

**EMERGENCE OF EARLY CULTURE
IN NORTH-EAST INDIA**



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IN
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(A Study Based on Excavations at Bhaitbari, Meghalaya)

By
A.K. Sharma

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To

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA

and

PEOPLE OF GARO HILLS

who poured love and affection

PREFACE

The book contains factual account of the remains unearthed at Vadagokugiri, District Tura, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya from first January 1992 to March 1992. In fact the site is well known as Bhaitbari and all earlier explorers and scholars have referred it by this name. Bhaitbari is a very recent name as such the site has been described under the name of Vadagokugiri, under whose revenue area it falls. As, so far there is not a single site systematically excavated in Meghalaya, inspite of all shortcomings and handicaps in not being a student of Art and Architecture, I had presented the facts as an excavator in record time so that the area and people, so far deprived of their glorious past, could point out to the world and say that they are the proud descendents of one of the advanced civilizations and culture of India, the remains of which were hidden under Garo hills. For no fault of theirs they were labelled as backward tribals with no cultural background of any significance. They were deliberately discouraged to come in close contact with the rest of the country and were treated as anthropological specimen.

Though the entire region abounds in archaeological and cultural wealth, very little has been done, so far, to unearth the glorious past of the area. If proper attention would have been paid earlier, as was done in case of other parts of the country, the feeling of aloofness and alienation, that was deliberately inculcated by the enemies of the country, could have been avoided. We are responsible for keeping our brothers and sisters of the North-East in dark about their glorious past, about their very close relationships with the rest of the country. Even now very few officers and young people willingly wish to work in the area, though it showers on the visitors abundance of love and hospitality through its people and enchanting natural beauty full of God gifted pure air and water shuttling between the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean.

The present attempt, though brief, intends to present the historical accounts of the Garo hills, so that it can serve as a beginning to the willing workers and scholars

in the area as immense archaeological evidences right from Stone Age to historical times lies buried under the debris of time in the hills and plains of Meghalaya. I will feel honoured if the work at Bhaitbari is continued and more facts brought out. The site has all the potentialities of becoming a site of great historical value and tourist attraction. It is not too late to start works in the area and check the drift.

I express my gratitude to Shri Bhaskar Ghosh, Secretary Culture, Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India and Shri M.C. Joshi, Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, who encouraged me to take up excavations at Vadagokugiri, the moment I was granted extension of service by the Government.

In spite of the fact that Assam and the area of our work adjoining borders of Assam, was, during 1992, badly disturbed due to the activities of insurgents, my colleagues in Prehistory Branch of Archaeological Survey of India ungrudgingly agreed to take risk and work at Vadagokugiri, far away from their headquarters at Nagpur. It was entirely due to their untiring work, for nearly three months, that it was possible to excavate scientifically, document meticulously and even conserve the excavated remains. The team comprised of S/Shri S.S. Gupta, Nizamuddin Taher, K.M. Girhe, R.K. Dwivedi, C.L. Yadav, N.K. Nimje, Ghayasuddin, P.S. Pashine, P.C. Dogra, S.M. Shambharkar, V.W. Pathak, T.B. Thapa, R.G. Katole and R.N. Sharma. I owe my heartfelt gratitude to them for their sincere work. I am also grateful to S/Shri B.R. Rajput and Rana, who came all the way from Delhi and video-taped the site and the excavated remains in spite of inclement weather conditions. I am grateful to my colleague Shri L.S. Rao, who helped me in identifying and describing terracotta plaques.

I am beholden to the dignitaries and officials of Government of Meghalaya, particularly, to Dr. S. Mitra, Secretary, Art and Culture and to the officials of the Department of Art and Culture who made arrangements for my first visit to the site and who gave all possible assistance. It was they only who came forward to appoint watch and ward staff for the site. I am grateful to Shri Bhatnagar, Collector, Tura, who frequently visited our excavations and enquired about our work and comforts and showed great interest.

It was due to Shri P.V. Janardhanan, my colleague in Prehistory Branch who actually encouraged me to write this book and who took all the pains to type out and arrange the material in record time. I am deeply beholden to him.

Photographs are by S/Shri N.K. Nimje and Ghayasuddin. Final drawings are by S/Shri J.S. Dubey, K.M. Girhe and R.K. Dwivedi. To them I am grateful for completing the job in record time. I am also grateful to Shri Pyara Singh and Smt. Mala Suple for arranging photographs and drawings.

