Title of the symposium: BIOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF NORTHEAST INDIA: TRADITION AND TRANSITION

Northeast India or India's Northeast, along with the eastern Himalayan region forms a distinctive transitional zone between the Indian, Indo-Malayan and Indo-Chinese bio-geographical realms, which occupies an area of 255,000 sq km and about 7 per cent landmass of India. This region is the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups who came from different directions in different periods. The region is an ethnic mosaic of more than 130 major tribal communities, of various ethnic stalks, speaking diverse languages and dialects, maintaining their identical traditional customs and practices, having self-sufficient economies, thus creating a multicultural constellation as a whole. Therefore, Northeast India is used here as a term to denote the region not merely as a geographical entity, but also as a mega-cultural interaction sphere. It was also mentioned as the Kiratbhumi in the Indian epics. Apparently the region looks like homogenous, but in reality it is largely heterogenous from micro to macro level.

The Australoids came to this region before the coming of the Mongoloids who partially or fully absorbed the Australoid strains. The main ethnic stalk of the region is the Mongoloid, who came from the north and the east at different periods. It has been stated that, long ago one section of the Indo-Mongoloids were spreaded over the whole of the Bramhaputra valley, North Bengal and East Bengal (now Bangladesh) giving rise to various tribal groups inhabiting this region. Many of the tribal groups have their counterparts across the international boundary in Tibet, Yúnnán province of China, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma and the Chittagong hill tracts of Bangladesh. Gradually, they were settled down in different habitats and ecological settings of the Northeastern region. Two main linguistic phyla can be found among the present-day tribal populations of Northeast India, viz. Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman. The third and fourth linguistic phylum found in Northeast India is the Kradai and Indo-European language families.

Besides the tribal groups, a few other non-tribal groups have also come into existence as a consequence of prolong interactions between the cultures of the migrants and those of the indigenous people, that took place as late as the last century have resulted spectacular social, cultural, economic and political transformations in this region. The region has been called a 'living museum of man' because of the mega-cultural diversity, with different groups adopting various traditional economic practices and possessing age old indigenous knowledge systems.

This entire region is equally known for its diverse landscapes and bio diversity hotspot. The region has unique physiographic landscapes characterised by hills, plateaus and flood plains. The area comprises a significant proportion of the Himalayan and Indo-Burmese biodiversity hotspots. It

frames up an ecological perspective of the socio-economic-cultural lifestyles of these indigenous groups. More than 60 percent of the geographical area is under forest cover, which plays a very crucial role in their traditional economic organization and religious belief system. The entire region can equally be considered as a shifting cultivation based and bamboo based cultural hotspot of India.

The proposed symposium, is an attempt to know about in detail, the biological, cultural, prehistoric and linguistic diversity of Northeast India, from an ethno-ecological perspective. Their age old indigenous tradition and contemporary changes will be analytically reviewed, both from the emic and etic perspective as well as through synchronic and diachronic approaches, to conceptualize Northeast India in the contemporary period.

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