

Discovery of Ancient Kamarupa: Quest for Pasts in Colonial Assam

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Submitted by

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis titled “**Discovery of Ancient Kamarupa: Quest for Pasts in Colonial Assam**” is the outcome of my own research carried out in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India, under the supervision of Arupjyoti Saikia, Professor of History, in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, India.

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Declaration

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Abbreviations

AIOC	All India Oriental Conference
ASA	Assam State Archives
ASB	Asiatic Society of Bengal
ASI	Archaeological Survey of India
AVD	Assam Valley Division
DHAS	Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam
EHK	Early History of Kamarupa
EI	Epigraphia Indica
EIC	East India Company
IVC	Indus Valley Civilization
JARS	Journal of the Assam Research Society
JBORS	Journal of Bihar and Orissa Rsearch Society
KAS	Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti
NAI	National Archives of India
PWD	Public Works Department

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Abstract

The present thesis examines how the idea of the ancient Kamarupa emerged as a complex cultural and historic entity in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A large part of the colonial projection of ‘discovery’ of the ancient Kamarupa, especially its political lineage was a result of chance findings. The thesis argues and focuses on the agency of Assamese and Bengali scholars in initiating a more systematic, organic and conscious retrieval and (re)interpretation of the great antiquity of Kamarupa situated within the historical and ideological imperatives of regional nation-building. The present thesis aims to trace the underpinnings that guided and shaped the idea of ancient Kamarupa in colonial Assam. A large part of the thesis revolves around the monuments and epigraphs that occupied a central place in the recovery of the antiquity of Kamarupa. But it also engages with diverse premodern forms of recording the past in Assam. In so doing, it delves into the scholars, especially Indian, who engaged with the pre-Ahom (modes of) history, institutions that formalized the search and study, and the ideas that drove these endeavours and institutions. The Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti, or the KAS, played a key role, that is often overlooked, in collecting and disseminating manuscripts, inscriptions, coins, sculptures, and other artefacts and traditions that accrued from scientific explorations in the Valley at the turn of the 20th century. Before the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) made headway into the region, the KAS explored much of the Brahmaputra Valley, and its findings often adorned its museum. The ASI, while establishing this search and recovery of archaeological relics from Assam on a more systematic footing, was also seen to closely collaborate with the KAS, unlike other parts of Eastern India. The outcome of these explorations and excavations was the revealing of a vast and rich cultural heritage of considerable antiquity. This necessitated the formal beginning of the region's first museum. The indefatigable effort and sacrifices of the workers of the KAS brought into being the Provincial Museum of Assam in 1940. The current thesis demonstrates the agency of local intelligentsia in bringing about the practice of archaeology and museums to the colonial province. It further explores their travails and methods in this collecting enterprise. The early initiatives in Assam by colonial military officials and political agents induced the recovery (what the colonials termed ‘discovery’) of the monuments across the valley. But at that point, it was not in the manner of a systematic and scientific exploration but more in the nature of sporadic chance findings. A more systematic and scientific search and further refinement of knowledge of the recovered antiquities was pursued meticulously by Assamese intelligentsia under the institutional aegis of the KAS.



Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the process that engendered ancient Kamarupa as a complex cultural and historic entity in colonial Assam, largely through texts, objects and monuments but also through traditions, mythology and historical memory. The thesis attends to the ‘discovery’ of the political lineage of Kamarupa by colonial officials in the 19th century and subsequently a more meticulous and purposeful recovery and reinterpretation of the great antiquity of Kamarupa by Assamese and Bengali scholars by the early 20th century. The thesis is specifically concerned with the underpinnings and agency of the scholars of Assam that guided and shaped the idea of Kamarupa culminating in the early 20th century. The thesis begins by delving into the nature of colonial intervention in terms of producing knowledge on Assam. It attempts to capture the complexities of representation and interpretation of their search for the political ancientness of the region and, to quote Dirks, the various ‘documentation’ activities.¹ In a brief section, the thesis discusses the premodern, non-textual traditions of remembering the past in what is now Assam. At the heart of the thesis resides the world of the contributors, or as more popularly couched, the interlocutors and collaborators, who were coming up from within the region and the ways these scholars from Assam and adjacent regions were contributing to the changes in perception of the past.