And finally to the people of Vadagokugiri, Bhaitbari and neighbouring areas who provided the needed labour force and who extended their full cooperation to us. I owe my gratitude to them. Last but not the least, I am grateful to Shri Douglas Chimnis, who actually took us round the site and showed the structural evidences as well as the rock engravings of temples. This intelligent man has a very keen eye and after quickly picking up he was able to act as a Guide to the visitors.

Illustrations are courtesy Archaeological Survey of India for which the author is highly indebted.

A.K. SHARMA

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the British Period and to some extent even after independence North-East India was regarded as most backward area, devoid of any ancient history and least affected by the cultural and historical movements of the rest of the Indian sub-continent. During the pre-independence era, in spite of some archaeological evidences showing similarities with the rest of the country, the myth of backwardness was deliberately inculcated and propagated as this facilitated the Missionaries in conversion of the indigenous population to their faith. In fact, during conversion, the local tribals were never told that they are being converted from their faith to another faith and religion as this might have aroused suspicion and revolt, instead they were told that they have now become civilized and will be treated amongst the civilized people of the world.

Various States to which, now, the north-eastern part of Indian sub-continent has been divided are recent politico-administrative creations. In order to look for the ancient past of this region, we will have to take the entire area as a singular zone. Unfortunately, due to one reason or the other no large scale systematic archaeological investigations could be made in the region till recently. In order to put things in their correct perspective by unearthing the evidences of glorious past of the north-east, I took up work in Manipur, Nagaland and Meghalaya in 1991-92. The results were startlingly rewarding. In the excavations at Sekta, near Imphal in Manipur, convincing evidences in the form of pot burials were unearthed which pushed back the history of the area to 2nd-3rd century B.C. The evidences clearly proved that the region had close cultural links with the Gangetic plains. The myth that wheel made pottery was never known to Manipur was exploded by the discovery of plenty of wheel made pottery both from the burials and from the habitation area.

In the remote village of Kigwema in Nagaland from the home of Shri Riik Rielhou, well burnished gourd shaped jars made of kaolin were recovered. Enquiries revealed that these jars were used for importing wine from distant land. They are very similar

and rather akin to famous Roman Amphoras. Every married Naga lady has to wear few carnelian beads as a sign of good omen like the *Mangal Sūtra* worn by Maharashtrian married women. The carnelian beads came to Nagaland from far off Kutch where carnelian bead making is a flourishing trade since Harappan times. Enquiries revealed that traders from far off land, *i.e.*, Kutch had been coming to this remote area of Nagaland for trading carnelian beads since time immemorial.

Meghalaya is full of archaeological wealth of which one was explored and partly excavated at Bhaitbari (Vadagokugiri), the subject of present book.

The importance of north-east region including Burma could be gauged from the reports published in the Annual Reports of the Archaeological Survey of India.

M. Chas, Duroiselle writing on Short Survey of the Religious Aspects of the History of Burma prior to the 11th century A.D.¹ states as follows :

‘*Śrīkeṣetra* or as the Burmese write it, Sarekhettara, often called Old Prome to distinguish it from the town of Prome, which was founded very much later on the Irrawaddy river some six miles away from it, covers a very large area; in many places, the ruins of the brick wall which surrounded it and the moat at its feet can still be traced. The whole area both within and outside the walls was, not so many years ago, covered with jungle which has now to a great extent disappeared under the ploughs of the villagers. It is dotted with numerous shapeless mounds, big and small, which are the ruins of ancient *stūpas*, temples and monasteries. These may also be seen, here and there, old buildings still standing, but they are mostly in a ruinous condition. *Śrīkeṣetra* is the site which has yielded the oldest, the most valuable finds, which have enabled us to push back somewhat the history of Burma, however slightly, beyond the 11th century, and has enabled us to get a glimpse of the culture and of the religious sects in the early centuries of the Christian era, in this Hinduized capital of the Pyu people. It is impossible to fix the exact date of the colonization of *Śrīkeṣetra* with any certainty; but it must have taken place very early, about the first or second century A.D., and not improbably even before that. The Indians always were great sailors, and their traders, not content with trading in their own country, ventured themselves on the high seas in search of gain, even before the Christian era and colonized Indo-China; they travelled

from the Gulf of Bengal to Champa (Annam); to Java and Sumatra, and even, in due course, reached the oriental coast of Africa. Such is the opinion of M.G. Ferrand based on far-reaching researches on early navigation in the East ("Le Malaka, le Malayu and le Malayur", *Journal Asiatique*, Juillet-Aout 1918, p. 11. Also by the same author, "Le Kouen-Loven et les anciennes navigations", *Journal of Antique*, Juillet-Aout, p.37). Lower Burma is much nearer the oriental coast of India, and we may, therefore, presume that Old Prome (as well as Thaton) were colonized very early, and if we put the date down to the 1st century or so, we keep well within reasonable limits.

