

Studies in the Early Art of North East India : An Overview

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Monuments of N.E India, like those in many other areas of the Indian Sub-Continent, were rediscovered by the British. The consolidation of British rule over the greater part of erstwhile Assam was preceded by thorough exploration of the region by a number of English officials ; some of them were keen observers of 'ruins and antiquities'. Their observations, recorded in the form of papers and communications, appeared in the pages of the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. A. R. Hoernle in the *Centenary Review of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, published in 1885, listed seven articles relating to Assam monuments ; the first of which was published as early as 1835. Captain G. E. Westmacott's 'Description of Ancient Temple and Ruins at Chardwar in Assam' is probably the very first work in English on Assam monuments. This was followed in 1840 by a paper on Ancient Landgrants on Copper, dug up near Tezapore in the Darrang District. Eight years later (1848), Lt. Col. S. F. Hannay described the antiquities in the vicinity of Suddyah in Upper Assam. In 1851, the same author contributed 'a very short notice of a fine stone-bridge (Sil Hako) near Gowhatty in the Kamrup district'. In 1855, 'There is an important contribution by Captain E. Taite Dalton, giving a full description of the antiquities of Assam, especially its temple and sculpture (in Gowhatty, Tezapore, Seesee and other places)'. These papers must have created some amount of interest, because Hoernle had rightly recognised the 'temple ruins of Assam as a subject. . . . well worthy of research'. In 1874, there are two papers on this subject which had been neglected since 1855'. Major H. H. Godwin Austen described the ruins of Dimapur and Mr. J. M. Foster those of Jayasagar.

Initiated by the amateur antiquarians, the study of Assam monuments in the 19th Century was concerned by and large with the mediaeval remains ; ruins of a Kachari fort, temples or stone bridge constructed under the patronage of Ahom rulers. These were certainly closer to popular memory and thus easily comprehensible by the Europeans. In describing the monuments, the British officials seemed to have laid great emphasis on the technical and functional aspects of the monuments.

The British initiative must, however, be viewed in proper perspective. Confronted with a world, very much different from their own, the first group of British officials came to realise that every bit of information is essential to comprehend the reality of the situation.

This explain the extraordinary zeal with which they had tried to collect and systematise information on the ethnographic, zoological, geological and cultural material. Ruins, by no means, was their exclusive concern.

The Indian interest in this field during the 19th century is demonstrated by J. C. Dutta's *Old Relics of Kamarupa* (Calcutta, 1891). As a Sanskritist, Dutt's primary concern was inscription but, on certain occasions, he did exhibit amazing clarity in his appreciation of Assam temples.

The first systematic history of Assam came out in 1905 and its author Edward Gait utilised the earlier writings on Assam monuments. It is unfortunate that Gait, with his wide and first hand knowledge of Assam, did not incorporate much about its monuments in the history. The establishment of the Archaeological Survey and its exploratory works in Assam brought into light impressive material remains of the medieval and pre-medieval periods. The Annual Reports of the Archaeological Survey of India started documenting new sites and finds. In some instances, archaeologists were re-surveying the sites described in the pages of the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. T. Bloch explored Dimapur and Bhisamak Nagar following the trails of Godwin Austen and Hannay respectively. The early decades of the century is marked by the greater involvement of Indian Scholars in the study of Assam monuments. A very important development is the emergence of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti in 1912 with the explicit purpose of promotion of researches in History, Archaeology and Ethnography.

During this period, three Indian officers of the Archaeological Survey of India, viz K. N. Dikshit, R. D. Banerji and T. N. Ramachandran made valuable contributions. Apart from reporting their findings, they laid the foundation for serious studies on Assam art. Many of the basic issues in art-historical studies can be identified for the first time, in their writings.

As one reads through their reports, three important problems, with which they were concerned, become apparent. In varying degrees these questions occupied their writings. The questions relate to the (a) impact of Gupta art on Assam, (b) interrelationship between the Art of Assam and those of the neighbouring regions, and (c) the distinctiveness of Assam art. Dikshit also made a very significant observation on the stylistic affiliations of Assam Art. "The affinities of *Assamese* art would seem to lie more with the School of Bihar and Orissa than with the contemporary Pala art of Bengal. This is not unnatural as of the streams of influence that have moulded the cultures of Assam, the strongest current has always been from North Bihar and Mid-India". This generalisation became a dominant concept in subsequent studies on Assam art.

