

## **AN OVERVIEW OF THE MONUMENTS OF NORTH – EAST INDIA**

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### **Abstract**

North East India is well known for its historical sites, monuments, cave, inscriptions, coins rock-shelters etc. The monuments are found scattered in different parts of the hill and valley of the region. This evidence has thrown some light on the history and culture of North East India. Most of the monuments are in good condition and preserved by the state government and Archaeological Survey of India. Sculpture, forth, temple, tomb of various designs and coins and epigraphic records are found in different places of the region. The remains revealed the important information about the customs, tradition and their social and economic life of the people. The remains are protected. However excavation and exploration have not yet been adequately done in North East India. The archaeological remains of this region offer an almost uninvestigated and unexplored field of study. The paper is to find out new facts, reconstruction and also to interpret literary sources in the light of the information gathered from the field work and to compare and bring them together. A comparative study of the remains with those of some other parts of the country has also been attempted. The paper is also attempted to give a complete picture of stylistic affiliation so as to make many comparative results.

**Key Words:** Archaeology, coin, excavation, history, inscription, monument.

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## 1. Introduction

Monuments are regarded as the most important archaeological evidence. This type of archaeological evidence is of high illustrative value and greatly helps in realizing the power and magnificence of some of the ancient dynasties. According to the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958, and (Amendment and Validation) Act, 2010, Ancient Monument means any structure, erection or monument, or any tumulus or place on interment, or any cave, rock-sculpture, inscription or monolith which is historical, archaeological or artistic interest and which has been in existence for not less than 100 years and includes- 1. Remains of an ancient monument, 2. Site of an ancient monument, 3. Such portion of land adjoining the site of an ancient monument as may be required for fencing or covering in ancient monument.(S.K. Goel:2014:16) The monuments are temples, mosques, tombs, churches, cemeteries, forts, palaces, step-wells, rock-cut caves, and secular architecture as well as ancient mounds and sites which represent the remains of ancient habitation. Today these remains are also treated as one of the most important sites of Tourism industry.

The North-Eastern region is very rich in archaeological sites and relics. There are hundreds of historical sites, monuments, caves, inscriptions, coins, Rock shelters etc. in different parts of the region. These remain has thrown some light on the history and culture of the people of the North-Eastern region since pre-historic periods.

The North Eastern region of India comprises of eight state viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Its area is bounded by the eastern Himalayas, Bhutan, China in the North, Bangladesh in the West and South and Burma in the East.. The major part of the region is hilly and the hills divisions like Garo hills, Jaintea hills, North Cachar hills, Naga hills, Manipur hills, Mizo hills together form a chain of Himalayas ranges. Arunachal Pradesh, Maghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim and Nagaland are hills stated while Assam, Manipur and Tripura cover both hills and plains. No other part of India has as great a variety of ethnic stock as the north eastern region. The region is the home land of the large number of culture and ethnic group with different language and dialects, religion and customs. This region has been a meeting point of Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist community, Tibeto-Burman tribal communities, the chins and the Kachins – originating from South China and the Indo-

Aryan Hindu of the Indo-Gangetic plains and the Khasi-Jaintea autochthones. The hills areas were entirely Indo-Mongoloids while in the plains the Indo-Aryans and the Indo-Mongoloid lived side by side. The Assamese, the Bengalis and the Tibeto-Burmese are the three largest language group in the region. Assam shares 76% of the total of the total population of the region. From ancient period the North East India had distinct political status. Different parts of the region ruled by different powerful dynasties viz. Manikya dynasty in Tripura from 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Ningthouja dynasty in Manipur from 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., Varman dynasty and Ahom dynasty in Assam from 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. etc. Beside these there are many other tribal independent rulers.

The region had closed cultural relation with the neighbouring states. The end of the fourth century B.C. marks a fixed point in the expansion of Aryan culture in eastern India. The spread of Aryan culture was largely due to the settlement of Brahmanas in the region. The inhabitants of the region, before the coming of Aryans were believers in animism, magic, ancestor worship, Shaiva and Sakti (fertility cult) etc. After the advent of the Aryan, Hindu religious beliefs were intermixed with prevailing tribal cult. Most of the rulers of the region were staunch and devout Hindu. Their royal patronage helped in the spread of Brahmanism and Vaishnavism. They donated lands to a large number of Brahmins and built Hindu temples and excavated tank which led to the Aryanisation of the region.

### **1.1 Review of literatures**

Brown (1976) made an attempt to study the origin and development of Indian architecture particularly for Hindu and Buddhist in the light of the available materials. He has given some new interpretation regarding the evolution of the temple, the principal architectural features, and a detailed analysis of the temple and monasteries of different regions.

