
Glimpses of the Growth of Archaeology in Northeast India: From the 19th Century to 1947

Aokumla Walling¹

¹. Department of History and Archaeology, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, Nagaland – 797 004, India (Email: aokumlawalling@nagalanduniversity.ac.in)

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Abstract: Northeast region of India represented by the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura remained peripheral in the sub-continental context and in the historical atlas of India as well as in the archaeological map of India. With its diverse race, flora and fauna, climate and geographical setting, this region would have been a strategic area of early cultural exchange. Though from 18th and early part of 19th century, attempts were made towards understanding the rich cultural traditions of the region through ethnographical works and other related writings, reports on collection of historical and prehistoric antiquities in various journals, Northeast India largely unrepresented in the history of Archaeology in India till independence. However, such reports and surveys highlighted the remains of Stone Age (Neolithic), megalithic, ancient art and architectural, copper plate grants, coins etc. contributing immensely towards the knowledge of the region.

Keywords: Northeast India, Neolithic, Megalithic, Art, Architecture, Copper Plate, Ethnography

Introduction

One of the earliest comments regarding Northeast India was made by Mohammed Cazim (1779:130) in his 'A Description of Assam', where he described the region to be, '...spacious, populous and hard to penetrate; that it abounds in perils and danger; that the path and roads are besets with difficulties; that the obstacles to conquest of it are more than can be described; that they are of gigantic appearance, enterprising, intrepid, treacherous, well-armed and more numerous than can be conceived; are always prepared for battle;...that the way was obstructed by thick and dangerous bushes and broad and boisterous rivers'. For a very long time, the present Northeast India which comprises Assam, Sikkim, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, and Manipur was a region that was difficult for outsiders to penetrate and explore and most of all a region to be avoided. It was only after the Anglo-Burmese war in 1824-1826, that the region called 'the North East Frontier' became known and exposed to the rest of the country According to R. Gopalakrishnan (1990: 22), just before the British rule, the territorial arrangement of the region could be discerned in the following broad division: i. The Bodo-Kacharis, Ahom, and the Aryan element in the Brahmaputra valley; ii. The Tibeto-Burman

groups and sub-groups in the hilly periphery of the Brahmaputra valley; iii. The Mon-Khmer group and sub-groups in the south of the Brahmaputra valley; and iv. The migrant communities from the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta and Central India, in the Brahmaputra valley, Cachar, and Tripura. Within these divisions, there were many groups of people inhabiting specific areas with political control over a limited territory. These different groups of people were more or less independent on their own, having less contact with outsiders. What distinguishes these states from the rest of the country is the sensitive geopolitical location, with the existence of diverse ethnic groups with different historical backgrounds. North East was not a single entity with a common political destiny; rather it comprised eight different states.

The British colonial rule and its implication in India is one of the vast historical phenomena in Indian history. After the Anglo-Burmese War (1826), the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed where the Ahom King ceded a part of his territory to the British East India Company as a reward. Thereafter, the British continuously expanded their administration in the region which slowly resulted in the entire region coming under British control and it is believed that *'The history of the North East until independence in 1947 is a history of the expansion of British rule and of social, economic and political changes in the region'* (Inoue nd: 17). During the colonial period (1826–1947) until 1874, North East India was a part of Bengal Province from 1839 to 1873, after which Colonial Assam became its province for entire Northeast. The two princely states of Manipur and Tripura after the British conquest in 1891 came under British dominion. The expansion of colonial rule into the hill region took shape in reorganization and demarcation of geographical area as Kamei (2008: 66) points out, *'Another aspect of the British expansion was the conquest of the hill tribes and establishment of their areas into various districts. For example, the Naga areas were constituted into the Naga Hills District, and the Mizo (Lushai) areas into Lushai Hills District. The tribes living in the southern slopes of the eastern Himalayas were brought under political control and later on brought under the North-Eastern Frontier Agency.'*

After the annexation of the whole of Northeast India to the British Empire (by the end of the 19th century), several British scholars in the earth, life, and social science were deputed to the various parts of the region to carry out systematic investigations into the natural resources and human variability in Northeast India. Initial interests in the region towards administering and understanding these societies led the British to commission military expeditions, resulting in military reports and travel accounts which also contained some ethnographic information on the different communities making some academic contribution towards the so unknown societies. Some of the earliest reports of the region were made mostly by military and administrative officers, like the works of Capt. John Byan Neufvill (1828), Lt. R. Wilcox (1832), F. Hamilton (1820), M. Ghosh (1820), RB Pemberton (1835), and others, though being branded as "savages," "primitives," "uncivilized," "barbaric tribes," and "head-hunters," greatly contributed to the growing knowledge of the region. Robinson's *'A Descriptive Account of Assam'* (1841) and Hamilton's *'An Account of Assam'* (1820) gave a wide perspective

of the region, which were vital not just for administration but towards an understanding of the people that they were about to rule and also introducing to the rest of the country a region which was formerly unknown.

