

Book Review

***Technology of the Tribes of Northeast India* by Amrendra Kumar Thakur, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, New Delhi, 2017, Pages I-IX+308, Photos, Bibliography, Index. Price Rs. 850**

J N Sinha*

The scholarly interest in the history and society of India's Northeast goes back to the colonial era, but the knowledge generated is yet to be properly integrated into the mainstream history of the country. This is partly because of the colonial approach to knowledge gathering, social tension in the region, and difficulty in accessibility to it. On account of the colonial concerns for control, the initial British interest in the Northeast was confined to the ethnic aspects of its different tribes, whose knowledge and heritage was studied more as 'exotic' than something worthy of wider use. The Survey operations focused on gathering ethnic, demographic and topographical information, aimed at administrative control and exploitation of the natural resources. Once the British expanded their interest in Asia beyond India, the geographical location of the Northeast attracted them to its diplomatic advantages, as it lay at a tri-juncture connecting India with Tibet and Burma (now Myanmar) and giving way to Southeast Asia. But the British interest in this hilly tract was probably not sustained due, amongst others, to its difficult terrain, although individual exploratory expeditions continued to take place off and on. It was only during the Second World War that the Northeast came in the limelight in a big way.

Nevertheless, the British have left valuable information about the Northeast by way of official

reports and memoirs; and scholars like Verrier Elwin have produced valuable works dealing with the life and times of the people of the region. More publications have followed. Considerable studies seem to have appeared at the sessions of the North East India History Association besides others published elsewhere. However, they are generally confined to narrow themes— to a particular tribe or theme, or to a certain area. Research on the technology of the Northeast is rare. The book under review, *Technology of the Tribes of Northeast India* by Amrendra Kumar Thakur, is, therefore, a most welcome publication, because of its broader approach in terms of the content, time and space, cutting across the tribes and aspects of life. It is a social history of technology drawing liberally from many disciplines— mainstream history, sociology, anthropology, economics and so on, and likely to contribute to them.

The author has been working on the Northeast for very long and has covered many aspects of its life. The present work appears to be his most comprehensive offering—an outcome of sustained dedication and a labour of love. Chapter 1 opens with an elaborate introduction covering the evolution of the history of science and technology with a sumptuous survey of literature on the subject. Chapter 2 is devoted to agriculture; and hunting, fishing and foraging are discussed

* Former Associate Professor of History, University of Delhi. Mailing Address: 38, Uttaranchal Apts., 5, I.P. Extension, Delhi 110092. Email: jnsinha@rediffmail.com

under chapter 3. The next chapter deals with the indigenous plants as food as well as medicine. Communication is the subject of chapter 5; and musical instruments and articles of domestic utility are examined in chapter 6. Salt, beverage and other items of domestic use are discussed in chapter 7, metallurgy and handmade papers in chapter 8, and village defence, forts and temples in chapter 9. Chapter 10 concludes the study.

The information and analysis contained in the book is meticulous and detailed, and encyclopaedic in many aspects. The Introduction is elaborate and extensive in examining the technicalities of the history of technology globally, often comparing them with the developments in the Northeast; a survey of literature on the region is covered; and, off and on, the prospective areas of research are projected. The chapters that follow bring to light the unique life of the Northeast—dictated by its distinctive geography and location at an international tri-junction.

Going into the details and we are introduced to an ethnic conglomeration of tribes subsisting on almost primitive level of production and social relations, yet happy in their social relations and respectful to the nature. In the midst of their simpler life, a few of their technological innovations, social practices and knowledge of the natural resources are strikingly impressive. Their excellence in bridge-making technology and the use of plants and other natural resources as cures for diseases are a few of them. Their bridges made of cane and whines are not only completely eco-friendly but also cost-effective and affordable (pp. 135-36). Their application in the remote areas in the Indian plains may be gainfully tried.

The use of plants as medicine and the tribes' understanding of the natural phenomenon are equally important. These themes concerning other tribes elsewhere are already underway globally. In the Indian context, probing the Northeast heritage is important for many reasons.

While its geographical segregation has kept the Northeast away from the mainstream history of India, it might have had, at the same time, the benefits of interaction with the societies beyond India's borders—Tibetan, Chinese, Myanmar and beyond. In that, the exercise is likely to give certain clues to the Buddhist philosophy and medicine. Likewise, such bizarre practices amongst certain tribes as drinking menstrual blood as medicine may deserve investigation by modern scientists (p.113). So is the case of poison and its antidotes (pp. 98ff). Besides elaborate discussion on medicinal plants and their therapeutic uses, the book has several corresponding charts to ease comprehension of the subject (pp. 107-23). They are likely to help in verifying their authenticity scientifically and developing new medicines. Finally, the narrative spread over several chapters presents examples of excellent resource management and utilisation of locally available resources. This reminds well of Mahatma Gandhi's similar concerns in his rural reconstruction programme introduced through 1920s and 30s.

Thakur has taken a very broad view of technology and has gone deeper into the socio-cultural life of the region. His discussion on the relation between slavery and technological retardness is revealing. That allows one to look also at certain positive sides of the lesser use of technology in the hills, where, in the absence of efficient technology, people are compelled to remain constantly engaged in providing for the sustenance of everyday life, having no time to idle about, worry and get depressed (pp. 46-47). Cannot the modern scientists research further, on this assumption, to measure the degree of the impact of technology on mental health? Likewise, the knowledge and heritage of the Northeast people about the nature and environment, such as weather change, earthquake, epidemics, pestilence, and about the fauna and flora may provide us valuable insights for management in these sectors in the other parts of the country.

In view of the truly interdisciplinary and encyclopaedic nature of this work, one feels tempted to know also about the historical interaction of the hills with the plains of the Indian Subcontinent, and the impact of modernisation on their life. The Northeast was a very important site in the Second World War because the Japanese aggression, leading to demographic exodus and casualties of life, both animal and plant. It was the location of high concentration of the Allied forces and war machinery. How did it affect the locale in terms of skill and technology? Similarly, there is virtually no reference to the colonial intervention in the various aspects of life of the tribes until the author discusses the village defence and forts (pp. 43-49). Maybe, this is because of author's main concern with technology. Or was it because the British actually avoided disturbing the tribes as elsewhere in India? For the next edition, the author may consider reducing references, standardising them, and enlarging the index.

The author has used varieties of sources, including mythology and oral tradition, language, anthropological information and archaeology, and has presented a variegated panorama of the tribal life of India's Northeast—their life in the nature, love for dance and music, social festivities and rituals, cultural traditions and social mores; and by relating them to techniques and technology, he has animated the subject delightfully. In-between,

he has presented certain unique snippets of history, such as, the role of salt (pp. 178-89) and presence of paper (pp. 231-37) in their life. The author has cited archaeological finds at various places in the region to indicate the occurrence of pottery making and metallurgical practices from very early dates (chapters 7-8). Together with indigenous papermaking that continued in the colonial era, these factors could have given birth to urbanisation in the Northeast, but the British rule completely reversed the process, regrets the author (p. 237).

Working with the passion and mission of a pioneer and as a university professor, Thakur appears to have in his mind the prospective researchers likely to take his work forward. As such, his elaborations, references and the narrative on the corresponding developments should serve as a handy tool of reference. The book will attract the specialists, and its engaging narrative is sure to endear the lay reader. It is an important work, not only for the students of history of technology but also for those from the other disciplines of the social sciences. It is going to serve as a book of reference for many years to come. The story runs in free-flowing language, and its excellent getup is inviting. The author deserves congratulations. Congratulations go also to the Indian National Science academy, New Delhi, for sponsoring this project.