

DON BOSCO CENTRE FOR INDIGENOUS CULTURES – SHILLONG-INDIA

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Indigenous / Tribal Population: It is estimated that there are some 5000 indigenous / tribal groups with a population of 300 million living in more than 70 countries on five continents. Of these some 190 million are in Asia. India has the largest number of indigenous / tribal population in the world. India's 95 million indigenous / tribal populations are distributed into nearly 500 tribes and sub-tribes. About 85% of these are in Central India (mainly Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan). North East India is the home of 11% of India's Indigenous / Tribal population [that is 10.45 million]. The remaining 4% are spread over the rest of the country. (See, Joseph ANIKUZHAKATIL, George PALACKAPILLIL and Joseph PUTHENPURAKAL, eds., *Understanding Tribal Cultures for effective education*, New Delhi / Shillong: CBCI Commission for Education and Culture and DBCIC Publications, 2003, 11).

1. A brief description

DBCIC (Don Bosco Centre for indigenous cultures) is a unique venture of the Salesians of Don Bosco (after 80 years of missionary service in the North of India) to develop expert facilities for the preservation and promotion of numerous beautiful and diverse indigenous cultures of North East India in particular, and the sub-continent as a whole. Everyone knows that a subtle but impoverishing de-culturation or de-tribalization is taking place among the numerous indigenous peoples of the world. This is true also of the indigenous population of North East India. Our posterity will be deprived of the wisdom enshrined in the proverbs, folklore, dances, artefacts, traditional music, celebrations, myths and core values and worldviews of indigenous peoples if something is not done to preserve and promote the values and talents found among indigenous peoples. Signs are there that society is being burdened with “uprooted” generations of young people who float about and who end up in insurgency, easy-money, extortion, drugs, terrorist activities and all sorts of anti-social behaviour. It is true that the multifaceted insurgency problem in the North Eastern States cannot be attributed only to a culturally uprooted society. There are other causes, too. Absence of economic development is one of the major causes. However, we feel that just as uprooted trees cannot bear fruit, uprooted people too may not have anything positive to contribute to human development, common welfare and the creation of a peaceful and harmonious society. The vicious circle is clear: People uprooted from their cultures lead to poor economic development, and poor economic development

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brings about insurgency and other anti-social expressions which in their turn give rise to more and more cultural up-rootedness.

We at Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures in Shillong would like to take *the path of culture* and help young people to be rooted in their own cultural values and talents so that they will be able to build a Peaceful, Prosperous and Harmonious Society in North East India. The challenge of an empty culture promoted and publicised by modern Means of Communication is too strong for the young to resist unless they are deeply rooted in the transcendental values embedded in their own indigenous cultures. DBCIC proposes to meet this challenge by means of its Museum and its effort to develop a museum concept in education, study and research, publications, animations and training programmes for the young through workshops, courses, seminars, inter-tribal get-togethers, etc.

2. What is there at DBCIC at present?

DBCIC is an ambitious project. It has been built over a period of 10 years (1994-2004). Its seven floors represent the Seven Sister States of the North East: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. To this list we may also add Sikkim which now is considered as part of North East India. The DBCIC building rises to form a flame in Shillong's skyline to remind everyone that cultures can light up and warm up peoples, if correctly understood. The DBCIC basic-facility-building has a total floor area of 56,000 sq. ft and 15, 154 sq.ft of wall area for display of art objects and paintings.

At present DBCIC has several distinct operational areas:

Exhibition of Cultural Artefacts: The Exhibition of Cultural Artefacts thematically arranged from floor to floor in the different galleries along with excellent paintings depicting various aspects of the cultures of the North East forms the first and the most visible aspect of DBCIC.

Study and Research Wing: At the service of the Study and Research Wing are the Conference Hall for scholars and researchers, the Temporary Exhibition Hall and, above all, the specialized DBCIC Library. The library has some 8500 volumes with space for an additional 10,000 volumes. These volumes come mainly under the following subjects: Culture, Indigenous Cultures, Anthropology, Sociology, Linguistics, Museology, and General Knowledge.

Culture Related Publications: Publications on culture and related topics constitute the third aspect of DBCIC. Within a few years DBCIC has brought out 12 publications.