Serious attempts to prepare an official ethnography of the various communities in the region were made for the first time only during the beginning of the 20th century. In 1903, Sir Bampfylde Fuller, then Chief Commissioner of Assam, proposed to the Government of India to sanction the preparation of a series of monographs on the more important tribes and castes of the province of Assam. According to Nag (2012), Chief Commissioner Bamfylde Fuller's directive in 1904 for the preparation of a series of descriptive monographs on the more important tribes and castes owed much to Sir Edward Gait, who was the honorary Director of the Department of Ethnography during 1894-97. It is said that historical research on North East India may be said to have commenced with Edward Gait's *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam*, Shillong, 1897; (henceforth referred to as Report) which is one of the most initiative and substantial works of this period reflecting the historical content of the region. His work incorporated works on coins (also see Gait: 1895a), inscriptions, historical documents, quasi-historical writing (also see Gait: 1885b &c) religious works, and traditions, giving a detailed summary of the reports and research carried out in the region by different scholars and administrators till the end of 19th century. The Department of Ethnography began to busy itself with the compilation and publication of monographs on the tribes of Assam and these proved to be useful for administration as well as for anthropological studies. Maj. P.R.T. Gurdon's *The Khasis* (1914) and T.C. Hodson's monograph on *The Meiteis of Manipur* (1908) were some initial works. Soon several works were produced *The Mikirs* (Karbis) by Sir Charles Lyall (1908), *The Garos* by Maj. A. Playfair (1910), *Naga tribes of Manipur* by T.C. Hodson (1911), *The Kacharis* by Rev. Sidney Endle (1911), *Lushei-Kuki Clans* by Lt. Col. John Shakespeare (1912), *The Angami Nagas* (1921) *The Sema Nagas* (1921), *The Lotha Nagas* (1922) by J.H. Hutton, and *The Ao Nagas* (1926) by J.P. Mills and several others. These works greatly contributed to an understanding of the history of the region for the very first time, especially the various tribal communities. There is no denying that the stray mention of ancient remains and findings in such works greatly helped in the later years in identifying and recognizing ancient remains in the region indirectly contributing to the archaeology of the region.

Antiquarian activities in the region began in the early to middle part of the nineteenth century, mainly through the surveys and reports of individuals (colonial personals) interested in antiquities. According to Shreya Roy (2021), in *Histories of European Archaeology*, the term antiquarianism usually refers to the discovery, collection, and description of antiquities, or to the amateur study of artifacts or monuments. In early nineteenth-century India, however, the word 'antiquarianism' had broader and more scholarly connotations. It was a time when strict disciplinary boundaries had not yet been drawn, allowing 'antiquarian' and 'antiquary' to be used as umbrella terms sheltering scholars who ranged over diverse areas – such as the study of ancient texts,

languages, inscriptions, coins, antiquities, monuments, chronologies, and history. In the mainland context, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that the term archaeology came to the fore and began to assume a distinct identity within orientalist discourse, denoting a branch of study concerned with the material remains of the past, with artifacts, sites, and monuments (Upinder Singh: 2004). The common notion of antiquarianism, popular during the time greatly influenced the perspectives on the reports and surveys carried out in northeast India during this period. Yet, archaeology during the 19th century in northeast India was still unknown and unexplored. It was only in the 20th century, that we noticed the application and growth of archaeology, though very limited. Nevertheless, initial surveys and reports, especially during the 19th century played remarkable roles in understanding the region's ancient remains.

The credit for introducing the region into the umbrella of archaeology goes to Sir John Lubbock (1867: 822), who reported for the first time the findings of polished stone axes from the region- Upper Assam (which was collected by Capt. E. H Steel of Royal Artillery) published under the title, *The Stone Age*, in the journal *The Athenaeum*. This report led to the beginning of colonial collections of prehistoric tools in Northeast India, including those reports by Later Capt. Steel (1870) and Lt. Barron (1872:61) on the discovery of polished stone axes from the region. Since then reports on stray finds of stone implements began to appear occasionally in several periodicals and journals published in India and abroad such as Anderson (1871) *On roughly ground celt*, HB Medlicott (1875) *On discovery of a stone hatchet*, HH Godwin Austen (1875a) and J Cockburn (1879) on the discovery of some polished stone axes including a shouldered type in the Khasi hills. A mention of H H Godwin Austen (1875a) on the discovery of stone axes from the Khasi Hills has to be made, where he went further by observing the material used for making the celt and commented on its similarity with the tools reported from other part of the region. HB Medlicott (1875) also added that the celts might have been used as hoes, by observing the Kukis of North Cachar hills who used stone set into wooden handles, which can be also one of the earliest ethnographic comparison works. Similar work was also reported by John Cockburn (1879), on the stone implements of the Khasi Hills, where he identified the material of the stone to be slate and interpreted the tools to be agricultural tools which were fixed on horn or wood handle.