Fletcher's (1975) work took into its ambit a detailed study of the historical archaeology. He also mentioned historical development of each and every parts of the structure, different methods of construction and materials used in the construction. A flood of light on the art and architecture has been assessed by the spot study findings of Fergusson (1967). It has arrived at the conclusion by studying the ruins in their proper perspective. Besides, Jouveau (1972) worked out the architectural pattern of the complete temple, palace and other secular structures.

Koller (2001) indicated the symbolic significance of the magnificent architecture of a unique South Indian temple in Madura highlighting the origin and development of each and every part of the temple structure and its associate building structure.

Kramrich (1965), in her monumental work in Hindu Temple and subsequent writing, identified the sources of the basic concept and with uncanny insight analysis the artistic design with reference to the image of man.

Michael (1983) gave valuable information on the northern and southern Indian temple style. The work emphasized on the study of the general layout, ground plan and vertical features of the temples of India.

The findings of Rowland (1959) incorporated that the results of a thorough exploration and undertakes the study of the archaeology of India in a critical and exhaustive manner. A comparative study of architectural remains of India with those of some other parts of the country has also been attempted.

In the study of Deva (1997), comparative findings of the South Indian temple architecture has been observed with a view to bringing out the full architectural features of the temples of North India and also their origin and gradual deviations. He made an attempt to determine the age by a thorough on the spot study of the site and the ruins.

Desai (1998) worked out a detailed study on the art and architecture from Mamluk or slave period (1206) to the end of the Mughal period. He mentioned the methods of construction, building materials, different style, their concept of decoration and ornamentation etc.

Jagat Pati Joshi has contributed a large number of papers in various books and reputed journals. Four of his works are published by Archaeological Survey of India in its memories series. His articles are on many aspects of archaeology say for instance excavation, conservation, architecture, numismatics.

Grover (1980) made an attempt to determine the age by comparing the existing structural components such as ground-plan, general-lay-out, doorframes, sculptures, pillar-capitals, decorative design etc, with their counterparts of known dates.

Ojha (1993) tried to give all the monuments found in India in its historical background, sizes of the monastery and its plan, purpose of structure, its historical importance, the places where it is found, archaeological finding etc. Every point has been dealt in an exhaustive manner.

Sankalia's (1979) work is an introductory study of the archaeological wealth. It is primarily based on his own field data. Explorations conducted by him brought to light a number of sites of archaeological importance. Singh (1991) gave valuable information on the archaeological remains such as icons and sculptures, coinage, inscription and architectural remains in North East India.

Vatsyayan (1983) described the rules and regulation of architecture based on 'Vastupurusa' (figure of men). This study stated that the analogy of human body is consistently followed in the structural plan of the temple. Coomaraswamy interprets the Hindu temple as the image of the cosmos with its drama of disintegration and reintegration and rightly relates the architectural structure to Indian myth and ritual.

Margabandhu, C., Sharma, A.K., and Bisht, R.S., (2002) made a study on 'Emerging Trends in Archaeology, Art, Anthropology, Conservation and History'. The editors had done an investigation on Proto-History and historical archaeology of India. They had also made a study on epigraphy, numismatics, art and architecture, sculpture, painting and dance.

Jha, Satyendra Kumar, (2011) study entitled 'Rajgriha- The city of Eminence' provides details of the location of Rajgriha and also provides interesting details of the whole fortification. The book highlights the scope of future research work required to be undertaken in the Rajgriha area.

Agrawal, R.C. (2013) investigated on 'Buddhist Monasteries of Ladakh'. The author has described different components and parts of the monasteries and has also mentioned about their state of preservation. Dr. Agrawal's description of various structures of the monasteries not only

mentions their functional aspects but describes the structures, walls, deities, murals, state of preservation and approximate chronological estimation. He has also suggested for preservation of the objects found in the monasteries.

Chaudhury,R.D. (2014) had undertaken a study on ‘Sculpture Masterpieces from Assam’. He presents an outline of the development of sculptural art in Assam. He describes history of development of stone, metal and terracotta sculptures from the Sunga-kushan period down to the late medieval age.

