

Fellow's Presentation- MAKAIAS

Topic: **TOWARDS CULTURAL MAPPING OF NORTH EAST INDIA IN RESPECT OF ART AND CRAFTS**

Presenter: **Arpita Basu, Senior Research Assistant, MAKAIAS**

External Expert: **Prof. Pallab Sengupta, President, Asiatic Society**

Date: **03.05.2013** Time: **3.30 pm**

Venue: **Azad Bhavan, Salt Lake**

Rapporteur: **Dr. Amrita Dey, Research Fellow, MAKAIAS**

If cultural mapping is tracing on a map the distribution of cultural facts—art, handicraft, tangible and intangible heritage, food, dress, customs and beliefs—Arpita Basu's presentation was an attempt at evaluating the prospects of cultural mapping of Northeast India, with respect to its arts and crafts. Focusing on the land, people, and arts and crafts of three dynamic states of Northeast India—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram—Arpita presented a detailed survey of the problems, the present scenario, data collection format and future plans of coding the cultural heritage of these areas. Focusing on the exquisite arts and craftsmanship of these people—cane hats of the *Idu's*, *Mishmis* of Arunachal Pradesh, their *Tanghka* paintings; bamboo vessels of the *Changs* of Nagaland, their cane objects, textiles, wood carvings and ornaments; the smoking pipes of the Mizo people, their ornaments and cane work, to name a few—Arpita succinctly traced the growing popularity of these crafts inside homes and in the international market due to their distinct style and uniqueness.

While the government of India has undertaken a few initiatives to explore their potential to the fullest, along with some NGOs, urban *haats*, and self-employment schemes aimed at uplifting the economic condition and social status of the weavers and artisans of these states, Arpita underlines a long litany of resources that yet remain untapped in these areas. Among the weaknesses highlighted in her paper, the most pertinent were:

- Presence of middle men between the craftsmen and the buyers;
- Lack of adequate infrastructure and communication facilities;
- Lack of coordination between government bodies and private players;
- Lack of interest in young people in the craft industry
- Infiltration of cheap goods from outside
- Lack of promotion of products (to mention a few)

With future plans to undertake a detailed survey of arts and crafts of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, including suggestions for developing a relevant standard and benchmark for quality work in artistic creativity, while aiming to prepare an atlas relating the crafts to eco-specific subsistence and resource management strategies, ceremonials and rituals, marketing and exchange centres, the scholar concluded by highlighting that locating the gap in resource availability, accessibility and use of artistry in traditional knowledge would immensely help a researcher to work extensively on the forms that have not been explored or studied earlier in this field.

Discussion Session

The external expert Prof. Pallab Sengupta congratulated Arpita for a thorough presentation on the cultural mapping of the three Northeast Indian states, their clans and the handicrafts they produce. Given the unique cultural and geopolitical significance of this region with multi-cultural, multi-lingual people and tribes, Prof. Sengupta pinpointed the need to cover the remaining four Northeastern states—Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura—in the second phase of her project. He further suggested that she mention her sub-chapter of methodology encompassing the cultural mapping of the whole Northeast region in the earlier section of her dissertation to systematically process the psychological and intellectual aspect of the different ethnic groups, including the myths, legends, folktales, songs, rhymes and riddles; and give a dependable account of deities and religious practices along with analytical descriptions of the life-cycle rituals of the people of this area, which has been left somewhat marginal in the national context. Since cultural mapping is a recurring process, necessitating continuous survey on a wider scale, preferably by a team of scholars from different disciplines, Prof. Sengupta extended all-round cooperation from the Asiatic Society to the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute for Asian Studies (MAKAIAS) in carrying out such a study, designating to Arpita the task of building up the liaison between the two institutions.

Comments and questions from the floor on the following issue:

Comments came on the uphill task of covering the art and craftsmanship of three big states of Northeast India—Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland, with their diverse tribes and sub-tribes, jealously protective of whatever they have;

Questions were raised on the current situation in Arunachal Pradesh following the Chinese intrusion and how it has affected the cultural aspect of the region;

on how the mental and physical backwardness of the menfolk of the Northeast has impeded the overall development of the region;

and on the role of NGOs in selling tribal products at national and international markets, given that most of these artisans are very poor and are unaware of the real value of their products.