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EIGHTH SESSION

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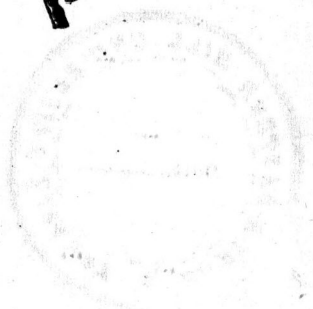
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PREFACE

The eighth session of the North East India History Association at the Kohima College, Kohima was indeed a milestone in the history of the Association. With this we have been able to hold at least one session in all the seven states of the region within eight years of the existence of our association. The session was attended by about one hundred and fifty delegates and sixty research papers were presented and discussed in the three-day session. It is for the first time that an academic gathering of this magnitude was organised in Nagaland. An additional feature of this session was a symposium on "Indian History Congress and Historical Research in the North-East" organised by the Association to mark the Golden Jubilee celebration of the Indian History Congress in which the key paper was presented by Dr. O.P. Kejariwal of the North-Eastern Hill University.

The present volume is the proceedings of the Seventh Annual Session of the North East India History Association held at the Kohima College, Kohima on October 27-29, 1987. Professor Gangmumei Kabui of Manipur University presided over the session which was inaugurated by Shri Shikiho Sema, Minister of Education, Government of Nagaland. Shri H. Gupta, Principal, Kohima College did us a great honour as Local Secretary of the session. Principal Gupta, his colleagues and the students made excellent arrangements for the conference and stay of the delegates. Besides its high academic contents, the delegates shall cherish the fond memory of the session for warmth of the reception extended by the organisers. Our thanks are due to the authorities of the Kohima College and the Government of Nagaland.

I am personally thankful to my colleagues Dr. O.P. Kejariwal, Dr. J.P. Singh, Dr. Milton S. Sangma, Dr. Gautam Sengupta and Dr. D.R. Syiemlieh for the help in editing and publishing the volume.

We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.

(J.B. Bhattacharjee)

Shillong General Secretary
The 1 July 1988 North East India History Association

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RECENT TRENDS IN THE HISTORY OF ART OF ANCIENT ASSAM

Gautam Sengupta

Background

The study of Assam art has crossed one hundred and fifty odd years. Initiated by the British Officials as early as 1835,¹ it has found a place in almost all the important² works on the early history of Assam. Elsewhere,² we have tried to explain how the history of Assam art is linked with the growing consciousness about its own past. In the monuments of the bygone days, Assam identified a symbol of its distinctive identity. It is no wonder that the most impressive monuments of ancient Assam were associated by pioneering scholars with the family of Bhaskaravarman. At the same time, most of the earlier authors were preoccupied with the crucial question of the regional dimension of Assam art. But they were perceptive enough to recognise the obvious connections of Assam art with other regional traditions. In the process, Assam art was considered as an important segment of Indian art in general. Nevertheless, the problem of autonomy vis-a-vis interdependence of Assam art in relation to the Indian tradition was never lost sight of. It recurs as a basic historical problematic in the writings of historians of Assam art - irrespective of regional or national affiliations.

I

The Recent Scenario

In this brief paper, our attempt is to identify the recent trends in the art-history of ancient (pre-Ahom) Assam as reflected in a number of works published over the last ten years. A

note of caution must be added at this point. Assam, in this paper, as also in the works cited hereafter, stands for the Brahmaputra Valley and its adjacent tracts. Southern Assam does not come under the purview of this essay.

The publications, discussed herein, are broadly divisible into two categories - a set of works is concerned exclusively with Assam. Arun Bhattacharjee's "Icons and Sculptures of Early and Medieval Assam" (Delhi, 1978); N.D. Choudhury's "Historical Archaeology of Central Assam from the Earliest Period to A.D. 12th Century" (New Delhi, 1985) and R.D. Choudhury's "Archaeology of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam" (New Delhi, 1985) can be cited as representative examples. In some other works, Assam monuments are considered as parts of a broader geo-cultural region, viz. Eastern India. These are: B.N. Mukherjee's "East Indian Art Styles: A Study in Parallel Trends" (Calcutta, 1980), Frederick M. Tsher's "The Art of Eastern India 300-800" (Minnesota, 1980) and Joanna G. William's "The Art of Gupta India Empire and Province" (Princeton, 1982).