From time to time Neolithic stone implements were discovered in the region. The first attempt to study the prehistoric cultures of Northeast India was made by John Henry Hutton during the 20th century. Although Hutton had no formal training in anthropology, his keen interest in prehistory is evident from one of his early papers (1928) published in the *Journal of 'Man in India'* entitled '*Prehistory of Assam*,' which is the first publication that provides general background on the nature of the prehistoric record of the region. This was a lecture talk given by Hutton on 17th August 1928, in the Indian Museum, Calcutta. He also remarked on the scant prehistoric remains in the region owing to the great humidity of the region. On records in stones, he pointed out

the existence of Celts- adzes or axes and also a few megalithic monuments. One remarkable contribution was the classification of the stone celts into three types- long and narrow (identical in type with celts found in dolmens graves in South India), more or less rectangular and shouldered. Hutton further added that the adze type found in the Ganges valley was probably brought by the emigrants from the east. By this time some local scholars also started to contribute towards the study of the archaeological remains in the region. KL Barua (1939), PC Choudhury (1944), and others did some general surveys on Neolithic remains especially in the Kamrupa area which were, however, not based on systematic exploration or excavation and were just stray finds reports. One distinguishing feature of their work was the identification of the specific tool typology viz. the ground and polished stone tools which were regarded by all writers as representing the Neolithic phase of prehistoric culture in North East India. However, no serious archaeological works were carried out till independence besides some explorations by the ASI -RD Banerjee (1924) in the Abor country (Arunachal Pradesh).

Studies on megalithic traditions of the tribal societies of Northeast India have received the attention of many for more than a century. Pioneering ethnographers like HH Godwin-Austen (1872, 1875a &b, 1876), H. Yule (1872), CB Clarke (1874), and others rendered accounts based on their direct observations of the megalithic rituals and the culture of the people making their writings invaluable. Much of the observations were made on the Khasi and Nagas, who practiced the culture more strongly. HH Godwin Austen (1872 &1876) while conducting geological investigations in Assam made copious references to the megalithic stone monuments of the Khasi hills and Naga tribes by giving a complete description of the kind of stone and the history connected with the erection and distribution. C.B Clarke (1874) also made some observations on the stone monuments of the Khasi hills, classifying the Khasi stones for the first time into three types: The funeral pyres, The cists containing the pots of ashes, and the monumental group.

During the 20th Century, PRT Gurdon, Playfair, JH Hutton, and JP Mills realizing the significance of the Megalithic culture, contributed to studying this practice in the region. Hutton (see 1922, 1924, and 1926) worked on the megalithic remains of the Khasis, where previously Gurdon had classified the megaliths of the Khasis for the first time into three groups: Menhir or vertical stone, table stone or dolmens, and stone cromlech or cains. Hutton (1929) went further by giving the possible origin of the monoliths of the region to Indonesia and opined that the erection of monoliths in the region was very important as it throws some light on the erection of prehistoric monoliths in other parts of the world, and believes that Assam and Madagascar are the only remaining parts of the world where the practice of erecting rough stone remains. The first survey of megalithic jars from North Cachar Hills was made by J. P. Mills in January 1928 where he noticed the presence of some unique types of stone monuments previously unknown in the region and not reported anywhere in the Indian subcontinent. The outcome of this survey was later jointly published with J. H. Hutton

in 1929, titled, *Ancient Monoliths of North Cachar* (1929). The characteristics for what these monoliths fall apart from the other types are the hollowed and pear-shaped or elongated convex ones resembling jars. They were made of stones locally available in the hills of North Cachar. In the proximity of these monolithic localities were also located menhirs, dolmens, and seating stones. The most remarkable reference is the finding of celts throughout these localities.

