of 83,743

sq. kms (Tada *et al.* 2012) which is bordering with countries like China to the north and northeast, Myanmar to the east, Bhutan to the west, and in the Indian side is the state of Assam and Nagaland to the south. The state is inhabited by around 25 major ethnic tribal groups (ibid) and subgroups who speak their own-language and dialect. It can be considered as ‘a hot pot of cultural biodiversity’. Thus, the state naturally becomes a kind of paradise to study from the anthropological and archaeological perspectives. Despite of it, archaeological works of the state is very scanty so far.



**Figure 1: Map of India showing the location of Arunachal Pradesh**

Source: Freeworldmaps.net

Archaeology is the study of past through material remains. The term archaeology derived from the Greek, *archaeo* meaning ‘ancient things’ and *logos* meaning ‘science’ (Daniel 2021). According to Fagan (2016), it is ‘a special form of anthropology that uses material remains to study extinct human societies’. It covers all related to human’s action both tangible and non-tangible things. In term of archaeological remains, India is a very rich country. One can say that it was realized with the discovery of Harappa and Mohenjodaro (Sankalia 1973). It has the evidences of the development of various cultural periods over the years. Apart from it, Indian (and Chinese) influences have been seen in Southeast Asian region from the very early times for their supremacy (Hall 1955). This region is politically and culturally overshadowed by Indian (and Chinese) civilizations long before historical period begins (ibid). Seeing the role of India in Southeastern Asian region, northeast India especially

Arunachal Pradesh could be a key strategic location with regard to the cultural contact with Southeast Asian region. Probably, it can be mentioned that the archaeological findings including the reports of the presence of the eastern Asiatic Neolithic complex of double-shouldered celts and cord-marked pottery from northeastern states of Assam and Meghalaya (Sharma and Singh 2017) hint the existence of regional connectivity of northeast India with Southeast Asian region in prehistoric time. Therefore, the potential of archaeological works of the region especially Arunachal Pradesh could be of very importance. This region can be regarded as a meeting ground of many ethnic groups and cultural elements (Ashraf 1990).



Figure 2: Hoabinhian tools (left) and Neolithic Tools (right) from Arunachal Pradesh

(Source: Tada *et al.* 2012)

### Discovery of Archaeological Remains

Archaeology of Arunachal Pradesh would be incomplete without the reference of northeast India as a whole especially the state of Assam. As far as prehistoric archaeology is concerned, Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of northeast India (Raikar and Chatterjee 1980). Popularly known as NEFA, the state was politically a part of Assam and administered through the Governor of Assam as an agent of the President of India (Dubey 2001). Later, it was given the status of union territory and statehood in the year 1972 and 1987 respectively (*ibid*). It has a common feature of hilly mountainous area, Tibeto-Burman populations (Sengupta and Sharma 2011) with densely populated valleys of Bhrahmaputra, Barak and Imphal (Subba 2012). It can be said that the archaeological study of northeast India was ignored in pre-independent era. Starting with the survey of Lord Cunningham, the founder of archaeological survey of India, had visited almost the entire length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent during his time except northeastern region (Sharma, 2012). Despite of it, there are few reports related to the archaeological research. As early as in 1867, John Lubbock reported the presence of prehistoric culture in the region.

Discovery of various prehistoric artifacts have been made from Arunachal Pradesh between 1867 and 1937 (Tada *et al.* 2012). One of the earliest reports of the stone artifacts from the state was given by John Anderson (1871). It was a kind of exploratory findings in the beginning and there was no proper work on the reconstruction of the prehistory of this region. After a long gap, Banerjee (1924) carried