Bhattacharjee attempts an iconographic classification of the known corpus of Assam sculptures. The arrangement, according to author's own admission, is on the lines of J.N. Banerjea's treatment in the "Development of Hindu Iconography" (Calcutta, 1959). An almost total, albeit uncritical, acceptance of the northern and southern canonical texts spoils the usefulness of the work to a considerable extent. The obvious hiatus between the text and the context was never given any recognition. In this connection, Maheswar Neog's observation is worth serious consideration: "It is to be noted that the icons found in Assam, as in other states, do not always conform to the tenets laid down in old Sanskrit texts of Iconography; nor do they invariably refer to the dhyanas given

in tantric texts connected with the actual worship of deities".³ Little attention has been paid to the distinctive regional traditions in iconography as indicated by the texts like the Kalikapurana. Bhattacharjee's method of classification and dating appears to be extremely arbitrary. He writes: "The arrangement of PGCS (Lotus, Mace, Wheel and Conch-Shell) makes the god Trivikrama of the twenty-four forms of Vishnu according to the Agni Purana and Padma-Purana and Upendra according to Hemadri".⁴ The important question is which system is of relevance in the context of Assam? Did Assam artists or priests, at any point of time, rely on the southern texts? Elsewhere Bhattacharjee observes about an Ambari Vishnu: "The image lacks in the life-like presentations of the Visnu image of Tihu. The carving is rather crude and so it may belong to a later period, say the decadent period of the Brahmanical art, towards the 13th Century A.D."⁵ At the heart of this logic is a comparison with the stylistic evolution of Pala-Sena Sculptures in total disregard to the specificities of Ambari Sculptures. For all practical purpose. Bhattacharjee's work is a catalogue of sculptures and should be viewed accordingly.

The two other works pertain to the tradition of historical archaeology, but unlike some works which are mostly based on earlier archaeological accounts, these are backed by extensive field works conducted by the authors themselves. Admittedly, their usefulness lies largely in bringing to notice hitherto unpublished materials.

N.D. Choudhury's area of enquiry is restricted to the five districts of Central Assam, viz. Darrang, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills; situated between 24°55' and 27°08N Latitude and 91°42' and 93°53' East Longitude. The author conforms, by and large, to the pattern worked out by B.K. Barua in "A Cultural History

of Assam" (Nowgong, 1951). The sculptures, for example, are treated thematically, as (i) human figure, (ii) animal figure, and (iii) ornamental design. Like most of the earlier authors, Choudhury has taken dates of monuments for granted. One does not come across a coherent methodology in the assessment of dates or stylistic features. There is a categorical recognition of the interrelationship of Assam art with those of the neighbouring regions as also of 'local' elements. Thus he argues: "His (a Vidyadhara on a Ceiling slab from Deoparbat) legs are so arranged as to be symmetrical with the circular course of the seed vessel, a feature met with in Gupta-Pala sculptures. The facial type is local, the decorative and anatomical details recall late Gupta and Pala features".⁶ And, he continues: "The facial type of the men and women occurring on the freezes from Deopahar are distinctly local". Evidently, the terms Gupta, late Gupta and Pala are used without any serious consideration to the art-historical categories. Widely divergent chronological and stylistic elements have been grouped together. In spite of an emphasis on the 'local' elements, its details remained unspecified. Choudhury concludes his discussion on Sculpture and Architecture with the following observations: "In the architectural history of Assam before the coming of the Ahoms two phases of architecture have been identified, the result of two art-currents, flowing from the west and from different sources. One carries with it evidence of a Gupta-Hindu stream percolating into Assam, and the other was formed by the extreme eastern limits of Orissan style. The former is evidenced by the door-frame of Da-Parbatia. The temple forming the latter group allied to the Orissan style have the appearance of shrines more than temples, as they consist mainly of Sikhara, with only a small porch or portico." These are reproduced in extenso, to illustrate how the present generation of authors are largely under the spell