## **1.2 Objective and Methodology**

The study of Indian monuments as a whole remains incomplete without a thorough understanding of the monuments of North East India. A number of excellent histories have been written in recent years. But none is found to have given importance to the study of the monuments and its art and architecture. The architectural history forms one of the most interesting but a little known chapter in the cultural history of the region. The history of monuments of North East India offers an almost uninvestigated and unexplored field of study. People of the rest of India have poor knowledge about it. This is because of the failure in giving proper interpretation to the known facts. The paper is an attempt to fill up the incomplete chapter of the history of Indian monuments and remains. The objectives of the paper are to discuss the historical background, the places where it found, its historical importance, purpose of structure etc. to find out new facts and reconstruction with the help of field work and original sources, to evaluate and critically examined the material which is already existed and make an attempt for reconstruction on a reasonable condition, to assess the evolution & development of art and architecture, to study the methods of construction, building materials, ground- plan, size, general-lay out, pillars, decorative design etc., to study the influence of Eastern & western culture in architecture with the help of the architectural remains of monuments, to assess literary sources & compare with that of the remains & to search out the causes responsible for the influence of Eastern & western style of architecture.

The research papers of the present topic is based on the field investigation. Emphasis will be given on the study of the general lay-out, ground-plan and vertical features of the remains to

collect some important new information's. Early manuscripts and other literary sources are also important for the study of the indigenous architecture, religion and the migration and settlement of the people. There are some other unpublished manuscripts and archival sources which are found useful materials.

A number of documents of British writers are also considered a store house of information relating to social, religious life, art & architecture and political conditions of the people of North East India. Attempts will be made here to interpret those literary sources in the light of the information gathered from the inscription, coins, fields work and to compare and bring them together.

The archaeological sources such as Epigraphic records, Numismatics, Monuments and other ancient relics furnished us with some detail of the state administration, royal declaration, donation of land, art and architecture etc. Therefore, a critical examination of these remains has been made with some relevant observation. This help to determine the time of construction of some monuments of unknown date by comparing their architectural features with monuments of known date. Besides, other materials also utilized as valuable sources such as periodical journals, bulletins, contributed by many scholars to the history of North East India. The study of the topic is based on primary sources and field survey with the support from the secondary sources.

## **2. Discussion**

### **2.1. Tripura**

The monuments of Tripura are the witness of the royal past. The Maharajas of Tripura had built wonderful religious and secular monuments in different parts of the state. The monuments are mostly located in its capital city Agartala. The major historical monuments are Ujjayanta Palace, Malancha Niwas, Neermahal and Kunjaban Palace. Among the religious monuments Fourteen Goddess Temple at Old Agartala, Mata Tripureshwar temple at Udaipur, Benuban Vihar at Agartala, Bhuvaneshwar Temple at Udaipur etc are very popular. Hinduism is the earliest religion of Tripura, Kings of Tripura were devout and staunch Hindu. They donated lands to a large numbers of Brahmins which led to the construction of many Hindu temples in different parts of the state. The architecture of Tripura is influence by the religion and culture of ancient

India. Most of the monuments are Nagara pattern of architecture. The temple of Tripura sundari at Udoipur about 52 km. from Agartala built by Dhanya Manikya, the king of Tripura, in the year 1501, representing ancient architecture of Tripura.<sup>4</sup> The temple of Chandra Gopinath built by Gopiprasad in 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Kali temple at Kasba, built by Kalyan Manikya in 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and temple of Jagannatha at Agartala constructed by Radha Kishore Manikya in 19<sup>th</sup> century A.D. were also famous for its architectural styles in North East India. Besides, there are many temples constructed by King Mahendra Manikya in his capital Udoipur, dedicated to Vishnu, Siva, and other gods and goddess. The temple Satero-Ratna or Seventeen jewels at Jagannathpur, the foundation of which was laid by Ratna Manikya II (1685-1712) was completed by Krishna Manikya (1760-1783).<sup>5</sup>

Archaeological Survey of India of Guwahati Circle conducted excavation and exploration in different parts of Tripura. Recently ASI, Guwahati Circle excavated a brick built Buddhist monastic complex during the year 1998-2001 at Shyamsundar Tilla. The plan of the central shrine is cruciform with pancharatha order. Its upper part is totally collapsed. A large number of terracotta plaques and stone sculptures have been recovered during excavation. Stylistically the remains can be dated to circa 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Archaeological excavations at Thakurani Tila, Paschim Pilak, District, South Tripura, has revealed ruins of eight brick temples and also found stone sculptures. Buddhist Stupa, Chaityagraha, a monastery and other associated burnt brick structures of the ancient remains sites at Boxanagar, west Tripura, have reflected an ancient art, architecture at religious aspects of ancient Tripura.(S.K. Goel:2014:48)