The trail of discoveries on ancient Kamarupa during the colonial period could be traced back to the later 18th century with the launch of the first British survey activities in this part of

¹ Dirks, Nicholas B. 1996. “Foreword.” In *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, by Bernard S. Cohn, ix-xviii. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Eastern India.² The earliest independent account of the region produced by a European is Chevalier's *Memoir*.³ Monsieur Jean Baptiste Chevalier, the head of the French East India Company and deputed at Goalpara in the 1760s, from erstwhile Chandernagore, was an important figure writing extensively on the region. Following Chevalier, the Ahom policy of isolationism would allow Captain Thomas Welsh's expedition in 1792. It was the first authorized English military intervention in Assam, equipped with the latest methods of exploration and survey.⁴ The official desire to collect information about Assam was carried out by Captain Welsh himself and in a more scholarly and laborious manner by Dr. John Peter Wade, the medical officer in charge of Welsh's expedition. Some fifteen years following Captain Welsh's treaty with Ahom king Gaurinath Singha in February 1793, Buchanan embarked on a mission to generate information on Assam.⁵ It was one of the earliest instances of information being generated on Assam in the long course of surveys of India. Dr. Buchanan, later Francis Hamilton, was appointed by the Court of Directors in 1807 to undertake a statistical survey of the territories subject to the immediate authority of the Bengal presidency and of some adjacent countries and petty states.⁶ Though Assam was outside the direct ambit

² Singh, Upinder. 2004. *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology*. Delhi: Permanent Black.

³ Chevalier, Jean-Baptiste. 2020. *Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765): Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal and Tibet*. First. Translated by Jean Deloche and Caroline Dutta-Baruah. Paris: LBS Publications India in association with EFEO, Paris.

⁴ Bhuyan, S. K. 1949. *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826: A History of the relations of Assam with the East India Company from 1771 to 1826, based on original English and Assamese sources*. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies Assam.

⁵ Bhuyan, Suryyakumar. 1949. *Early British Relations with Assam*. Shillong: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam.

⁶ Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 4-5; Hamilton, Francis. 1940. *An Account of Assam with some notices concerning The Neighboring Territories first compiled in 1807-1814*. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, v-ix.

of Doctor Buchanan's investigation, he contributed two crucial accounts on the region, namely, *Desultory Notice of Assam* and *General View of History and Manners of Kamarupa*.

Explorations also took place external to the domain of official surveys. In terms of records relative to Assam, contributions published in the pages of *Asiatic Researches* were important. Assam as an unexplored region from the historical point of view till then, communications relating to the province were deemed valuable by the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Henry Vansittart and Heinrich Blochmann translated Persian accounts which described Assam and its people.⁷ These early surveys, especially those produced under the aegis of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, were marked by the necessities of the development of administrative policy. Captain Westmacott first supplied notices on monumental remains in Tezpur and following Westmacott, Majors S. F. Hannay, Captain E. T. Dalton, John Butler and H. H. Godwin Austen embarked on surveys of monuments in Guwahati, Tezpur, Dibrugarh, Bishmuknagar, Dimapur and such places.⁸ Meanwhile, Jenkins chanced upon Dharmapala and Vanamala's plates that contributed to the growing self-confidence of an antiquarian search. These sporadic searches of the 19th century culminated in the formation of the

⁷ Vansittart succeeded Lord Clive as governor of Bengal in July 1760. Vansittart was an early contributor to the creation of colonial(ist) discourse on Assam. His writing on Assam is based on indirect observation. Cazim, Mohammed. 1799. "A Description of Assam.", Translated from Persian by Henry Vansittart. *Asiatic Researches; or, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal for Inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia* II: 171-186.

⁸ Westmacott, Captain G. E. 1835. "Description of Ancient Temples and Ruins at Chardwar in Assam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* IV(40): 185-195; Hannay, Major S. F. 1848. "Notes on Ancient Temples and other remains in the vicinity of Suddyah, Upper Assam.", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, XVII(Part I), 459-76; Dalton, Capt. E. Taite. 1855. "Notes on Assam Temple Ruins." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Baptist Mission Press) XXIV (1): 1-24; Butler, Major John. 1855. *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam during Residence of Fourteen Years*. London: Smith, Elder and Co.; Austen, Major Godwin. 1874. "On the Ruins at Dimapur on the Dunsiri River, Asam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Baptist Mission Press) XLIII (Pt. 1) (I-IV): 1-6.