of earlier writings and very much unconcerned about the conceptual advances in the realms of Indian art history. Elsewhere he observes: "The sculptures in Central Assam exhibit various regional characteristics. Several decorative motifs, architectural design and temple sculptures are imitated from Bengal, Orissa and Central India".

Compared to N.D. Choudhury's work, that of R.D. Choudhury has a broader focus. R.D. Choudhury devotes two elaborate chapters to Architectural Remains and Sculpture. A significant exercise is to reconstruct the plan of the Dah-Parbatiya temple, on the basis of P. Sarma's work.¹⁰ It is, however, doubtful whether any worthwhile picture is likely to emerge out of the present state of ruins. Looking for parallel with Deogarh and Bhumara hardly leads to a conclusive position. The author is fully aware of the extremely fragmentary nature of the remains, and does not attempt any fanciful speculation like many other authors. There is, however, hardly any historical basis for such observation as: "It is possible that as the Palas of Bengal were Buddhists, the Hindu people of Kamarupa, had more relations with Orissan Hindu people on religious grounds than the Buddhists of Bengal, in spite of favourable geographical factors. This reason may be responsible for the carving of Orissan miniature Sikhara motifs in the art of Assam".¹¹ The evidence for historical links between Kamarupa and Orissa at an early date is, at best, tenuous. And royal religion should not, on any account, be identified with that of the common people. It is refreshing to note that his understanding of the stylistic affiliations of Assam art is based on broader historical considerations. Contradicting of repeated views, propagated, for the first time, by T.N. Ramachandran, Choudhury asserts, "Chalukyan architecture and art had no influence over the art of Kamarupa. The South Indian and Ceylonese art had also nothing

to do with old Assamese art which was the product of the eastern Indian medieval school."¹² Obviously, Choudhury's allusion relates to R.D. Banerji's "Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture" (Delhi, 1933), which excludes Assam from its scope of inquiry. One cannot but acknowledge the influences of Pala-Sena style on early Assam art; but it is difficult to accept it as a product of eastern Indian School in view of its clear cut regional characteristics. Choudhury, further, fought out the age-old misconception about the alleged Pallava influence on the Venugopala figure at Kamkhya.¹³ Choudhury's treatment of sculpture is basically thematic, thus conforming to the set pattern of art historical scholarship in Assam. But, unlike most of the writers on Assam art, Choudhury is more careful and critical in his observations on 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."¹⁴ Elaborating on this, he further adds: "The Pala and Sena art, indeed have a good deal of resemblance with the art form of Assam. In fact, in a broad sense the art of Assam, Bengal, East Bihar and Orissa belongs to one school".¹⁵ Notwithstanding an amount of oversimplification, this is a significant departure from a long standing and powerful misconception about interrelationship of the art of Assam with that of Bengal.

II

For obvious reasons, there had been very few attempts to study Assam art as an integral part of Indian art history. Among the historians of Indian art, R.D. Banerji, for the first time, tried

to view Assam sculptures in relation to the major developments of Gupta art. Since then, the Dah-Parbatiya door-frame has become the sole representative of Assam in the standard works on Indian art. Art-historians, writing after Banerji, faithfully reproduced his views on its chronological position and stylistic affiliations. In Ganga-Yamuna figures of Dah-Parbatiya, art-historians recognised a key example of Eastern version of Gupta art which is ultimately rooted to Sarnath experience. It is gratifying to observe that the scholars are now trying to look beyond the Dah-Parbatiya monument in their attempts to understand Assam art, although the debate on Dah-Parbatiya continues with a renewed vigour.