out an archaeological study and found a stone adze (see sample neolithic tools in Fig. 2) from Mebo village of Siang district. As per report, collection of these stone tools has been preserved in the Pitt River Museum, Oxford (Ashraf 1990). A report has been prepared by Dani (1960) through systematic study of archaeological materials from northeast India which demonstrated the similarity with parts of Southeast Asian and East Asian region. Following these, first kind of scientific study had been undertaken by Bopardikar in 1972. It has resulted into the discovery of palaeoliths from Daphabhum area of Lohit district including chopper, handaxe, scraper, points, etc. (Bopardikar 1972). Various neolithic tools have also been made in public then (Duarah 1979, Ashraf 1990 and Tada *et al.* 2012). Archaeological excavation probably started in 1982-83 by Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh under the initiative of A.A. Ashraf, the then Assistant Director (Ashraf 1990). It has given the stratified neolithic layers from Parsi-Parlo site. Under this Directorate, periodical exploration and excavation of archaeological sites have been conducted over the years. Stone artifacts are also collected from Leel village of Kurung Kumey district in 2010 (see Fig. 2) by Tada and his team (Tada *et al.* 2012). It is reported to be similar to that of Hoabinhian tools of Mesolithic period which is considered to be new in the region (*ibid*). These Hoabinhian sites are spread to the regions such as Southern China, North Vietnam, Malaya, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Sumatra and Taiwan (Dikshit and Hazarika 2011-12) as a characteristic feature of Southeast Asia. Due the presence of Hoabinhian in northeastern region, Sharma (1966) opined that Neolithic appeared under the Hoabinhian tradition of Chinese and Southeast Asia. Under the custody of Directorate of Research as per report of Tada *et al.* (2012), there are 94 stone tools – palaeolithic (1), Mesolithic (29) and Neolithic (64).

### Local Myths on Archaeological Remains – Neolithic Celts

The main typical tool of Neolithic period is neolithic celt, a common designated term. It can be a well-ground axe or adze where the working edge is polished (Bhattacharya 1972). It is also mentioned that China was the source of Indian neolithic celts in the case of faceted tools (Worman 1949). If this is to be believed or assumed, it could be through northeast India particularly the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Northeast India, especially Arunachal Pradesh serves as a corridor from eastern Asian region for such early tradition (Ashraf 1990). These prehistoric tools have been reported from various parts by Tada and his team (2012) such as Monpa, Sherdukpen, Tagin, Khamba, Adi, Galo, Nyishi, Mishmi, Khampti Tangso Nocte, Wancho, etc. inhabited areas. Some of these are considered to be culturally associated as ‘thunderbolt’ or ‘axes of the sky’ or ‘some deity’ for instance among the Monpas as *kyug*, Galo as *michafllu*, Idu Mishmis as *baya*, etc. such as the Sinphos call it *muhningwa*, *muh* meaning ‘name of a local deity’ and *ningwa* meaning ‘axe’, axe of *muh* (Tada *et al.* 2012).

The belief system of the considerable number of tribes in Arunachal Pradesh is tribal religion or the so called animism in the absence of shrine or temple or image worship (Bose 1997). According to the writing of Banerjee in Ashraf’s *Prehistoric Arunachal* (1990), local people believed that neolithic celts were fell down on earth from the sky and these were regarded with great veneration by the Abors as a gift of the Gods and used to sores, ulcers, etc. This has been associated to different beliefs in the state differing from one tribe to other, with a common belief that it was hurled by deities from the sky. Taking few notes as examples – according to the Monpas, Sherdukpens and Khambas, it is to strike evil spirits; among the Mijis, Akas, Galos and Khamptis, it is to punish men and any other wrong doers to the deities; among the Mishmis, Tangsas and Wanchos, they avoid to use the tree and later two tribes even avoid the use of house struck by thunderbolt, it may lead diseases or death if use (Tada *et al.* 2012). The house owner performs rites to propitiate the angry deity and no calamity befalls. Among the Singphos, it has three colours – black, bluish green and golden, if strike a tree, animal and man

or banana respectively (ibid). Moreover, it is also reported that some of these neolithic celts (fully ground and polished types) were associated as the traditional garland of Aka's priest in Thrizino area. Directorate of Research reported that local priest of Nafra area of West Kameng district, also performs traditional ritual – *puja* on these stones (Tada 2014).

### Archaeological Works on Selected Prehistoric Sites

Archaeological sites and remains give clue of the man's past. These are the remnants of human activity which are covered or buried by some natural (Ember *et al.* 2002) or probably by also artificial process. Archaeological remains have been reported from the state since from the last nearly 150 years. Despite of limited research works and hilly terrain, it includes both exploratory and few excavation findings. In search of the archaeological sites in different parts of the state by agencies or individuals, it gives important archaeological sites of different cultural periods. They have been divided into prehistoric and historic remains. Some of the selected archaeological sites i.e. prehistoric sites/remains are given below –

### Prehistoric Remains

As we generally understand about prehistory, it is the cultural period where man has no written records. Stone tools are the most common remain of this period. It has been recognized altogether in three different stages – palaeolithic, mesolithic and neolithic period (in Reddy 1987).