Department of Ethnography in the region in 1894 and the publication of the *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam* in 1897.⁹

It was Sanskrit experts and English-educated scholars of Assam, such as Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath Bhattacharya who provided the first useful critiques of the colonialist approach to Assam's history. Padmanath's contribution towards a cogent reconstruction of the early history of Assam can be understood from his use of sources, largely epigraphic but also mythological and spiritual. Padmanath's extensive engagement with these sources created some of the earliest, persuasive accounts of Kamarupa. Padmanath and his contemporary's scholarship culminated in the formation of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti (KAS). The proposal for the formation of the KAS was taken at the fifth session of Uttar Banga Sahitya Sammelan (North Bengal Literary Convention), organized in 1912.¹⁰ The assembly was held at the historic site of Kamakhya temple, and as the main objective stated, it was to search the history of ancient Kamarupa.¹¹ The jurisdiction of this enquiry would primarily comprise Assam, Eastern Bengal, North Bengal and Cooch Behar.¹² As will be seen subsequently in this thesis the objective of the KAS stood in clear distinction from leading orientalist societies in the metropolises and colony's presidencies, such as the Asiatic Society of Calcutta and

⁹ Gait, Edward Albert. 1897. *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam*. Shillong: Superintendent of Assam Secretariat.

¹⁰ Vidyavinode, Padmanath Bhattacharya. 1913. "Kamarupa-shasanavali Bhaskarbarmma'r Tamrashasan" read at its first annual meeting of Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Gauhati. in Sarma, Chandra Nath, ed. 1920. *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*. First. Gauhati: Office of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, 49-77.

¹¹ Bhuyan, S. K., ed. 1927. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti or the Assam Rsearch Society*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti.

¹² The selection of archive for current thesis has been made in reference to the foundational objectives of the KAS. Primary documents have been collected from academic and administrative archives in Assam, parts of Bengal including and with special focus on the coterminous Cooch Behar and North Bengal.

elsewhere.¹³ Quite avowedly, the KAS would trace its origins, in its search for the regional pasts, to the regional antiquarian societies such as Bangiya Sahitya Parishad and Varendra Anusandhan Samiti.¹⁴ In this, the KAS may also be viewed as a crucial participant in Eastern India wherein antiquarian research was inextricably enmeshed within a growing national movement across India.¹⁵ Sahitya Parishad inspired other regions to open their own wings to search for their 'glorious' pasts.¹⁶ Accordingly, regional societies came up in different parts of Eastern India. In the Brahmaputra Valley, Bangiya Sahityanushilani Sabha came up in 1908 as the Gauhati branch of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. Sahityanushilani Sabha acted as the precursor of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti. The foundation of the KAS rested on the notion that, "though similar in name, the method of work has to be quite different from that followed by the Varendra Anusandhan Samiti."¹⁷

The Samiti had nothing of the financial support comparable to either of the two Societies of Bengal, namely Sahitya Parishad and Varendra Anusandhan Samiti that had the privilege of large incentives provided by Maharaja of Baroda and Sarat Kumar Ray of Rajshahi.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the KAS still carried out considerable work all across the length and breadth of the Valley. Quite appropriately and immediately, the KAS recognized the import of various

¹³ Asiatic Society's quest was broad-ranging, incorporating the whole of Asia and in terms of subject of enquiry, ranging from man, nature, of sciences to antiquities. Jones, Sir William. 1783-84. *A Discourse on the Institution of a Society for Enquiring into the History, Civil and Natural, the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia, Delivered at Calcutta, January 15th, 1784*. London: T. Payne and Sons, xi-xv.

¹⁴ Bhagabati, Tarun Chandra. 2014. *The Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti in Historical Perspectives (1912 AD to 1993 AD)*. Delhi: B R Publishing Corporation.

¹⁵ Maitreya, Akshay Kumar. 1985. *Uttarbanger Puratattva Samgraha*. Kolkata: Pratiti Prakashani.

¹⁶ Bhagabati, *The Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*, 29.

¹⁷ Sen, Kalicharan. 1914. *Prospectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, 1.