B.N. Mukherjee poses a number of important issues pertaining to the art-history of Eastern India with specific bearing on Assam. Crucial to Mukherjee's argument is identification of a stylistic trend running parallel to the dominant Pala-Sena idiom. Dismissed earlier as products of perfunctory craftsmanship, Mukherjee sees in a number of terracotta, stone and bronze pieces, an unmistakable evidence of his 'parallel trend'. Applied with some amount of caution, this method can be extended to other parts of the sub-continent.

Mukherjee argues that a large number of Assam sculptures datable between the 9th and the 13th centuries A.D. betray close stylistic affinity to the Pala School, even though they occasionally indicate local variations particularly in physiognomical details - a corrective to K.N. Dikshit's views which sought to underplay the importance of Pala-Sena idiom in relation to Assam art. More important, however, is Mukherjee's formulation on 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. The beginning of

this art-idiom is discernible in the four images found at Deopani ... Stylistically the earliest of them is an image of Harihara. The palaeographic feature of the inscription on its back may assign it to c.8th-9th Century."¹⁶ Elaborating on his argument, the author writes: 'The treatment of the figure, frontally conceived and actually carved in low relief on a block of stone, is somewhat angular. The image is very much wooden in appearance. The stocky figure has open eyes, high cheek bones, and broad chest and shoulders. It has, however, like numerous sculptures of the Gupta school, diaphanous drapery. Another Deopani image, which also bears these characteristics, betrays a little more pliability But none of these Deopani sculptures can be compared, from the aesthetic point of view, with the best¹⁷ specimens of the Gupta art or of the Pala art.'" Mukherjee has correctly identified the 'existence of a regional idiom or even a full-fledged school of art in Kamarupa of early medieval age."¹⁸ Mukherjee's important contribution raises a number of issues like the indigenous vis-a-vis standardised and canonical perception of form, its social basis and finally its translation in stone, metal or wood. The Assam experience is of importance in particular. It might provide some kind of a model for understanding this process in other part, of the country. It must be pointed out, in this connection, that Mukherjee's chronological scheme is not always sufficiently convincing. The female bust from Mikirati is little too sensuous for a 'Gupta'¹⁹ sculpture - it must be assigned to²⁰ a later date. Similarly, the Karmedhipara Visnu, in spite of its apparently early iconic features, does not date earlier than the 9th century A.D. A number of Visnu sculptures of Bihar and Bengal datable to c.9th century A.D. bear most of these seemingly early features.²⁰ Again, the comparison between the Mikirati Visnu and Hankrail Visnu might be misleading. The former is distinctly provincial but

the latter with its raised shoulder level and wide torso pertain more closely to the 4th century idiom of Eastern India. Nevertheless, Mukherjee's work remains one of the most important contribution to early Assam's art-history.

As the title indicates, Frederick M. Asher considers Brahmaputra Valley as an integral part of Eastern India - so far as art idiom is concerned. Asher is, however, concerned with a solitary monument of Assam, viz. Dah-Parbatiya door-frame. Asher contends that the Dah-Parbatiya door-frame, so long recognised as a key example of the eastern version of Gupta art, dates from the 7th century A.D. He argues that since 'the monument is provincial both in location and appearance, it is difficult to analyze'.²³ What happened in this case is the persistence of Gupta format till a later date, although the motifs became repetitive and two dimensional. He further argues that the strongly oval heads and the rendering of facial features are distinctive to Assam and "pre-figures the appearance of the ninth century images from Deopani".²⁴ In other words, it is more of a provincial monument, rather than of generalised Gupta affiliation.