- **Daphabum Area:** The discovery of stone tools from Dabhabum area of Lohit district is considered to be the earliest systematic or scientific exploration in the archaeological context of Arunachal Pradesh. It was under the initiative of Archaeological Survey of India, Nagpur Circle, led by B.P. Bopardikar (1972). This exploration discovered the presence of palaeoliths from the state for the first time. It includes chopper, handaxe, cleaver, scraper, point, etc. It also tried to see the link of early Stone Age man and stone industries of the people who were living in Western Himalaya and Eastern Himalaya (Bopardikar 1972). In his finding, it is mentioned that majority of the tools were highly rolled and weathered. They are made from metamorphic rock and basic rock such as granite, quartzite, gneiss, crystalline limestone, etc.
- **Parsi-Parlo:** Parsi-Parlo can be considered as one of the most important prehistoric site in the state. Excavation (1982-83) at this site on the right river bank of Kamla river of present Kurung Kumey district was carried out extensively under the initiative of Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, led by A. A. Ashraf, then Assistant Director (Ashraf 1990). This aim to determine the cultural sequence of the prehistoric period and the stratigraphy in respect of the cultural sequence.

This excavation gave the three main cultural sequences (ibid) such as –

- ✓ Aceramic neolithic stage: It consisted of scrappers and large cutting tools showing palaeolithic in character with the rudiments of pecked and ground techniques. Raw material used for these tools consisted of sandstone and quartzite.
- ✓ Ceramic neolithic stage: It was characterized by the occurrence of pecked and ground stone implements, wasted blades/axes, faceted tools and handmade pottery. Tools mostly possess hafting facilities and are mostly agriculture based. A few number of fire places with ash and charcoal have also been reported. Hand-made potteries represent honey comb, square grid and beaten impressed decoration.

- ✓ Ferrolithic stage: Alongside pottery, pecked and ground stone implements, there was evidence of iron tools. An iron blade was found with a lump of raw iron.
- ✓ Raw materials used for the tools are sandstone, basalt, schist, quartzite, gneiss and jadeite. Of the above six raw materials, jadeite is locally unavailable and probably the origin of northern Burma (presently Myanmar) if not eastern China.
- **Megalithic Sites:** Megaliths are large stone structures which are standing either alone or with other stones (Meitei 2017). It has been reported to be found in many places around the world. They have been classified accordingly on the basis of its structures and functions. It appeared probably as the Stonehenge in Britain and continued till Iron Age through Chalcolithic Age (Roy 2003). Similarly, India especially northeast India has a very rich tradition of megaliths such as the state of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, etc. Recently, Arunachal Pradesh is also included in the map of northeast India's megalithic tradition. Raikar and Chatterjee (1980) had reported about the presence of megalithic structures in West Kameng district. Some important megalithic sites are given below –
  - ✓ **Shergaon site:** These structures of West Kameng district are basically menhirs<sup>2</sup> and found in two sites; one is on the right bank of Choskorang river and second is on the left bank of Daflo Kho river. Numbers of menhirs are three from the first site and twelve from the second site where the height measures from 1.65 m to 4.7 cm (Tada *et al.* 2012). These menhirs are rectangular in structures with truncated top and raised upright and inclined towards the left (Archaeological Survey of India 2016).
  - ✓ **Borduria site:** This is another recently reported megalithic structure found from the state. This site is located in the Nocte's inhabited area of Tirap district. Nocte's have the long cultural history of head hunting in pre-independence era<sup>3</sup> and also chieftainship system (Tada *et al.* 2012). The hunted skulls were brought in their village and erected a menhir in a place known as Long Pan. Locally, Long Pan means long stone or barricade place of small earthen mound where there are more than 100 upright stones. Directorate of Research (2022) and Tada *et al.* (2012) further mentioned that it is erected as a symbol of victory for every hunted skull. As per information mentioned in Tada *et al.* (2012), this practice was prevalent till early 1990's.

In addition to the above, megaliths are also reported to be present in Mechuka, Thrizino, Tamin, Rupa, etc.