These merchants brought with them their customs, their arts, and no doubt later on, their priests brought their religion and learning. The early settlers came from the Coromandal coast, this is attested by the alphabet, used on the earliest inscriptions and manuscripts discovered at Śrīkṣetra, which was derived directly from the Old Telugu-Canarese alphabets of South India, and more closely allied to the Kadamba alphabet of Vanavāsi, the capital of the Kadambas in North Canara. There is no doubt that Śrīkṣetra was also deeply influenced by the culture of Kancheepuram (Conjeevaram) which was a great centre of *Hinayāna* Buddhism in the 5th century. (The Mon alphabet was derived directly from that of the Pallavas of Kancheepuram). The documents on which those derivations are based are, for the Pyu, the two gold plates found at Maunggan, near Hmawza (6th century) and the Bawbawgyi inscription (7th century) also found at Hmawza (Old Prome) (F.Finot, "Unnouveau document sur le Bouddhisme birman", *Journal Asiatique*, Juillet-Aout 1912, pp. 121). These documents are in Pāli for the Talaig or Mon, the inscription found at Lopbouri in Siam. Over a century ago, king Bodawpaya collected a large number of inscriptions which are now gathered at Amarapura; among them is a Pyu epigraph.

According to native chronicles there was, about the 8th century a strong recrudescence of Hinduism (which was already there long before that) and the supremacy of the two religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, was for a time in the balance.'

In the *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report*, 1906-07, on page 17, the interesting description runs as under :-

'The introduction of Aryan civilization into Assam is attributed to Krishna. As in Magadha he overthrew the barbarious rule of Jarāsandha, so in his progress towards

the rising sun, he defeated Naraka, the king of Prāgyotiṣa, and restored to Aditi, the goddess of the earth, her ear-rings, which had been stolen by Naraka.

The course of Aryan civilization in its progress towards Assam naturally followed the valley of the Brahmaputra. It is here that we meet the first Aryan settlements. However, owing to unfavourable conditions of climate of Assam, with its torrents of rain and perpetual recurrences of seismic disturbances, it can not surprise us in the least to find scarcely any ancient buildings left to us.'

From out of Sadiya in Assam from Bhismanagar in Kundilnaju a number of terracotta tiles were recovered. These carved tiles, were fixed into all the inner sides of the city wall, except the eastern one. Sixteen of them were found, twelve were discovered by Sir Alexander Cunningham also from the ruins of Paharpur, Distt. Rajshahi now in Bangladesh.² These tiles decorated the walls of the main temple.

Interestingly, on page 28 of *A.S.I. Annual Report, 1906-07*, T. Bloch narrates an interesting event which shows that the north-east had very close cultural relations with other parts of Northern India.

"I may notice, however, another fact, which confirms me in the opinion that the country east of Sadiya, was at a former time better known to, and in closer touch with, the Aryan population of Northern India than at present. When I travelled up the river from Sadiya to Bhismanagar, I met with number of Punjabis going in the same direction. Punjab milkmen were selling milk to their countrymen all along the river-bed, and small marts have been established at various places where I halted. On enquiry, I was informed that somewhere in that direction is a locality, called *Paraśurāmeśvara-tīrtha*. It was described to me as a sort of waterfall, formed by one of the many arms of the river up there, perhaps something like the 'Hardvār of the Brahmaputra', where that river turns down to the plains. The knowledge of the secluded spot, coupled with the fact that it annually attracts a number of pilgrims from such remote distances as the Punjab certainly goes it to show that, at one time, the country east of Sadiya was not, as at present, so very much out of the reach of civilization, and it seems natural to surmise that the establishment of *Paraśurāmeśvara* as a regular place of pilgrimage, a sacred *tīrtha* to the Hindus, dates from a time when the ancient

city of Bhismanagar was inhabited, and formed perhaps, the seat of the Governor of one of the frontier provinces of Assam."