¹⁸ Gupta, Manoranjan, ed. 1960. *Historical Relics Etc. in the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Museum*. Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad; Maitreya, *Uttarbanger Puratattva Samgraha*. 1-9.

sites housing old, deilapidated temple complexes. The extensive collection activities and explorations at these archaeological sites across the Brahmaputra Valley, that had fallen into ruins, would establish the KAS on the front foot as a learned historical society. The people responsible for this feat would be mainly Padmanath Bhattacharya, Dhireshwaracharya Kaviratna, Hemchandra Goswami et al. The objects and legends associated with these sites that the KAS meticulously collected and recorded were viewed by these scholars as cultural artefacts encoding and embodying distinctive regional identity, the uniqueness of Assamese antiquity. Soon, the learned society recognized the necessity beyond the energetic fieldwork, documentation and preservation and to launch the *Journal of the Assam Research Society* (JARS). This was a turning point in the intellectual life of colonial Assam. Through extensive writing across subjects ranging from ethnography, antiquities, oral traditions, history and geography, the KAS articulated an autonomous historical imagination rooted in the regional experiences. It garnered scholarly attentions across and beyond the region. Writing in the first issue of the first volume of the JARS, J. P. Mills, colonial administrator and noted ethnographer of the region, remarked that the chief tool of an archaeologist, the spade, had never been used in research in Assam. This is critiqued in the thesis as a crucial moment of negotiating regional episteme within a national and colonial framework.

The Archaeological Survey of India did not officially enter the northeastern regions before the first decade of the 20th century. The earliest tour conducted by Eastern Circle Superintendent Theodor Bloch would only be around 1905.¹⁹ Assam came within the fold of Archaeological Survey of India only around the turn of the 20th century as a spatial zone of study within the Eastern circle, jointly with Bengal. Despite mixed opinions on a pan-Indian

¹⁹ Bloch, T. 1905. *Report on an Archaeological Tour in Assam*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat, 1-5.

scale, the archaeological landscape in Assam proved abundant while also relatively less appreciated.

Writing the official history of Assam in 1906 Edward Gait opined that there were few monuments to substantiate the fair degree of civilization attained by Kamarupa in the early centuries CE.²⁰ The ‘discovery’ of the ancient past of the colony’s regions was never neutral rather political. The colonial writers writing the colony’s history sought to construct the colonized subjects as forgetful of their own past, indolent, decadent, impoverished and thereby unworthy of sovereignty or self-rule, through the official documentation discourses of survey and ‘discovery’. The colonial government became the trustee of India’s past. Both historians Upinder Singh and Nicolas B. Dirks remind us that the colonial approaches to the ancient history and historical relics were deeply complicit in the brute realities of colonial conquest – i.e. not just economic and military but through systematic production of classificatory knowledge – and thereby rooted in contemporary political and legal disquisitions that asserted the fundamental nature of Indian society, its civic and political institutions and subsequently served to perpetuate the story of Britain’s rescue of India from its civilizational decay and demise.²¹ Through an archival study of the Annual Reports of the Archaeological Survey of India the thesis highlights the differential treatment and outlook towards indigenous monuments as expressed by colonial administrators and Indian archaeologists. As the Indian scholars started making their way into the colonial bureaucracy of the Archaeological Survey and its intellectual circles the 1920s onwards, this distinction became even more prominent.

²⁰ Gait, E. A. 1906. *A History of Assam*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 20-21.

²¹ Nicholas B. Dirks. 1993. “Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive” In *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives On South Asia New Cultural Studies*, edited by Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, 279-313. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press; Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 333.

The thesis demonstrates through a thorough reading of the Annual Reports that the archaeological survey reports produced by archaeologists like Rakhaldas banyopadhyay, K. N. Dikshit, T. N. Ramachandran concerned beyond the European model of cataloguing and classifying India's past to reclaiming the act of discovery by active search for cultural moorings, regional identity and antiquity.

The extensive collection amassed through early 20th-century archaeological surveys in Assam eventually culminated in the establishment of the Assam Provincial Museum, emerging from the efforts of the KAS. This thesis traces the process of 'museumization' of these artefacts and the broader heritage-making around the historical region of Kamarupa.²² It critically examines whether this was a deliberate political project of the colonial state or an outcome shaped by intersecting scholarly and ideological currents. The location of the Museum in a colonial province – rather than in a presidency, metropolitan city, or commercial hub – reflects a distinct set of imperatives that depart from the dominant models of imperial museology.

