



Book Review

Megalithic Traditions of North East India. 2019. Queenbala Marak (ed.). New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd., pages xxxix + 262, Price: ₹ 1100/- (INR). ISBN-13: 978-93-86682-70-3. (Hard Cover)

Megaliths refer to the large stones as the term has its derivation from the two ancient Greek words – *megas* meaning ‘great’ and *lithos* meaning ‘stone’. These large stones or monuments not only depict to singly standing stones or stone monuments standing in association with other stones but they also refer to smaller stones. Moreover, sometimes the raw material of these structures is not stone but other non-lithic materials such as bamboo and wood (as found in Garo hills of Meghalaya). These monuments are also sometimes Y-shaped wooden posts as found among the Garos, Nagas and Mizos. The megalithic structures have played an important role in the lives of the people across the world including Northeast India since prehistoric times to the present. These structures help to understand the human societies and their cultural practices at present by intervening in these objects of the past. In this regard, the present book titled ‘Megalithic Traditions of North East India’ edited by Queenbala Marak is an important contribution that brings diverse megalithic traditions of the region together under a common thread which the editor opines as ‘living nature’.

With a foreword by Professor of Anthropology, Gauhati University, Late Abdullah Ali Ashraf, this book is comprised of three sections having fourteen chapters. The first section is composed of six chapters describing the regional specificities with respect to the megalithic monuments. The second section talks about the symbolic nature of megaliths through five chapters. There are three chapters in the last section that speaks about the megalithic structures and tradition with respect to land, change, and continuity. The fifteen contributing authors of this edited volume are academicians and scholars of national and international repute. A detailed and well-researched introduction is also provided by the editor.

In the introductory note, the editor gives a comprehensive overview of megaliths, their meanings and definitions, types based on structure and

function, and the process of construction. Marak argues that megalithic tradition is a 'living tradition' among different communities inhabiting this region of Northeast India, which reflects the socio-cultural and religious functions of the society. She sums up by highlighting the changes and continuity in keeping up with the megalithic tradition. The editor also provides information about the dating of these megalithic structures. She concludes by giving the organisation of the chapters of the book.

The book begins with an overview of megaliths in Meghalaya's Khasi-Jaintia Hills. In Chapter 1, Marco Mitri describes the megaliths of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills as fascinating monuments and goes into depth about the many types of megaliths found in this location. He categorises them based on their forms, functions, and meanings. Furthermore, the author addresses the chronology of the megalithic civilization in this region, as well as the distribution of megalithic sites in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the socio-economic and political analysis of the monuments, and the socio-economic and political analysis of the monuments.

P. Binodini Devi. in Chapter-2 provides a comprehensive understanding of morphology and functions of Poumai Naga megaliths in Manipur. These structures are classified into twelve types. The Poumai Nagas perform rites and rituals, as well as a series of merit feasts, which allow a merit-seeker to build megalithic structures.

The third chapter by Watijungshi Jamir explores the origin, affinities, and chronology of Naga megaliths. Through his extensive work, Jamir came across almost all the varieties of megaliths in Nagaland. He believes that contemporary education and Christianity have exacerbated the conflicting situation surrounding the live practise of erecting megaliths. The author also agrees that the megalithic culture of Nagaland is undoubted of prehistoric origin and has survived as a living tradition having a significant socio-cultural role among the Nagas.

Kalpana Choudhury in Chapter 4 focuses on the process of building megaliths as funeral rituals among the Karbis of Dimoria, Assam. She attempts to help the readers comprehend the different types of megaliths based on their construction, as well as details about the rituals connected with the selection process, transportation, erection, and post-erection stages of the megaliths. Despite changes in megalithic traditions among the Plains Karbis of Dimoria brought about by modernity and industry, the underlying significance of the stones is still observed by the community.

The Mizos of Mizoram have also erected stone or wooden megaliths in the past with figures of humans, animals, and other prestigious goods carved on

them to commemorate the different significant events in the lives of the people. These memorials are erected both for the living and the dead, and the carvings provide valuable insights into the early society of the Mizos. Therefore, in Chapter-5, Malsawmliana makes an attempt to understand the ideological basis of megaliths in the Mizo society.

In Chapter-6, Charisma K. Lepcha tries to reflect the essence of the symbolic and social values of megaliths among the Lepcha community from Sikkim in celebrating Mt. Kanchenjunga, their guardian deity. She also tried to classify the megalithic structures present across the state of Sikkim.

Chapter 7 opens up to the second part of the book, which is about the symbolic nature of the megaliths. Through this chapter, Prof. M. Mani Babu discusses human cognition as a unique manifestation that exploited, materialised, and used megaliths as 'external symbolic storage'. He says that the ideas are stored and exposed through these large stones by the indigenous Naga communities living in Manipur.

The eighth chapter by Tiatoshi Jamir reflects on social memories among the Nagas being connected through the conception of monumentality and the idea of landscape. Megaliths and the landscape play a significant role in the inscription and transmission of memories of communities and social groups.

A. Milan Meitei in his chapter on the mortuary behaviour among the Jaintia megaliths discusses about the relation of religion and the ritual practices with mortuary rites that are manifested through the different megalithic structures. He also talks in Chapter-9 about the passage chamber tombs that contribute to the megalithic map of Northeast India. He even points out that though there exist inter-village differences due to geographical space, yet the internal ideology, concept and belief system remain the same for the Niamtre Jaintias.

In Chapter-10, Jelle JP Wouters discusses the sociology of stones in Nagaland. In doing so, he narrates how megaliths produce and communicate both the form and substance of social life among the Chakhesang Nagas of Nagaland. He elaborates on how the "natural entity" of stones is transformed into a "social repertoire" of feelings, emotions, and beliefs. Thus, the author pinpoints that stones can speak among the Chakhesang villagers.

Through the eleventh chapter, Raphael Rousseleau demonstrates the socio-economic and political contexts of the impressive megalithic market site of Nartiang in West Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya by discussing the colonial discourses, narrations of Khasi/ Synteng scholars and also ethnographic enquiries.

Ditamulu Vasa in Chapter-13 discusses about the wood engravings as a form of cultural memories among the Chakhesang Nagas of Nagaland. The chapter also addresses reflective anecdote of a feast giver and the symbolism through indigenous house designs, and the recognition that lives as a cultural memory among the Chakhesang Nagas.

The last chapter of the book is by Sukanya Sharma, wherein she maps the changes in megaliths and the reasons for the changes that have occurred in the town of Cherrapunjee in Meghalaya. She also provides a list of conservation parameters with respect to megaliths keeping in tally with cultural resource management. As a concluding remark, the author pinpoints that the megalithic monuments are not just cultural identity markers but are imprints and symbols of the past that is relevant to the present.

This edited volume by Queenbala Marak is rich in information pertaining to the megaliths and the megalithic tradition still existing in Northeast India. The book covers a wide range of aspects in relation to megalith and the associated tradition from the six states of Northeast India (except Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura). This volume also provides space for readers/ scholars to explore more into the age-old tradition of megalith construction in this part of the country. Every chapter of this volume including the detailed introduction is enriched with references/ reference lists. Since the volume is on Northeast India, the absence of studies from Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura is very much visible. It would have been beneficial and enriching if the editor would have made some more effort to include some studies from these two states also. Besides this, the edited book definitely tries to address some of the significant research gaps pertaining to the study of megaliths in Northeast India benefitting the larger academic fraternity.

Garima Thakuria

Department of Anthropology

Sikkim University

tamirag25@gmail.com