R. D. Banerji was trying to understand Pre-Ahom monuments against a broader perspective. Faced with Assam monuments, especially of the Pre-Ahom period, Rakhaldas adopted an essentially comparative method in understanding the nuances of Assam

art. For him, comparison at each stage, with the known and more or less securely dated monuments in other parts of India afforded clues to the date and stylistic affiliation of Assam monuments. To R. D. Banerji's credit goes the discovery of the most important monument in Assam, viz. Dah-Parvatiya Door frame which he placed to the Gupta period. More important is Banerji's recognition of the distinctiveness of this monument which he relates to Pataliputra School. Banerji elaborated his formulations on Dah-Parvatiya Door Frame in his *The Age of the Imperial Guptas* (1924, published posthumously in 1931). T. N. Ramachandran's reports on the Doboka Group of Ruins and Deo-Parbat ruins (1936-37) embody ideas that deserve serious consideration. Like most of the scholars of his generation, Ramachandran believed that the regional art idioms are derivative of the Gupta and late-Gupta styles. He further held that the art of the neighbouring region, viz. Bengal, has important bearing on the Assam art, which nevertheless, exhibits certain distinctive local elements.

The third decade of the century is marked by the publication of the *Journal of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti*. A number of local scholars, viz. K. L. Barua, Sarbeswar Katakī, Padmanath Bhattacharya and R. M. Nath, started writing with great zeal on the 'Ancient remains and antiquities' scattered over different parts of Assam. Important as the works are, these are mostly in the nature of descriptive account, with very little to offer on the crucial issue in art-studies. Nurtured in the tradition of historical archaeology popularised by Cunningham and his associates, these scholars brought into light a rich crop of sculpture, architectural remains, inscriptions, and coins. Often their concern was to locate historical sites and relate those to textual and literary sources. R. M. Nath observed on the Deopani ruins : "All the images are massive in construction, standing upright in the simple form without any sign of movement or pliability with short-featured physiognomy. The style is definitely of the *Utkala* tradition of the 8th and 9th century A. D." Another interesting essay in the *Journal* of K. A. S. is Sarbeswar Katakī's "The Discovery of three Stone Images at Gauhati". Katakī did comment on the iconographic features of the sculptures ; but dismissed the problem of dating in very few words. Along with the introduction of a *Journal*, the third decade of the century saw the publication of K. L. Barua's *Early History of Kamarupa* (Shillong, 1933) - a singularly important work with wider implication for the later scholarship on Assam. By the time, Barua had taken up his work, Padmanath Bhattacharya's *Kamarupa Sasanavali* (Srihatta, 1338 B. S) had already come out. This necessitated a re-alignment of early history of Assam. And the Varmanas of Kamarupa emerged as one the major powers of North in the post Gupta period. In Bhaskarvarman, Assam identified a genuine 'Local' national hero'. The 'Golden Age' analogy, which remains a powerful intellectual concept in Indian history, was extended to early Assam history. And any major cultural achievement tended to be associated with the family of Bhaskarvarman. K. L. Barua quotes at length from the reports of Dikshit,

Banerji and Ramachandran. Dikshit's observation on the affinities of Assamese art with Bihar and Orissa rather than the neighbouring Bengal found favour with K. L. Barua. Barua appeared to be greatly influenced by Vincent Smith, Foucher, Grunewald—a group of Western scholars who were keen on establishing Greek influence on every aspect of Indian Art. This becomes apparent in his observation on Dah-Parbatiya Door-Frame figures : “Another striking feature of this piece of work is the pose of the figures of Ganga and Jamuna which seems to be characteristically Greek while in their anatomical correctness these figures resemble Hellenic art more than anything else.” R. M. Nath, tried to relate art and architecture to cultural development of different periods of Assam history. Almost echoing K. L. Barua, he wrote : ‘Culture of various branches of fine arts went on side by side with industrial development’. To him monuments are of importance as evidence of “spread of Hindu culture and ideas into the surrounding hilly areas, and the Mikir Hills, are still full of architectural and sculptural ruins of Hindu temple and deities”. R. M. Nath's *Background of Assamese Culture* (Gauhati, 1948) contains highly suggestive observations ; but like Barua, Nath's emphasis lay elsewhere. Nath, however, had a fine sense of appreciation of monuments. In his *Glorious Assam* (Shillong 1949), one comes across some of the finest reproduction of Assam sculptures. More important, however, is Nath's concern about the ethnic dimensions of Assam art. Representation of different tribal groups in the sculptured panels is a very promising area of enquiry. Unfortunately Nath did not write any commentary on the plates, it still remains the basic source-book for the study of Assam art.