This study contends that the conceptualization of Kamarupa as a historic cultural community was not purely a colonial invention. Instead, the effort to inherit, organize, and exhibit the region's legacy reveals a scholastic impulse embedded within both colonial administrative logics and nationalist aspirations of recovery. The activities of the KAS, in the production of historical knowledge on Assam outside the university and creating a heritage discourse through print, mark the emergence of a distinctive regional episteme and self-assertion that contested and supplemented colonial archaeology. Its varied collection of cultural, material

²² Cohn, Bernard S. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Anderson, B. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.

and textual artefacts signified a regional scholarly movement that negotiated its place within wider political frameworks.

Ancient Kamarupa in the Age of Colonialism

Kamarupa as a historical entity, was not merely ‘discovered’ but discursively produced across the shifting registers of colonial administration, orientalist fascination, and a counter-colonial resistance. In light of this articulation, the thesis examines the textual discourses produced at the behest of the British government that variously reintroduce Kamarupa as a lost civilization, an ancient polity suspended in time, and a site of enduring cultural continuity.

The first noteworthy history of Assam was compiled in 1841 by William Robinson at the instance of Colonel Francis Jenkins.²³ Francis Jenkins, then agent to the Governor-General in the North East Frontier, was attributed the credit of the ground-breaking discovery of the plates of Dharmapala and Vanamala in the course of an investigation of Lakhiraj tenures, about the 1840s.²⁴ It was ground-breaking, because this discovery changed the course of the search for Kamarupa that came to depend largely on epigraphy. Naturally, it could be assumed that Jenkins was endowed with thorough knowledge of the region and was, therefore, best suited to write a descriptive account of Assam for the British government to gauge the commercial prospects of the region.²⁵ It might be read as an advent of increasing interest in the past of the region by the colonial government, and, in its wake by the colonised subjects

²³ Robinson, William. 1841. *A Descriptive Account of Asam: with a sketch of local geography and a concise history of the tea-plant of Assam: to which is added a short account of the neighbouring tribes exhibiting their history, manners and customs*. Calcutta: British Library.

²⁴ Jenkins, Major F. 1840. “Paper on Ancient Land Grants on Copper, Discovered in Assam.” *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Bishop's College Press) IX (Part II): 766-782.

²⁵ Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Asam*, 146-188

alike.²⁶ However, the mantle fell on William Robinson for the compilation of a descriptive account of Assam that dealt comprehensively with the history, geography, language and resources of the province. His references to the ancient kingdoms of Kamarupa are scattered, often relying on secondary sources and hearsay. Yet, his text participates in the gradual colonial rediscovery of Kamarupa. Positioned within the early phase of British engagement with Assam, Robinson's account prefigures later, more systematic archaeological and historiographical projects. In this sense, Robinson laid the groundwork – however tentatively – for the framing of Kamarupa as a 'lost' Indic polity, later taken up by figures like Edward Gait and others. Though not a historian in the formal sense, Robinson's work reflects a proto-ethnographic engagement with the region, marked by orientalist fascination and administrative intent.²⁷

Dr. Francis Buchanan was a Scottish surgeon and surveyor with the East India Company. Dr. Buchanan was among the earliest colonial figures to attempt the historical reconstruction of Kamarupa. Buchanan wrote the *History and Manners of Kamrup* before Robinson's account and he too thought that a general obscurity prevailed surrounding the sources of the pre-Ahom phase.²⁸ Dr. Francis Buchanan was a laborious compiler. For seven years, spanning 1807 to 1814, he was appointed by the Court of Directors to survey territories subject to the immediate authority of the Bengal government. Buchanan's work tried to periodize the history of

²⁶ Although preceding Robinson, Dr. J. P. Wade, the medical officer in Capt., later Colonel Thomas Welsh's detachment in 1792 produced a historical and a geographic account. These were "*chiefly translations from original documents in the Assamese language. But partly derived from the information of intelligent natives and partly from my own observation.*" J. P. Wade, 'Geographical Sketch of Assam (4th July 1802)', in *Letter to Kaye and Johnston from John Peter Wade*, MSS. Eur. F3 (Letter no. 95), dated 03.02.1793 [DHAS].