## **2.2. Assam**

The ancient monuments of Assam are found lying scattered throughout the state. Most of them are not in its original condition. Natural and artificial causes helped to ruin these monuments. The monuments, which are scattered throughout Assam, are eloquent testimony to the artistic skill of ancient Assam, and testify to their wealth of grandeur during different epochs of history.(N.D.Choudhury:1985:7) Megalithic monuments are found in several places particularly in central Assam e.g. Kasomari and Jamugori in Karbi-Anglong and Derebra, Tuivamittlang, kobak, Boloson, Kartong and Harangajao in North Cachar Hills. .(N.D.Choudhury:1985:57) In the medieval period a number of buildings were constructed in various parts of Assam. The



earliest architectural remains, belonging to the late Gupta period, are located in Darrang and Sonitpur Districts. Beside this there are many other remains of pre-Ahom period located at Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Darrang, Sonitpur, Kamarupa, Barpeta, Nawgaon, Karbi-Anglon, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh etc.

Among the Ahom monuments of Assam Talatalghar (House Having Several Storeys) situated on the bank of the Dikhow river, Ranghar Pavilion (a double-storied royal pavilion) built by Ahom king Pramatta Singha (1744-1750), Ahom Raja's Palace (four-storied building of 18<sup>th</sup> century AD.) at Gargoan, Jaidol temple built by Ahom king Rudra Singha (AD 1696-14) at Joysagar dedicated to Lord Vishnu are well known for its unique architectural features. (S.K. Goel: 2014:45-46) There are many other archaeological remains at Goalpara, Sivasagar, Kamrup etc.

The earliest example of Hindu temple was the ruins temple at Dah parvatia belongs to the 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. There are many ruins of temples at Bamuni Hills, Tezpur, Gauhati, Kamakhya, Hajo etc. These temples are dedicated to Siva, Vishnu, Surya, Durga etc. “The outlines of the plinth mouldings from the ruins at Tezpur show that the medieval architects of Assam employed the same motifs and figures as those in other part of North India; the ornamentations of the plinth mouldings, bears marked similarity to the same designs from Orissa.<sup>6</sup> The lower part of the sanctum of the shrine at Kamakhya and stone slab from Tezpur are similar in design to these of central India type. During the reign of Sib Singha (1714 - 1744 A.D.) many temples were constructed of which Ashvaktanta (North Gauhati) and Dirgheshwari temple.<sup>7</sup> His brother Pramatta Singh (1744-1751) also built Sukreshwar temple and Radreshwar temple. The temples of Bashistha, Nabagraha & Manikarnish-war were built by King Rajeshwar Singh (1751-1769 A.D.). These structures were built with brick, stone & cement made of ingredient like molasses, pulse, lime etc.

Due to lack of proper preservation most of the remains of pre-Ahom period has now been totally damaged. However the Directorate of Archaeology, Assam has been doing the work of conservation of the state.

### **2.3. Arunachal Pradesh**

There are many monuments which are found in different parts of Arunachal Pradesh. These monuments are protected by ASI and state Government. Some of the most famous monuments of Arunachal Pradesh are found in Milinithan and Bismaknagar. Among the ruin temples of Arunachal Pradesh the temple of Malinithan(near Likabali, West Siang district) is one of the most popular temples. The temple is dedicated to Goddess Durga. Bhismanagar Fort is located nearly 30 K.m from Roing. It dates back to 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. This fort is regarded as the oldest archaeological site. It lies in Dibang Valley district. The ITA Fort is located at the heart of the capital city in Papum Pare district. The fort is built with bricks and dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It is believed that the fort is built by Ahom rules. Dikang, Dzung, Balukpong, Jameri, Talung Dzung, Dimachung-Betali are some of the historical places of Arunachal Pradesh.

### **2.4. Meghalaya**

Ruins of brick-bats and terracotta, old fortifications and tanks of pre-Ahom period are noticed at Garo hill district of the Meghalaya state. In Meghalaya the most important example of Hindu temple was octagonal Siva temple also known as Ashtamurti Siva temple at Vadagokulgiri (West garo Hills).

### **2.5. Manipur**

Manipur is also very rich in archaeological sites. The remains are located in different parts of the hills and valley of Manipur. Archaeological findings have revealed that Manipur was inhabited by pre-historic man. Pre-historic settlements are found in the hill and valley areas. Coins, megaliths, sculptures, burial sites, inscriptions, and monuments gives very valuable information about the socio-economic, political, religious conditions and art & architecture of Manipur. Megalithic monuments are mostly found in the hill areas such as Mao, Ukhrul, Tharon, etc. There are many other historical monuments found scattered in different parts of the valley. These monuments are consisting of ruined palaces, forts, temples, gate-ways, samadhis, coronation hall etc. Majority of these monuments were found in the ancient capital Kangla, Imphal and also in another capital Langthabal/Canchipur, 8 kms., to the South of Imphal. Among the monuments, temples and Samadhi were in good condition.