3. Developing a Museum Concept in Education

DBCIC is launching into this new area of Developing a museum concept in education. How can a Museum be a place of learning? In this connection, DBCIC is

preparing graded exercises for students and visitors to help them find meaning in what they see in DBCIC.

If this effort turns out to be successful, it will be appreciated by the educational institutions in Shillong and in the North East. Eventually we hope to recommend it to the Educational Authorities requesting them to integrate it in their syllabus preparation.

Museum as a place of learning will certainly be a change for students who are accustomed to class room learning. In the course of time DBCIC will organize classes on learning by doing, namely, classes on fine arts (including painting, modelling in plaster of Paris, clay, *putty*, fibreglass) and traditional music will be promoted by DBCIC.

4. A DBCIC dream

Since the number of students and visitors to DBCIC is on the increase, DBCIC has a special dream. And the dream is to digitize the rich collection of Traditional Musical Instruments in the DBCIC *Musical Instruments Gallery*. Once the traditional musical instruments become alive by means of electronic touch screen, the youth especially will spend hours listening to their own traditional indigenous musical instruments which unfortunately are being forgotten. This is again an ambitious dream! This would mean searching out those people who are still alive in the different villages of North East India and who can play the musical instruments we have on display. A DBCIC team will have to visit them, arrange a suitable day or days to record the visual and the audio parts and then transfer them into at least 10 touch screens or computer monitors for the young to enjoy them. Once they are rooted in their own indigenous music, in the values contained in their proverbs, folklore, stories, myths and worldviews, they will be able to appreciate the same in other cultures and societies, for they will not be any more an up-rooted people.

5. DBCIC Galleries

The following is a list of the various galleries in DBCIC. It takes generally about two hours to go through them. Write-ups carrying useful explanation are provided in the galleries.

Photo Gallery: It houses precious photos of an anthropological value taken by missionaries working in the area.

Conference Hall: Meant chiefly for the use of scholars, researchers, teachers, leaders and heads of tribal groups when they organize short courses of one or two days, on a particular theme. At present it is also used for giving a short introduction to groups of visitors to DBCIC.

Mission and Culture Gallery: The love the Church has for all the cultures, a brief history of the Church in the North East, a summary presentation of the twenty centuries

of history of the Church, the services the Church renders in the North East, the Cultural Presentation of the Church among the Khasi-Pnar and the Garos of the State of Meghalaya, the different groups of missionaries who have worked in the North East, and a model of the first Cathedral Church at Shillong that was reduced to ashes in the great fire of 1936, etc. can be seen in this Gallery. One can spend even an hour in this particular Gallery only explaining the history, the Khasi-Pnar and the Garo mythologies and how they are linked to the present times. Entrance Alcove representing all the States of the North East: There are twenty-two small alcoves in this entrance to DBCIC. They form a big alcove with sceneries from all the States of the North East. The life size fibreglass figures representing the many cultures of the North East act as a friendly welcome to the visitors.

Introductory Gallery: With the help of four panels the visitors get an overview of the whole North East. The Flora and Fauna panel is colourful and attractive.

Prehistory Gallery: The origin of the Universe and of Man is shrouded in mystery. There have been efforts to unravel it. Creation and evolution are the two important answers. While the Creationists say that God is the author of the universe and of the origin of man, several evolutionists hold that the universe evolved gradually from simple to complex, from one cell Amoeba to Man. Today, many scholars are of the opinion that both Creation and Evolution are not contradictory in terms. Evolution requires a moving force, which the creationists would call the “Divine Intervention”. The Prehistory gallery tries to explain the history of Man’s gradual development as expounded by some of the Physical Anthropologists.

Land and Peoples Gallery: It gives a beautiful overview of the places and peoples of the North East. 32 large size photographs in colour and 26 in black and white, and 18 life size figures and 60 busts adorn this exciting area.

Fishing Hunting and Gathering Gallery: The varieties of baskets used in fishing and the implements used in hunting and the types of containers used during harvesting are indeed astonishing. They provide a glimpse into the creativity and genius of the people’s of North East India.

Agricultural Gallery: Three types of agricultural practices are shown in this Gallery by means of exceedingly beautiful dioramas. They are: wet cultivation, *jhum* (or slash and burn or shifting) cultivation and terrace cultivation. The 255 year old mighty tree in the middle of this Gallery is a graphic demonstration that if slash and burn cultivation disappears from the area, it will give way to big trees like the one in the Gallery.