²⁷ Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Asam*, 146-188

²⁸ Buchanan, Francis. 1958. "General View of the History of Kamrupa." In *Kamarupar Buranji*, edited by Suryya Kumar Bhuyan. Gauhati, Assam: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.

Kamarupa into dynasties and kings, often reconciling mythological timelines with historical geography. His account, while not based on formal archaeological or epigraphic work, drew heavily from local traditions, Puranas and Tantras and interviews with visitors and settlers of Assam and Bengal. Buchanan's orientation was deeply orientalist that treated Kamarupa as a lost ancient kingdom, integrated into the broader imagination of India's antiquity.

The intervention from Fort William in the matters of Ahom governance created a necessity for surveys with explicitly strategic and commercial aims.²⁹ The earliest geographic survey was conducted by Dr. John Peter Wade as part of Capt. Welsh's detachment in 1792-94. Wade's descriptive geographic account treated Kamarupa as a spatial entity bearing testimony of a lost kingdom visible in material traces and place names.³⁰ Wade referred to two previous and partial geographic accounts viz., the one of F. J. van der Heiden's and the other by the French administrative official Jean Baptiste Chevalier. Ensign Wood on Welsh's detachment provided one of the earliest maps of the course of Brahmaputra but only up to Rungpore.³¹ Dr. Wade practically narrated a hitherto uncharted territory, however, in his own words, described his survey as 'unscientific'.³² The region was found to be interspersed with rivers and mountains. Fleeting mention of historical regions such as Bisnauth, Charaideo, Rungpore, Kamrup and Gauhati featured in brief detail, without any mention of historical traditions or relics associated therewith. Wade's description of topography laid an early foundational role in locating Kamarupa within an emergent historical and geographical imagination of the British colonial state.

²⁹ Welsh, Captain Thomas. 1799. "Welsh's Report on Assam 1794." In *The North-East Frontier of India*, by Alexander Mackenzie, 377-394. Delhi: Mittal Publications.

³⁰ Wade, Dr. John Peter. 1805. *A Geographical Sketch of Assam*. The Asiatic Annual Register.

³¹ Ibid, 1-34. Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2020. *The Unquiet River: a biography of the Brahmaputra*. New Delhi: OUP.

³² Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam*, 2.

Following this, no written notices were practically produced. Surveyors would be appointed in the early decades of the 19th century, but what would be described as an “extensive mountainous and unhealthy country” would prevent any survey.³³ Till this point, whatever notices were produced, including Wade’s, would be more descriptive rather than cartographic. In the meantime, Lt. Thomas Fisher produced two maps while on survey to determine the boundaries of Sylhet, Tripura and the territories of Jaintia and Cachar in concurrence with the local Rajah or chief. This would be followed by a commission to the Surveyor General for ‘best maps extant of Assam and... the Burrumpooter’ as the English clashed with the Burmese on 5th March 1824.³⁴ Captains James Bedford, Lieut. Richard Wilcox, Lieutenant Philip Burlton, Lieutenant Jones and Captain John Bryan Neufville produced several maps of the rivers of Assam. For example, Burlton produced a map of Brahmaputra upto Sadiya with commendable accuracy despite provisional constrictions. Other rivers surveyed by the military and revenue officials during this time would be a quick survey by Wilcox up the Disang river and Buri Dihing upto Dikho; Jones produced sketches of the Brahmaputra; Neufville and Bedingfield submitted a map including Chindwin river; Matthew surveyed Dhansiri river.³⁵ Fieldnotes on several dwellers of upland routes of these streams such as the Abors and Mishmis would be collected but neither the topographic nor the revenue surveys mentioned anything about temples or any other historical finds.

These strenuous exertions at the difficult eastern frontier dispelled the mist of obscurity about the mountain barriers, the courses and magnitude of the rivers or that surrounding the manners

³³ Phillimore, Colonel R. H. 1954. *Historical Records of the Survey of India*. Dehra Dun: Surveyor General of India, 49.

³⁴ Ibid, 52.

³⁵ Phillimore, *Historical Records of the Survey of India*, 49-66.

and customs of the indigenous peoples that inhabited these mountainous and riparian regions. The earlier vague local information would now be replaced by investigations conducted with scientific and geographic precision. In the wake of the Anglo-Burmese war and the Treaty of Yandabo, the spirit of enquiry further intensified as these geographic surveys brought to light the ethnographic and cultural trove of the region.