The earliest example of Hindu temple in Manipur is Vishnu temple believed to be constructed by King Kyamba in 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. This is situated at Bishenpur about 19 km. from Imphal. The temple was built on a square plan look like double storeyed, made of brick and lime mortar. Temple of Hanuman Thakur was constructed by King Garibaniwaz in 18<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The temple is built on a square plan, which facing to south. The temple is made of brick and the curvilinear roof is covered with lime plaster. Temple of Radha Raman, constructed by Gambhir Singh in 19<sup>th</sup> century A.D. at Canchipur 3 km. from Imphal, Temple of Govindaji at Kangla, constructed by king Nara Singh in 19<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and temple of Thangal General, are some of the example of Hindu temple in Manipur.

There are many historical monuments built by the Manipuris in the neighbouring state of Manipur. From the early period the Manipuri princess use these places as the springboard to capture the throne of Manipur. Some of them settled permanently in that place. They built their palace and temple of Hindu deities and traditional deities. Some of them are still found at Sylhet district, Bangladesh. Beside these many other temples also built under the patronage of the rules of Manipur. There are many other historical monuments in Sylhet district of the modern Bangladesh built by the Manipuri princess. At the time of Burmese invasion in 1819 the Manipuri princes such as Gambhir Singh, Chourjit and Marjit fled from Manipur for about seven years. During the seven year devastation, their royal deities was taken to Cachar District and then to Sylhet (Bangladesh) by the princes. With the permission of British authority they built place and temples in Sylhet district, Bangladesh. Gambhir Singh built a residence known as Manipuri Rajbari of Lama Bazar, Sylhet and Marjit also built another residential building called Manipuri Rajbari at Bhalughat, Southern part of Sylhet, Bangladesh. Near the palace, Maharaja Gambhir Singh built three temples of traditional deities such as temples of Pakhangba, temple of Yumjao Lairembi and temple of Nongshaba. These temples are situated just to the opposite side of the Madan Mohan Collage, Sylhet Bazar.

These three temples were built over a rise common platform and have similar architectural style. The temple of Pakhangba is bigger than the temple of Yumjao lairembi and the temple of Nongshaba. The Unique feature of the temple Pakhanga is the depiction of peacock, solar symbol, bulls, and horses and paphal of Pakhangba in the southern and Eastern side walls

respectively. Mahraja Gambhir Singh also joined the reconstruction of Brindaban and the village of Radha-Kunda by giving financial assistance. He also sent his official to look after it. Raja Nara Singh also built a temple and a mandapa at Nara Singh Tilla, in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. The temple and the mandapa were dedicated to Lord Jaganath.

### **3. Conclusion**

The tribal chiefs and the kings of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Nagaland & Mizoram were influenced by Buddhism & Animism. So, they neglected monumental type of architecture. However, we came across number of monuments and remains in different parts of the region which enable us to form a definite idea about the extent and mature of the art.

Most of the rulers of North Eastern India particularly Tripura, Assam & Manipur were marvelous builders. They erected magnificent monuments some of which have survived till today. In the beginning people used bamboo, thatch, reeds, etc. and other indigenous products for the construction of house, temple, palace, fort, etc. However, in later period these perishable materials were replaced by durable materials like stone and brick etc. Monuments that were built in the early period were the victims of natural forces and some were demolished by foreign invaders either on account of their iconoclastic zeal or for securing building materials.

The Archaeological Survey of India, Guwahati Circle, played a greater role in preservation, protection and maintenance of the ancient monuments & archaeological sites of North-East India. There are 79(seventy-nine) centrally protected monuments and sites under the jurisdiction of Guwahati Circle. Out of which 55 are in Assam, 03 in Arunachal Pradesh, 01 in Manipur, 08 in Meghalaya, 04 in Nagaland and 08 in Tripura.(S.K. Goel:2014:44-45) Others remaining monuments are protected by the Archaeology Department of each state. The department is responsible for structural conservation and chemical preservation of ancient monuments and archaeological sites and remains.

North-Eastern region is rich for its distinct religion, culture, language, art and architecture. Study of this remained are useful not only for their artistic value but also they throw on the social, religious and economic conditions of the people of the period. The archaeological remains also

played an important role for the growth of the Tourism Industry. Many tourists visited in this region and contributed a major part in state economy. The paper will be able to help the scholars to have a fair idea about the archaeological wealth of North-East India and may inspire young scholars to do further research work in the field of historical archaeology and tourism development in this region.

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