

BOOK REVIEWS

NORTH-EAST INDIA: A HANBOOK OF ANTHROPOLOGY,
Edited by T. B. Subba, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2012,
pp. 430, Rs.275.

Since the birth of ethnographic studies in pre-colonial times, India has been a favourite of anthropological research. The present handbook adds to the vast corpus of literature on India in general and the north-eastern regions in particular, but its focus is more specific. It is aimed at students and teachers of anthropology of this region. Therefore the editor claims it to be an introduction as well as a source of in-depth information on North-East India. The main aim of the book is to manage and balance this gap between an introduction of anthropological disciplines, and a very specific account of the North-East Indian context. It is this balance that the book has to maintain in order to make the subject and the information provided accessible, without being too introductory and superficial.

The book is divided into four parts. I will discuss these four parts separately and examine the coherence between these sections, always keeping in mind the main aim of this book, to be a helping hand for students and teachers.

The book comprises of 19 chapters. Part one is dedicated to archaeology, part two to colonial ethnography, part three to physical anthropology and part four to social and cultural anthropology. Unfortunately a section on linguistics is completely missing, even though a few chapters refer explicitly to the linguistic richness of North-East India.

The first part, entitled “Prehistoric North-East India” gives a very broad idea of archaeological excavations and the importance of archaeology in anthropological studies. Sadly, a lot of space is dedicated to mere listing of researches carried out. This information is very useful if one needs to refer to some specific research, but there is very little emphasis on the conclusions or results of these researches, which makes it sometimes difficult to understand the link between the theoretical problems and the examples given. Unfortunately this problem persists

throughout the book, although a lot of the authors illustrate their arguments very well with selected research examples.

The second part, “Colonial North-East India” is strongly involved in the discussion concerning the scientific quality and validity of ethnographic work carried out by colonial administrators cum ethnographers, namely J. H. Hutton and J. P. Mills. The relation between the chapters is very interesting, the first one being a harsh critic of colonial ethnography, in sharp contrast to the praise of the work of Mills in the following chapter. The concluding text tries to reconcile the two poles. The author’s main argument is that colonial stereotyping was often, but by far not always negative, and that the scientific community should take into consideration the many cases of positive stereotyping, when it comes to judging colonial writing. This is a valid point, but unfortunately there is no separate reflection on the averse and often racist roots of stereotyping in itself, regardless of being negative or positive. Colonial ethnographies have been written by people who researched not among their equals, but among their subordinates, disqualifying the results of their works from being sources of serious ethnographic data.

The third part on “Physical Anthropology of North-East India” occupies a vast section of this book. Studying the chapters, the reader understands that physical anthropology is much more based on natural sciences like biology and genetics than other anthropological disciplines are. It is only natural for topics as specific as dental or dermatoglyphic anthropology to be heavy on research data, making them a good source of information on where to look for related data on North-East India. The only inconvenience is that one might sometimes face difficulties in understanding the connection between the biological variety and the cultural aspects of groups of people, without falling into the trap of Bio-Determinism. For further editions a chapter dedicated to embedding physical anthropology into the wider context of the book might fill this gap.

The book concludes with a section on “Social-Cultural Anthropology in North-East India”. There is a very strong focus on tribal groups among the texts, which is understandable if one takes into consideration that the majority of the population in this region is part of a Scheduled Tribe (ST). Some of the texts mediate the balance between conceptual introduction and examples to support their arguments very well, especially

the text by Aier and Changkija, which stands out not only in this section but in the whole book because of its clarity and up-to-date discussion.

A problem this handbook faces is its lack of critical reflection on highly discussed concepts like evolution, development, ethnicity and so on. There is a very broad set of takes on these concepts throughout the book, some of which can easily be misunderstood as evolutionist, or essentialising. For the next edition, a glossary discussing briefly important and ambiguous terms used in the book, would eliminate this problem, and encourage all participants and readers to reflect on their own position and thoughts. This discussion could also happen in the context of a closing chapter, briefly connecting the different ideas and theories expressed in this book.

The result is ambiguous. Some of the chapters are more than apt to provide help, access and resources for both students and teachers. But regrettably a fair number require a careful reading and basic background in order to avoid being entangled in misunderstandings. Others simply give a too general overview, making them less vital for advanced students and teachers.

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TRANSFORMING INDIAN AGRICULTURE-INDIA 2040 - PRODUCTIVITY, MARKETS, AND INSTITUTIONS Edited by Marco Ferroni, New Delhi: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2013. pp. 357, Rs 995.

India is one among the top five countries in key agricultural products like, wheat, rice, vegetables, and melons. It is now the world's leading producer of milk and pulses. Marginal farmers are shifting toward high-value outputs. There was a rise in agricultural investment, as a share of agriculture GDP, from 13 per cent in 2004-05 to 18 per cent in 2008-09; and the private sector has enthused into agricultural research and extension services. The vision of what India's economy in 2040 should and can look like, with a modern agricultural sector, will necessitate primary transformations in both the demand and supply sides of Indian agriculture. However, this vision is based not on projections but on how India's agricultural sector needs to adapt to meet the progress in economy.