Buchanan had observed that neither the mythical king Bhagadatta nor any later rulers before the Ahoms built any fortification or any form of superior dwellings.³⁶ This view came to be refuted as the antiquarian search for Kamarupa began as early as the early 19th century, when British military officials and political agents, such as most notably Captains G. E. Westmacott, E. T. Dalton, Majors S. F. Hannay, John Butler and H. H. Godwin Austen et al., gradually turned their attention to ancient monuments following Assam's incorporation into the Bengal Presidency. In November 1834, while on public duty, military official G. E. Westmacott was lodged in a neighborhood in Chardwar, near Tezpur. The captain fortuitously came across a chain of granite hills thickly mantled by woods and reed grass. Local tradition had it that the hill originally operated as an impenetrable castle of a king by the name of Banh. Further investigation revealed, from amidst the jungle, antique remains of gigantic dimensions. Clearing up the jungle with the help of local workers uncovered the presence of scattered remains of architecture extensively across the hills. This would be the beginning of antiquarian survey in the Assam.

Chardwar in central Assam is a small district bordered on the north by hills and on the south, east and west by Brahmaputra, Bhairavi and Rhotas respectively. Westmacott's survey here brought to light seven temples. The structures were in considerable ruin, and fragments were

³⁶ Buchanan, "General View of the History of Kamrupa.", 112-137.

too scattered to form a fair idea about the entire temple. A principal temple facing the north was constituted of a portico supported by ornate columns. Hewn from a single block of granite, these columns would be bedecked with sculptured capitals. The entablature connecting these pillars would be carved with scrolls of flowers in basso rilievo. Iron rivets in apertures fastened the constituent members, and no mortar would be used in these buildings. The surveyor noted the engineering employed in the construction of the temples, and the superiority of the craftsmanship led to the formulation that the site might have operated as a capital or prime seat of the political function of Kamarupa.

Major S. F. Hannay, formerly Captain of Native Infantry surveyed temples of a section of Upper Assam.³⁷ Both Westmacott and Hannay held a common assumption that these magnificent structures and designs were achieved by a people of rather a different descent than the present inhabitants of the country.³⁸ Captain E. Taite Dalton, like the previous two surveyors, was left in awe thinking about the builders of these spectacular monuments. This led him to remark that “Budh could not have selected a more [lofty] spot for the dissemination of his doctrines.”³⁹ The sites presented an appearance of a glorious era long forgotten. Dalton noticed that the stone temples that blended with the rocks, the shrines that dotted the islands, pilgrimages that crowned the hills and less obtrusive structures raised in the recesses of the valley were markers of the spirited devotion of the age. The shrines located in strategic spots were surveyed in Guwahati, Tezpur, Biswanath and Dibrugarh.

³⁷ Hannay, “Notes on Ancient Temples and other remains”, 459-476.

³⁸ This is a well-known colonialist perspective elucidated most notably by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. This point re-appears in the fourth chapter of the thesis, where a detailed discussion is provided on the point. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin*, 156-176.

³⁹ Dalton, “Notes on Assam Temple Ruins”, 2.

The 19th century antiquarian search for ancient monuments following the inclusion of Assam in the Bengal presidency included Major John Butler's ethnographic account of the tribes of the hill accompanied by a statistical survey of Nowgong, provided one of the earliest antiquarian descriptions. Butler's account is interlaced with descriptions of the travels and adventures of an officer in civil employ in Assam. In an account on one of the expeditions to Nowgong, Butler briefly described his encounter with the ruins of an old city at Dimapur on the bank of Dhunsiri river and produced some of the early sketches of the site.⁴⁰ Butler's as well as much of the early recoveries by these political agents comprised of searches based on chance find or trailing along the jungles, as these officials thought that the local inhabitants were largely ignorant.⁴¹ However, a thorough survey of the site took place as Major Godwin Austen in combination with Topographical Surveyor M. T. Ogle and Major Butler's son explored the ruins of Dimapur, another two decades following Butler's survey.⁴²

Contesting Kamarupa: Imperial Histories and Counter-imperialist Resistance

A systematic pursuit of the ancient history of Assam did not emerge before the early decades of the 20th century. Much of the early to mid-19th century writings were based on the Ahom chronicles or the Buranjis and the Ahom past drew great attention in these writings. The *Assam Buranjis* (1860s) of Haliram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua are examples of such writings.⁴³ These scholars from Assam decided much of how modern history writing came to

⁴⁰ Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam*, 14-26

⁴¹ Westmacott was quite dissatisfied with the ignorant locals. Westmacott, "Description of Ancient Temples", 185-195.

