



Tracing post-Pleistocene human movements and cultural connections of the eastern Himalayan region with the Tibetan plateau



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ABSTRACT

The eastern Himalayan region played a crucial role in shaping the population prehistory of the Indian subcontinent. To understand the archaeology of the Tibetan plateau, a closer look at the archaeological remains of the eastern Himalayan region is pertinent. This paper reviews the available data from historical linguistics, genetic sciences, ethnographic oral traditions and historical sources to inform an interpretation of the archaeological problem of early migration and dispersal of people on both sides of the mountain range. Rejecting the hypothesis of the high Himalaya being a barrier for human movements, we suggest that there were considerable population dispersal and cultural exchange across the eastern Himalayan region and the Tibetan plateau from an early date. Further research strategies are also highlighted.

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1. Introduction

The Himalayan mountain range separates the riverine lowlands of the Indian subcontinent from the Tibetan plateau. Archaeological remains from the eastern Himalayan region suggest prehistoric population movement and cultural connections on both sides of the Himalaya. On the basis of human genetic research, some have argued that the Himalaya acted as a barrier for population movements in the past (Cordaux et al., 2004). However, recent studies suggest that the Himalaya, and especially the lowland Terai region, spreading parallel to the southern ranges of the Shiwaliks, acted as a pivotal passageway allowing multiple population interactions at different times (Fornarino et al., 2009). Considering the geographical proximity of the eastern Himalayan region with the Tibetan plateau on its southeastern border, a closer scrutiny of the available sources concerning both the regions would be pertinent to understanding the archaeology of the Tibetan plateau. Considerable attention has focused on evidence for the earliest human occupation and process of colonisation in the extreme environmental conditions of the high Himalaya and Tibetan plateau (Aldenderfer and Zhang, 2004; Chen et al., 2015; Brantingham et al., 2007, 2013; Madsen et al., 2006; Rhode et al., 2007; and all papers in this special issue), but more work needs to be done to integrate the various, quite different, lines of research that speak to early interaction

across, through and within this region, and very little discussion of the eastern Himalaya in particular has contributed to the broader discussion.

The term eastern Himalaya denotes the region of the northeastern part of India extending from Sikkim in the west to Arunachal Pradesh in the east (Prasad, 1999: 480–492) including the Kingdom of Bhutan (Figs. 1 and 2). In this discussion of prehistoric cultural connections of the eastern Himalayan region with the Tibetan plateau, the other contiguous parts of Northeast India lying in the southern part of the river Brahmaputra are also included. The Brahmaputra traverses a total distance of 2880 km. The river originates in the Chema Yundung glacier of Tibet and flows through Assam and Bangladesh through a valley consisting of recent alluvium and deposition of sediments (Sarma, 2005). As a whole, Northeast India, spreading across over 262,000 km², covers the Brahmaputra valley surrounded by several ranges of hills. These hilly ranges are the Arunachal Himalaya on the north and east, the Patkai and Naga hills on the northeast, and the Mikir hills and Shillong plateau on the south, with the Barak valley forming the southern part of this region (Fig. 1).

Anyone who wishes to undertake archaeological research in the eastern Himalayan region and its adjoining areas needs to employ a multi-disciplinary approach for the reconstruction of the movements, dispersals and settlements of the prehistoric people. The scanty nature of archaeological data from the eastern Himalayan region compels one to gather evidence from all possible scientific lines of enquiry in order to paint a vivid picture of the development of early societies. This

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Fig. 1. Map showing the location (black square in A) and topographic details of the eastern Himalayan region and Northeast India (B) in South and East Asia.

evidence can be gathered from historical linguistics, genetic sciences, and ethnographic and historical records to develop an interpretation of the available archaeological data in relation to linguistic hypotheses of early migration and dispersals of people and prehistoric cultural development in this region (for details see Hazarika, 2014). Multi-disciplinary datasets clearly suggest that there were considerable

population dispersals and cultural exchanges across the eastern Himalayan region and the Tibetan plateau. Hence, Northeast India is an area of crucial significance not only in regard to the movement of early peoples into the Tibetan plateau, the “roof of the world”, but also more generally in the dynamics of interaction and influence involving many neighbouring regions.



Fig. 2. Map of administrative units of Northeast India (modified from Census of India 2001 Administrative Atlas).

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