Edward Tuite Dalton,³ writes "There is doubtless and intimate connection between the Indo-Chinese population of Assam, and some of the people that formed nations in the Gangetic provinces before the Aryans appeared in them. We can trace the path of many hordes from the North-Eastern Frontier to remote regions of India and Burma; and we find in Assam colonies formed as it were of the strugglers of the parties that had passed through.

I do not introduce the Assam hill and border tribes as the aborigines of that province, but have rather endeavoured to show that its colonization, as a branch of the Aryan family, dates from a very remote period. It is probable that the hill people of lower Assam, now known as Garos and Kasias, were earlier settlers, for we find them holding an isolated position, as if the Aryan invasion pushing in like a wedge had cut them off from communication with the parent northern nations, (and it is very remarkable that it is through them, especially through the Kasias, that the connection between the Lohitic tribes and the aborigines of the Gangetic provinces is most clearly traced) but otherwise the plains of Assam appear to have been occupied, and to the Aryans may be ascribed the honour of first peopling them".

Encouraged by the archaeological wealth of the north-east, which I encountered with during my first visit to Manipur in February 1989, to examine the Gold masked human skulls found along with other antiquities near Imphal and from the hills near village Sekta, I decided to work as much as possible in these remote areas up to the time I get opportunities to do so. The excavations at Vadagokugiri was as a result of this interest. Though I am not a student of Art history and Architecture, I ventured, with the active encouragement and permission of Shri Bhaskar Ghosh, Secretary, Department of Culture, Government of India and Shri M.C. Joshi, Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, to excavate some sites in Manipur and Meghalaya. Basically being a physical Anthropologist and a Pre-historian looking after the Pre-history Branch of the Archaeological Survey of India, it was rather unusual for us to excavate historical sites in Meghalaya. This I had to do as hardly any other officer of the Survey was willing to take up large scale excavations in the area in the prevailing

political conditions. The staff of the Pre-history Branch of the Survey worked hard for nearly three months at Vadagokugiri as a result of which two temples, one *stūpa*, nearly 40 m. of fortification wall and a few trenches in the habitation area could be excavated in such a short time with minimum of expenditure.

With all the handicaps of not being a student of temple architecture and art history, I thought it proper to put the factual descriptions of the findings before the scholarly world, to interpret and assimilate. Naturally in this effort reader is bound to find many mistakes, for which I hope I will be forgiven as my only aim is to put before the people the bare archaeological facts of the glorious past of the Garo hills so that the history of the area could be taught to the coming generations in its correct perspective and young archaeologists could be encouraged to work in the area. With all the noise of political instability in the area, widely publicised threats of insurgency, local hostility, let me put on record, with all sincerity, that during our nearly three months of stay in Garo hills, we tested only abundance of love, hospitality and hard work of the local people and state officials. In fact, after nearly one month's dig when preliminary results started coming out and when we explained the significance of the findings to our labourers and few curious visitors, it was a stream of curious, awestricken people seeking for more information about their so far unknown, misinterpreted past, with whom we had to deal in the coming two months. Right from ministers, professors, scholars to humble people, men and women, young and old, daily, there was an unending stream of people from near and far off places. We tried to quench their thirst for knowledge about their past, as much as we could.

When our working season in the area came to close, the problem of preserving the ancient structures from vagaries of nature was before us. As the State authorities had no resources and expertise for the job, and as the conservation wing of the Survey could have taken over the job only after the site is declared as a protected site by the Archaeological Survey of India, the job of making arrangements for the temporary protection of the excavated remains fell on our shoulders. It gives me immense pleasure that the Pre-history Branch of the Survey could do it in the shortest possible time. Suitable thatched structures of wattle-and-daub were raised over the temple and fortification remains. As it was not possible to cover the huge *stūpa* with any such structure, the last method of preservation, *i.e.* covering with earth was adopted. The

State Government and particularly Shri Bhatnagar, Collector of Tura, immediately appointed four watchmen to look after them till final arrangements are made.

In one season's dig only nearly 10 per cent of what is hidden below the earth could be exposed and preserved. There is urgent need to expose more areas and structures to understand the enormity of the site east of Brahmaputra in Garo hills. There is no doubt that the site could be developed into one of the major tourist interest spot in North-East India. It will be Glory of Meghalaya of which the people could be proud of. Concerted effort is needed.

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