The intellectual legacy of K. L. Barua is clearly demonstrated in B. K. Barua's *A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period)* (Nowgong, 1951). Its chapter on Fine Arts (Chapter VIII) is based mainly on the earlier archaeological reports.

When it comes to commenting on the stylistic affiliations, B. K. Barua, like his predecessors, quoted with approval K. N. Dikshit's views on the affinities of Assam art with Bihar and Orissa instead of Bengal. As a historian of culture Barua was aware of synthetic character of Assamese art and articulated his views in no uncertain terms. “From the twelfth century, however, there seems to appear marked provincial characteristic in Assamese art. During this period, Tantric rituals began to dominate the Brahmanic religion and the Mongoloid infiltration influenced the culture of the population.”

P C Choudhury's *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A D* (Gauhati, 1959) gives a descriptive account of Assam monument, arranged in a site-wise sequence. Like most of the earlier authors, Choudhury has very little to offer on the problems of dating and stylistic affiliation. As with K. L. Barua and B. K. Barua, Choudhury also overplays the bearing of Bihar and Orissa art on the Assamese art. Contradicting B. K. Barua, Choudhury argues that the peculiarities and differences between the Assamese art and those of other parts of

India were mainly due to the non-Aryan influence in Assam.

A number of recent works have touched upon various aspects of Assam's art history. Arun Bhattacharjee's *Icons and Sculptures of Early and Medieval Assam* (Delhi, 1978) attempts an iconographic classification of the known corpus of Assam sculptures. The arrangement is on the lines of J. N. Banerjee's treatment in the *Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta, 1959). For all practical purpose, Bhattacharjee's work is a catalogue of sculptures and should be viewed accordingly. In sharp contrast, B. N. Mukherjee's *East Indian Art Styles : A Study in Parallel Trends* (Calcutta, 1980) poses very important issues pertaining to art history of Eastern India with specific bearings on Assam. Apart from a Chapter on Assam sculptures, there is an appendix on two inscribed Harihara images of Assam. Mukherjee argues that a large number of Assam sculptures datable between the 9th and 13th Centuries A. D. betray close stylistic affinity to the Pala school, even though they occasionally indicate local variations particularly in physiognomical details. This formulation stands as a strong rejection of K. N. Dikshit's views which underplayed the importance of Pala-Sena idiom. More important aspect of Mukherjee's formulation is recognition of what he calls 'parallel trend' which was "born out of fusion between a local art-styles and the lingering traits of Gupta school in Kamarupa during the post-Gupta period." R. D. Choudhury's *Archaeology of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam* (New Delhi, 1985) and N. D. Choudhury's *Historical Archaeology of Central Assam from the earliest period to A. D. 12th Century* (New Delhi, 1985) - are the two most recent works. Both the volumes pertain to the tradition of historical archaeology. Choudhury's treatment of sculpture is basically thematic, and like most of his predecessors he has taken dates of sculptures for granted. But, compared to most of the writers on Assam art, Choudhury is much more careful and critical in his observations of the stylistic features and connections. He observes : 'the fine Art of Assam tended to be closer to the art of the Gupta, the Palas and the Senas. This intercourse was possible because of the geographical factors We cannot say that the art of old Assam had less affinity with the Pala School of Bengal. On the other hand, we can guess that the medieval Assamese art had less affinity with the Orissan art.'

Although, the study of Assam art has crossed one hundred and fifty odd years, the authoritative works on Indian Art remain painfully indifferent to this region. Among the historians of Indian Art, R. D. Banerjee for the first time tried to view Assam sculptures in relation to the major developments of Gupta Art. Since then for all practical purpose, Dah-Parbatiya Door Frame became the sole representative of Assam art. Art historians, writing after Banerji, faithfully reproduced his views on its chronological position and stylistic affiliations. Nihar Ranjan Ray contrasted heavy, round and tough female busts from different sites of Malwa to soft, slender and delicate figures of Banaras, Rajgir and Tezpur. Ray attempted to view Assam as a part of East Indian art-tradition.

