

## Excavation at Ambari (Guwahati)

(Its problems and Prospects)

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The archaeological site at Ambari is located in the heart of the city of Guwahati, which was known as Pragjyotishpura in the Ancient historical and Early Medieval periods. Regarding the the historical and archaeological importance of Guwahati, T. Bloch of the Archaeological Survey of India, who conducted explorations in Assam during 1901-7, recorded as follows :

“The modern civilisations of Gauhati and Tezpur seem to occupy the sites of two of the oldest and most important among the early Aryan settlements in Assam called *Pragjyotishpura* and *Haruppessvara* in Sanskrit. Like the modern Champanagar, the site of Champa, the ancient capital of the kingdom of the Angas, west of Bhagalpur in Bengal, both Gauhati and Tezpur have been built upon a sort of artificial plateau raised by the underlying debris of the ancient settlements”.

It is therefore evident that the historical significance of the ruins of ancient civilization is no less important than those of Hastinapur, Indraprastha, Kosambi, Mathura, Sarnath, Rajgir, Pataliputra, Thaneswar etc., which have been dug out by archaeologists to prove their historicity and to reveal the glories of our ancient civilization.

One could thus judge the significance of Ambari excavation for the history of Assam from the above statement.

The archaeological site at Ambari is a chance discovery, effected by a student of mine Shri Rasaraj Seal, who brought information to me on 28th March, 1969. Having completed the necessary legal formalities to enter an unprotected archaeological site, that too owned by the most powerful Reserve Bank of India, I entered into the site on 29th March, 1969 and on 30th March, the local newspapers flashed a front-page bold headline news on the discovery of the ruins of an ancient city at Ambari.

Since then innumerable problems were created by the State Govt. officials to prevent me from restoring the site from destruction and buried permanently under the modern structure to be raised by the Reserve Bank of India. These anti-historical and anti-

civilization forces nurtured by the Govt. of Assam would have been successful to accomplice their evil designs, as proved by documents preserved by me, had not the then President of India the late Dr. Zakir Hussain paid an unscheduled visit to the excavation site on 25th March, 1969 and advised the Govt. of Assam to protect the site and conduct excavation there on, whereupon the State Govt. issued notification on 10th Oct., 1969 for protection of the Archaeological site under the Assam Ancient Monuments and Records Act, 1959. After this, the Govt. of Assam allowed us to conduct the excavation for only one season (1970-71), after which the State Govt. preferred to establish a Central School, their offices and a Press Club over the site in violation of the said Assam Act by driving away the University archaeologists from the protected site and by shifting the large number of dug out sculptures and other antiquities like garbage to the State Museum, Guwahati.

They were successful in preventing us to enter the site till 6th December, 1987, when the State Govt. allowed us to resume the excavation, but the necessary funds, to be provided by the State Govt. to Gauhati University under an agreement signed by Govt. of Assam with Gauhati University, were successfully blocked till 31st March, 1989 when only fifty thousand rupees were made available to the University to bear the expenditure in conducting the excavation for two seasons 1987-89 and 1988-89.

One could easily judge from what has been stated above, how hazardous it is to conduct archaeological excavation in Assam, where not a single archaeological site has so far been successfully excavated and report published, although we all know that it is the constitutional obligation of the Government to dig up, protect and preserve the cultural heritage of man in Assam for our posterity and for strengthening the scrapy historical records of the Ancient and Early Medieval period.

It is now well known that there does not exist the minimum necessary technical staff and equipments either in Gauhati University or in the State Archaeology Deptt. of Assam to conduct an archaeological excavation. Under this pitiable situation, the writer had to take the help of Professor Sankalia, who visited the site in January, 1970 and promised necessary technical help for conducting the excavation, as well as the Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, who deputed their one of the most experienced technical expert to help us in conducting the excavation. Dr. Sankalia deputed Dr. M. K. Dhavalikar and Dr. Z. D. Ansari to help us in conducting the first archaeological excavation in

Assam and to work out the first archaeological chronology of the Ancient and Early Medieval Periods of Assam, which was published by them in Poona University Journal (Humanities Section) Vol. 35, 1972 under the title "Excavations at Ambari (Gauhati) 1970". This is the first preliminary report of Ambari excavation prepared and published by the best available archaeological experts in India and this report will remain as a model for archaeological excavation in Assam.

The Archaeological site at Ambari is found to be heavily water-logged as is the case with the present premier city. The total depth of cultural layers at Ambari is found to be more than 5 metres, as determined with the help of a test pit, of which not more than 1.80 metres could be exposed during the driest season of the year due to high level of sub-soil water. Out of about 6000 Sq.m. of the protected site, only about one-fifth of it could be dug out so far upto the sub-soil water-level. We have obtained a Radio-Carbon date of the site of a charcoal sample collected from a depth of 1.2 m. which is 1030  $\pm$ 105 A. D. This layer has yielded a large number of sculptures, totalling 301 icons of two sizes, large icons - 49 and small icons - 252 of different deities, such as Vishnu, Surya, Devi Durga, Sivalinga, Yonipith, Nataraj Siva, Agni, Ganga, Yamuna, Muni and Gaua-Simha, all found in undamaged and in some cases unfinished conditions suggesting that Ambari was a major *Altelier* centre of Ancient Kamarupa. In addition to these, the site has yielded a huge quantity of dressed and decorated stone architectural block of granite and gneiss, among which the rare piece consists of a lattice-work of black basal, an imported variety of rock, decorated with exquisitely carved lotus motif recalling the Gupta or the Post-Gupta style of art.

The most important finds from Ambari are, however, the large varieties of pottery-both indigenous and foreign. Among the foreign varieties are the Chinese Celadon ware and perhaps local imitations of Roman arretine and rouletted wares, suggesting evidence of Indo-Roman and Indo-Chinese trade routes through the Brahmaputra valley, since the early part of the Christian era. There has been found green-glazed or Muslim-Mughal pottery of the late Medieval period in stratified context above the sculpture bearing layer. The most significant pottery of Ambari is, however, the kaolin wares of extremely fine quality found in huge quantity. This type of pottery, not so far found in other Ancient and Medieval Indian sites, is considered to be distinctive of the 'Brahmaputra Valley Civilization', if this could be authenticated by further archa-

eological excavations that the *Lauhitya Sagara* or the mighty river Brahmaputra, like his sisters in northern India, the Sindhu and the Ganga, played important role in giving rise to a distinctive civilization in the northeastern frontier of India.

The other important finds from Ambari are the beautiful pieces of terracotta art-all made of Kaolin, again a distinctive feature of the Brahmaputra valley art and culture, a large number of beads of Semi-precious stone, such as Chalcedony, Agate, Carnation, Jasper, Coral, Amber, Jade etc. - all are imported varieties of rocks suggesting trade contact of ancient Kamarupa with Central India and China, terracotta beads and bangles and a terracotta sealings showing in positive a human head with long face and fine nose, large moustach, wearing a crown and necklace of large beads - suggesting that in the cavity of the sealing, the head of a ruling king of Kamarupa was ungraved in negative on clay sealing-certainly an example of a masterpiece of terracotta art of ancient Kamarupa.