Williams argues, somewhat in the lines of Asher, that the Dah-Parbatiya door-frame follows certain patterns in iconography 'current in Bhuvanewar in the seventh and eighth centuries'.²⁵ She suggests that alleged Gupta elements are "atavistic features surviving in an outlying area that drew upon a variety of traditions formed elsewhere."²⁶ In fact, Williams tries to locate number of stylistic sources for the monument, which at times, confuses the issue. For example, she writes "the innermost band has a strongly Gupta flavour in its bold leaves, but the pattern of repeated circular form shows the regularity of Orissan foliage of the eighth century and later."²⁷ How does one explain decorative elements of a 6th-7th century monuments in terms of features

occurring elsewhere in the 8th century A.D.? Williams attempts to explain the possible Orissan connection through the dynastic history of the period. She writes: "Surely this isolated example of early stone-carving in Assam is less likely to be connected to Samudragupta's conquest than to Sasanka's hegemony early in the 7th century."²⁸ This is undoubtedly reading too much into Sasanka's campaigns and conquests. It hardly does any justice either to the art-history or even to the conventional dynastic history.

In Williams chronological/stylistic scheme Dah-Parbatiya, along with Gap, Mandor and some other monuments, marks the Beginning of the Medieval. Needless to say, the terminology raises a number of problems, and if Dah-Parbatiya is viewed in terms of Orissan developments, as has been done by her, then the label becomes all the more unconvincing.

III

In spite of a growing concern about early Assam art, there is hardly any authoritative and connected history of Assam art. Scholars have indeed brought to light new crop of materials. Others have sought to re-interpret the known evidence. But the picture is still far from complete. Any attempt in this direction must begin by working 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 regions, historically relevant for this purpose. Admittedly, the method has its own limitation. But under the existing circumstances, it is possibly the only valid option open to the art-historians. Enough confusion have been created by some of the earlier scholars through impossible suggestions on stylistic sources. Fortunately, some of the recent studies have systematically fought out these notions.

Some of the crucial questions - like Assam's historical developments, its ethnic composition and above all how the indigenous perception was translated into mediums of stone, clay and bronze and how did it utilise the standardised stylistic and iconographic elements - have not properly figured in the writings on Assam art. It is about time we address ourselves to these basic questions in right earnest.

Notes & References

1. A.R. Hoernle listed seven articles relating to Assam monuments, the first of which was published in 1835. **Centenary Review of Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784-1884)**, Calcutta, 1885, p.16.
2. Gautam Sengupta, "Studies in the Early Art of Assam: Trends and Prospects" (Forthcoming Paper).
3. Maheswar Neog, **Tradition and Style**, Jorhat, 1981, p.12.
4. Bhattacharjee, **Icons and Sculptures**, p.2.
5. **Ibid.**, p. 2.
6. Choudhury, **Historical Archaeology**, p. 187.
7. **Ibid.**, p. 191.
8. **Ibid.**, p. 185.
9. **Ibid.**, p. 197.
10. P.C. Sharma, "A Study of the Temple Architecture of Assam from Gupta Period to the end of the Ahom Rule" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Gauhati University, 1981).
11. Choudhury, **Archaeology**.
12. **Ibid.**, p. 216.
13. **Ibid.**
14. **Ibid.**, p. 218.
15. **Ibid.**

16. The passages quoted herein are from an earlier version of Mukherjee's work, published as a Chapter (A Regional Idiom) in S.K. Mitra (ed.) **East India Bronzes**, Calcutta, 1979, p. 59.
17. **Ibid.**, pp. 59-60.
18. **Ibid.**, p. 60.
19. Mukherjee, **East Indian Art**, p. 18.
20. **Ibid.**, p.19, fig. 54.
21. **Ibid.**, p. 20, fig. 55.
22. For a detailed treatment of these figures, See Gautam Sengupta, **Eastern Indian Sculpture** (c.4th to 7th Centuries A.D.) - A Study in Style and Technique (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Calcutta University, 1984).
23. Asher, **The Art**, p. 65.
24. Asher, **Ibid.**, p. 66.
25. Williams, **Gupta India**, p. 171.
26. Williams, **Ibid.**, p. 170.
27. Williams, **Ibid.**, p. 171.
28. Williams, **Ibid.**, p. 171.