Dah-Parbatya Door-frame has been discussed by Frederick M. Asher (*The Art of Eastern India*, 300-800, Minnesota, 1980) and Joanna G. Williams (*The Art of Gupta India Empire and Province*, Princeton, 1982) and Odette Viennot (*Temples De Le Inde Central Et Occidentale*, Paris, 1976). Both Asher and Williams, assign it to the 7th Century A. D., on different grounds. Williams argues that alleged Gupta elements are "atavistic features surviving in an outlying area that drew upon a variety of traditions formed elsewhere." She suggests, somewhat in the line of Asher, that it follows patterns current in Bhuvaneshvar in the seventh and eighth centuries. Williams attempted to explain the possible Orissan connection through dynastic history of the period. This is undoubtedly reading too much into dynastic history-dynastic association of Indian art has always been overstated.

Beyond the Dah-Parbatya door-frame, Assam monuments have drawn a blank in art-historical studies. C. C. Dasgupta in his *Origin and Evolution of Indian Clay Sculpture* (Calcutta, 1961) spoke of Assam School of terracotta art. A promising area of enquiry which was never pursued in right earnest. Similarly, Nihar Ranjan Ray in his discussion on Eastern Indian School of Bihar and Bengal of the early medieval period made a cryptic comment on the reverberation of this school in Kashmir, Nepal, Tibet and a few Sub-himalayan tract. But nothing more than that. S. K. Chatterji's views that 'Assam in pre-Muslim times was, in the matter of art particularly stone sculpture, which has been preserved - just an extension of Bihar and Bengal, from Gupta times' - is hardly acceptable to any serious student of art-history.

It is most unfortunate that so far no serious attempt has been made to write a connected history of the art of N. E. India. Any attempt in this direction must begin by trying to work out a dependable chronology of Assam sculptures on the basis of inscribed pieces, and by resorting to a comparison with the dated examples from other parts of Eastern India. In so doing, one must not however, lose sight of Assam's historical developments, its ethnic composition and above all the mode and mechanism translation of indigenous perceptions into medium of stone, clay or metal. The interaction of Assam's perception of form with those of the regions historically linked to it has also to be situated in proper perspective. The distinctiveness of Assam art must be viewed along with the recognition of its commonality with Indian traditions. Beyond Assam, the monument of other N. E. Indian states have received short shrift from the art historians. Although some of the monuments like Unakoti in Tripura were known as early as 1921-22 (Annual Report Archaeological Survey of India 1921-22, pp 85-87), no attempt was made to locate them in a broader chronological stylistic framework. With the exception of a solitary sculpture, nothing of the Unakoti material figured in R. D. Banerji's exhaustive study. (*Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval sculpture* Delhi, 1933, p 111, plate 1) A very important assemblage of bronze, stone and terracotta sculpture have been discussed in great details

by Debala Mitra (Antiquities of Peak and Jolaibari, *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Vol. XVII, 1976 pp 70-80). The present author made an attempt to work out a chronological-stylistic framework of Tripura monuments on the basis of published and unpublished data, wherein he tried to establish a chronological scheme to identify the impact of dominant eastern Indian idiom and to determine the nature and extent of the influences of autochthonous elements (Gautam Sengupta, Early Sculpture of Tripura in J. B. Bhattacharjee (ed) *Studies In The History of North East India, Shillong*, 1986).

The monuments of Barak Valley, the neighbouring region of Tripura, are virtually unknown to the scholarly community, exception is R. M. Nath's synoptic account *Antiquities of Cachar*. Our recent survey of a select area around Silchar has brought to light a significant crop of sculptures and architectural fragment assignable between C. 8th - 10th centuries A. D.

In spite of the absence of any coherent study of Arunachal monuments, some attempts were made to locate and describe the sites. L. N. Chakravarty's *Malinithan* (Shillong, 1974) provides a first-hand account of sculptures and architectural fragment unearthed in course of an excavation. Similarly, Y. A. Raikar and S. Chatterjee's very brief work *Archaeology In Arunachal Pradesh* (Shillong 1980), brings together useful material. Nevertheless, the works cited above are basically in the nature of descriptive accounts. - a statement that holds good, by and large for the writings on art and architecture of North-East India.

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