The earliest colonial account of the stone monuments of Northeast India comes from the Khasi Hills. Henry Walters (1832), a British magistrate in Dhaka, in his account of his journey via the Khasi Hills in 1828, referred to some two or three hundred monuments, large and small, all formed of circular solid stone slabs, supported by upright stones that vary from two to six and eight feet in diameter. Following this, in 1835, GE Westmacott (1835), a captain in the Assam Light Infantry documented the remains of old temples near Chardwar (Chariduar) in Tezpur (Central Assam) giving a detailed and objective record of the temple and its ruins with the help of a sketch plan. JM Foster's (1874) work on the temple of Jaysagar, is one of the earliest reports concerning the need for conservation of ancient monuments in the region. He mentions how ancient edifices in Assam are destroyed due to earthquakes and other influences of weather and how they should be preserved against future destruction. Another early account is the report on ancient monoliths of the Kachari kingdom in Dimapur by Lieutenant Biggs in 1841(1914), this was followed by H H Godwin Austen (1875) who made some remarkable observations with detailed sketches on the ruins at Dimapur (Nagaland) on the Dunsiri River Assam; his work holds importance till date.

Beginning of the 1920s, steady growth in archaeological explorations and excavations began as a result of new institutional involvements such as the archaeology, arts, and culture departments at respective states dedicated to cultural and historical studies. In essence, the attempts to promote archaeological research in recent times signal a step further ahead from the foundational initiatives of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti and the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS). The Kamrup Anusandhan Samity, a voluntary organization of local enthusiasts and scholars, highlighted the cultural linkages between Kamrup, the historical kingdom that covered a major part of northeast India and the rest of the sub-continent. For better governance, it was important to steer Assam's growing intelligentsia towards favoring the British government. Also, the colonial government's initiative was intended to facilitate and encourage a different focus on historical studies. Thus, the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) was established in 1928 under direct control of the colonial government focusing specifically on historical periods and events through a clearly defined emphasis on recorded history. Also, the Bengal Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was set up in 1900 and evolved into the Eastern Circle five years later, in 1905. With the establishment of this Circle, exploratory works were undertaken and important archaeological sites were discovered and located within a broad chronological framework. The monument survey undertaken by T. Bloch in 1901 is an example of an organized archaeological effort in pre-Independence

India. Bloch's survey was subsequently published in the Archaeological Survey of India Report of 1906-07 under the title '*Conservation in Assam*'. Three distinguished Indian archaeologists, R. D. Banerjee, K. N. Dikshit, and T. N. Ramachandran, made valuable contributions while appointed as the Superintendents of the ASI's Eastern Circle. Special mention is also towards, Banerjee's work on the Stone Age of Arunachal Pradesh. His article titled '*Neolithic implements from the Abor country*', published in 1924-25 (1924), opened a new chapter in the prehistory of the region. K. L. Barua (1933), the author of *Early History of Kamarupa*, stressed the importance of undertaking excavations to recover ancient relics, and he published several 355 articles along these lines. Barua's (1939) article titled '*Prehistoric Cultures of Assam*', published in the *Journal of the Assam Research Society* in 1939 is one of the first articles on archaeology by a local researcher.

The Archaeological Survey from the beginning of the 20th century also emphasized conserving the ancient monuments of the region especially the monuments of Assam. Erection of concrete platforms for the monuments at Sibsagar, and execution of special repairs of the Ahom palace at Garhgaon, were carried out during this period. For the first time, watchmen were employed to take care of the monuments and the initial step of placing notice boards in front of monuments, providing wire fencing around, clearing the area, erection reinforced concrete boundary pillars around, and constructing iron doors. Many monuments like the rock-cut sculptures and stone images of Tripura state, the monolithic columns at Dimapur, the ruined Gupta temple at Dah Parbatiya in Darrang dist. Assam, Jayasagar in Sibsagar, and many others were cleared of jungle, made accessible, repaired, and came under the fold of the Archaeological Survey of India. Later, during Lord Curzon's time as Viceroy of India, the Kachari monuments were restored for preservation. After the establishment of the Eastern Circle of ASI in 1905 some monument surveys were undertaken under the initiative of T. Bloch (1906) covering portions of Assam. The report titled '*Conservation in Assam*' was later published as part of the Archaeological Survey of India Report (1906–1907). Most of such works were carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India. Their works were mainly on the exploration and conservation of monuments within the region- Padmanatha Bhattacharya on *The Tezpur remains* (1909), K N Dikshit on *Assam monument* (1923b), RD Banerji on the *Pre-Ahom Art and Architecture* (1924b & 1925), TN Ramachandran's *On the Exploration and conservation of monuments in Assam* (1936) are some of the works carried out. Concerns regarding the need for conservation were also highlighted by many like that of TH Padmanatha Bhattacharya's *Study on the remains of Tezpur* (1921), where he reported and made observations on the carvings of figures, the nature of how the whole column was made, the manner on how the columns and blocks have been left and exposed to nature and how it has become disfigured. Pioneering work on the exploration of the region was done by K N Diksh (1923a) at Pandu, Kamakhya Hill, Hajo, and Deopani during 1923-24. He identified that the areas were important for an understanding of the art and architecture and even carried out restoration works. He was followed by workers like R D Banerjee, NG Majumdar, and TN Ramachandran mostly from the