Traditional Technology Gallery: The peoples of the North East are industrious in their village surroundings. The dioramas showing pottery, wine making, basket making, black smithy, gold smithy, weaving, wood carving, leather works and cane making provide a quick tour of the North East with appropriate explanations.

Basketry Gallery: A wonderful diorama showcasing four different tribes (Assamese, Karbi, Khasi and Naga) engaged in the same occupation of basket making. The reali-

stic village set up takes the visitor to the remotest corners of the North East. The innermost section displays articles which people use in their homes. A feeling that one has visited many houses in the North East accompanies the visitor as he/she moves into the next Gallery.

Musical Instruments Gallery: This Gallery is a feast of traditional musical instruments. Displaying a variety of items, this Gallery after digitization will become a splendid best attraction, perhaps, to all music lovers.

Religion and Culture Gallery: Twelve large panels guide the visitors through the major religious beliefs and cultures of the world. One cannot rush through it if he/she prefers to read everything written in this Gallery.

Library: It houses some 8,500 volumes on Anthropology, Sociology, Linguistics, Museology and Culture, especially indigenous cultures. The facilities provided for serious researchers and the quite atmosphere of the library is a good combination for productive intellectual output.

Weapons Gallery: Weapons too are part of culture. Traditional weapons may not be used now a days. But the Gallery preserves them to enter the past and to experience how people struggled to protect themselves and their dear ones.

Costume and Ornaments Gallery: This is another feast of ornaments, shawls and colourful tribal costumes of the North East. The Gallery has life size figures of men and women of several tribes in their traditional dress: Nishi, Tangsa, Nocte, Apatani, Adi, Mizo, Manipuri, Mao, Angami, Khasi, Pnar, Garo, Karbi, Tiwa, Dimasa, and Mising. They are there as if to invite the visitors to their respective villages and to taste life to its full tribal expressions.

Don Bosco and Culture Gallery: DBCIC is dedicated to one of the greatest Educators and Friends of the Young, namely, Don Bosco. The Don Bosco group of Educators are present in all the five continents and in over 150 countries. Through Academic, Technical and Agricultural education as well as other activities, Don Bosco serves the cause of Culture in an eminent degree. The Gallery is a continent-wise showcasing of the service to culture around the world.

Land and Housing Pattern Gallery: Housing Pattern reveals the socio-economic situation of peoples. The Gallery provides insight into this particular aspect and guides the visitors through North East.

Art Gallery: This is another special attraction in DBCIC. The very entrance to it is different from other Galleries. It displays all the seven States and Sikkim by means of their ancient artefacts and paintings. Well-designed and carefully arranged, this Art Gallery is a place wherein the visitors are given a taste of how creative the indigenous peoples are.

Media and Culture Gallery: Culture is something alive. It moves forward. It meets modern means of presentation. The Media and Culture Gallery situated in the top-

most floor of DBCIC is a welcome place to relax, to watch a dance, enjoy a cultural celebration and see the life of someone or other who gave his/her life for the promotion of the cultures of peoples. Echoless and sound proof, quite and free from any disturbance, the Media Gallery is where useful programmes of Video, PowerPoint presentations, etc. can be organized for groups of 150 persons at a time. Programmes that will create an Osmosis of cultures leading to a Culture of Peace, Harmony and Collaboration can be held in this Gallery.

6. DBCIC and Ph. D Student awards

At present 5 students are given financial assistance, thanks to NXL Torino (Noi per Loro) to complete their Ph.D. in Anthropology, Sociology, Museology and specialization in photography and documentation. Even if they are employed outside the DBCIC structure once they have completed their studies, they will be linked to DBCIC and render assistance as Research Assistants to other students.

7. DBCIC Data Bank

DBCIC Library Staff have already started scanning whatever material available to us at present to lay the foundation for a Data Bank. Our Data will be at the service of people around the world by means of our website or e-mail.

8. DBCIC Language Institute

Its objective is to help interested people (priests, religious and lay people from outside the respective language region but are called to work within the language area in question) to equip themselves with the basic knowledge of local languages and customs. The language courses that will be held every year are for learning Khasi, Garo, Assamese Bodo and Hindi.