### **Influence of South Asian and East Asian into the Region: Prehistoric context**

Geographically, Arunachal Pradesh is bordering with countries like China (including Tibet), Myanmar and Bhutan. Due to its proximity, the state is seen to be influenced by both Tibetan and Assamese way of life (Bose 1997). The languages which are spoken by different tribes of the state are broadly falls under the Tibeto-Burman group with rare exception such as Tai language of Khampti (ibid). Moreover, the physical features of different tribes of this region have similar Mongoloid features (Bose 1997 and Tada *et al.* 2012). From the above, the state is closer (in term of appearance and language) to Southeast Asian nations who are mostly having Mongoloid features and speak Tibeto-Burman language. Over the years, researchers have claimed the similarities or connection between the regions i.e. northeast India (as a whole) and Southeast Asia through archaeological remains. Politically and geographically, it is highly a strategic location and so, the region might have played as a strategic importance even

in prehistoric period. It was probably first propounded by Dani (1960) through his systematic archaeological study which brought the similarities of northeast India with neighboring southeast Asian and East Asian region (Dani 1960). Archaeologically, this region was influenced greatly by Indian and Chinese since long (Hall 1955), one cannot be surprised to see northeast India especially Arunachal Pradesh the influence of Indian and Chinese in the past. Northeast India has a good evidence of Stone Age. Of these, remain of neolithic period was probably the highest. The neolithic materials emerged in the region under the influence of China and Southeast Asian neolithic (Sharma 1966) or through Southeast Asia from China, if not direct (Dikshit and Hazarika 2011-12). It has been mentioned that neolithic culture of northeast India has similar to the neolithic culture of Southeast Asia and East Asia in three ways – celt making traditions, cord-impressed pottery and rice agriculture (Hazarika 2006). The distinguished nature of neolithic culture of northeast India is the presence of shouldered celts (ibid) from the rest of India. Moreover, quadrangular adze also known as faceted hoe is a common tool in Assam, Chittagong, Yunnan and South Asia (Krishnaswami 1962). These distinguish features have been reported from various sites of northeast India such as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, etc. (Dikshit and Hazarika 2011-12). However, pottery with cord-impressions is a common characteristic feature of Neolithic pottery of Northeast India (Mitri 2009). Another typical feature of prehistoric northeast India is the Hoabinhian (as Mesolithic) indicating cultural link with Southeast Asia. Hoabinhian culture of northeast India is considered to be the starting point of early Holocene epoch (Sharma 1966) and it is predominantly found in Manipur and Meghalaya (Sharma 2012). Similar culture of Hoabinhian is spread to Southern China, North Vietnam, Malaya, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Sumatra and Taiwan (Dikshit and Hazarika 2011-12). Interestingly, artifacts or tools of pre-neolithic stage i.e. Hoabinhian were also first discovered from the state of Arunachal Pradesh at Lelle village of Kurung Kumeng district in the last decade (Tada *et al.* 2012). Probably, this might indicate the presence of habitation in the region since long ago. The recent archaeological findings from the state show the tools of Mesolithic era which includes sumatralith (axe), pebble pick, scraper, etc. and they are probably used for agricultural activities (DNA 2011). The present habitants of around 25 main ethnic groups and many other sub-groups in the state reminds the work of A.A. Ashraf (1990), he mentioned about the state of Arunachal Pradesh as the possible meeting ground of many ethnic groups and cultural elements. Therefore, this region could be regarded as a meeting ground of many ethnic groups and cultural elements (Ashraf 1990).

### Discussion and Conclusion

The geographical location of Arunachal Pradesh is situated in the extreme northeast of the very strategic location of Indian subcontinent bordering with China (including Tibet), Myanmar and Bhutan. Despite of its important geographically and politically, the archaeological work of the state is less, still it can be considered as minimum. Moreover, none of the above prehistoric sites are considered in the list of Central Protected Monuments (ASI) and State Protection Monument according to the report of Directorate of Research, Department of Cultural Affairs, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2022.<sup>4</sup> Like any other state of northeast India, Arunachal Pradesh also gives the remains of palaeoliths, Mesolithic tools including Hoabinhian, neoliths and various other associated items such as corded pottery. Though, there are minimum indicators of proper settlement or habitation in the state in prehistoric time; the account of habitation might have been supported by above archaeological findings. This shows how important archaeologically the state is. Seeing the richness of archaeological remains and strategic location of the state, more study must be encouraged to dig more about the prehistoric past of the state as well as the northeast India (India as a whole) and the linkage with other neighbouring regions such as

Southeast Asia and East Asian prehistorically and later, historically. Through the lens of archaeological findings, it would not be wrong to say that the state can be considered of having the relationship with its neighbouring regions including China, Myanmar, etc. since prehistoric times. Moreover, it could be worthy to mention that the scope of archaeological research in the state is still enormous.

### Notes

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