ASI. Pre- Ahom Art and Architecture and sculpture of Assam, exploration at Darrang district, Tezpur, identification of a Saiva temple of the 10th century and other temples belonging to the 10th-11th century AD, exploration of Dah Parbatiya at Tezpur where the unique distinction of having within its limit ruins of the oldest temple in Assam, exploration of Bamuni Hills in Assam for its gigantic stone built temple, are some of the works that the survey carried out under the initiative of R. D Benerjee (1924a). These explorations brought into picture the art, sculpture, architecture as well and religion of ancient Assam. Another work of R D Banerjee (1925) was the exploration of the North East Frontier tract at Sadiya. This frontier post of Sadiya showed evidence of Sadiya being fortified by Ahom with some guns captured by them from Musalmans.

Studies on copperplate grants were carried out mainly under the KamrupaAnusandhanaSamiti, by scholars like Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinod, Umesh Chandra Chudhuri, NK Bhattasali made some prominent contributions. Padmanath Bhattacharya (1914) contributed to identifying the copperplate grant of Bhaslarvarman of Kamrupa - which is said to contain the most ancient record hitherto discovered in Assam containing names of kings reigned from mid-4th – 7th century AD. He also went further in working on the copperplates of Harjaravarman and also in identifying some kings of Assam which were not mentioned in other inscriptions of Kamarupa. NK Bhattasali (1935) and Umesh Chaudhuri (1940) also contributed to identifying the places that were mentioned in the copper plate grants.

In the year 1906, three coolies while hoeing in the Daflating Tea Garden, in the Jorhat Sub-division of Sibsagar district Assam, came upon a large number of old coins. The then Deputy Commissioner investigated the matter under the provision of the Treasure Trove Act, one of the first of its kind, and ultimately, some 928 coins- mostly minted by the Assamese Kings were recorded. These were further forwarded to Shillong for the report to HE Stapleton the then inspectors of schools, Dacca Division, and Honorary Secretary to the Coin Committee, East Bengal and Assam. The local government in the region recognized the importance of the find and requested that an account of it should be included in a paper dealing with all Assamese coins from the time of Rudra Simha to the end of the Assamese rule. This work was carried out by Stapleton (1910a) and includes a study on the pre-Ahom coins in Assam, coins in Ahom Script, and Assamese coins in Bengali script before the time of Rudra Simha. AW Bothman (1914a) also made further inputs to the previous work of Gait's (Gait 1895) on Ahom coins and was interpreted more cohesively. Botham (1914b) also rearranged the Jaintia Kings chronology (from Pratapa Singha to Ram Singha II) which was earlier done by EA Gait (1885) based on coins, by taking the help of Buranjis and copperplates.

Conclusion

Though reports on the collection of historical and prehistoric antiquities began to appear in various journals by the end of the 19th century, the Northeast region remained peripheral in the sub-continental context and the historical atlas of India as

well as in the archaeological map of India till independence. Though the Archaeological Survey of India (the main agent during the time to carry out archaeological works) can be acknowledged for specific works mainly on conservation and some archaeological explorations, no work as such was carried out on excavation of archaeological sites till independence. Reviewing the paucity of research taken in the region, J P Mills (1933) administrator and ethnographer observed that “archaeologically Assam is still *terra incognita*. The spade, the chief tool of archaeology has hardly been used in research in Assam.”

T C Sharma (1999) also pointed out that the Archaeological Survey of India did not pay attention to excavating early historic sites in the Brahmaputra Valley till 1968. Secondly, the region as a whole could not be brought into a systematic archaeological frame under the survey and emphases were mostly in and around Assam while the remaining region was mostly left unnoticed and unexplored. Nevertheless, the pre-independence works though fragmentary and its date inadequate, laid the foundation for the reconstruction of the prehistory of Northeast India as well as the beginning of copper- bronze Chalcolithic period to the beginning of the historic period in the Brahmaputra valley, the different dynasties of the region, the art and architecture of the region, coins, copperplates, megalithic studies and other related studies which greatly contributed to the building up of the history of the region, later to be taken up more intensively post-independence.

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