⁴² Details of Godwin-Austen's survey are presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Austen, "On the Ruins at Dimapur on the Dunsiri ", 1-6.

⁴³ Barua, Gunaviram. 1884. *Assam Buranji*. Calcutta: New Arya Press; Phukan, Haliram Dhekial. 1962. *Assam Buranji*. Gauhati: Mokshada Pustakalay.

be shaped in the region. They rewrote and edited various *buranjis* and modern history writing of Assam came to be determined to a great extent, based on these medieval chronicles. But it was the early history of the Brahmaputra Valley prior to the advent of the Ahoms that was unknown to either scholars or local populace. The history of pre-Ahom Assam or the ancient Kamarupa was based largely on the legends, the *Puranas* and the epics and hence it was believed that it could not 'be called history in the true sense of the term.'⁴⁴ Notwithstanding, Kamarupa featured as a legitimate subject of enquiry in Aundoram Borooah's *Ancient Geography of India* written in the 1870s.⁴⁵ Borooah offers an important indigenous scholarly perspective on the historical imagination of Kamarupa. Writing in an era when colonial historiography had already begun defining ancient Indian politics through classical texts, Borooah's work stands at the intersection of philological rigor, regional pride, and a counter-orientalist recovery of place and past. In his discussion of Kamarupa, Borooah draws heavily from Sanskrit epics, particularly the *Mahabharata*, referencing characters like king Bhagadatta. He situates Kamarupa geographically and culturally within the broader Indic world, but also gives it a distinct regional personality – "In the Udoya Parva he (Bhagadatta) is said to have assisted Suyodhana (sic) with an army of 'Kiratas and Chinas.'". He identifies Pragjyotishpura, the ancient capital, with modern-day Guwahati, supported by references to sacred geographies such as the Nilachala and Ashvakranta hills, thereby reclaiming the landscape as a space of enduring mythic-historical presence. Borooah's is an early example of indigenous antiquarianism and serves as an important node in the shift from imperial discipline to indigenous imagination – where the archive and landscape catalogued under colonial authority are repositioned through philological enquiry and reinscription of regional history within a larger framework of Sanskritic antiquity and local memory.

⁴⁴ Bhuyan, Suryyakumar. 1912. *Ahomar Din*. Jorhat: Assam Publishing House, 89.

⁴⁵ Borooah, Anundoram. 1971. *Ancient Geography of India*. Gauhati: Publication Board, Assam.

Gait's *A History of Assam* (1906) was a pioneering work that rested on the notion that the Ahom period comprised Assam's definitive past. Paucity of sources for Kamarupa was a concern in Gait's *History* too and only a few pages were devoted to the history of pre-Ahom period. By this time, Archaeological Survey of India made its formal headway into the region and under the aegis of the Department of Ethnography steered by Gait, more than seven inscriptions came to light. But as was evident even in Gait's *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam* that the author had particular penchant for textual sources and as a result was largely dismissive about other sources, especially epics and traditions. Despite more epigraphic sources coming to light Gait's point of view remained unchanged and is often criticized for the imperialist ideology that informs the text. For example, in relying extensively on epigraphic sources Gait frequently occludes other forms of knowledge such as the epics, puranas with a skeptical tone describing these sources as confusing and interpolated. One of the prominent aspects of Gait's treatment of Kamarupa is its orientalist tendency to flatten indigenous history into a Eurocentric chronology and political narrative making it intelligible to the British empire.

Another participant in the colonial historiography driven by the imperatives of orientalist imagination and administrative utility is F. E. Pargiter. Operating within a broader philological framework, Pargiter set out to reconstruct a coherent historical core out of the genealogies and accounts presented in Sanskrit Puranas and epics. Within a pan-Indian scope, Pargiter situates Kamarupa as the eastern fringe of Aryavarta, connected through dynasties and lineages stemming from epic texts. While Pargiter's work is scholarly and meticulous, it reinforced a hierarchical geography of India's past, where Kamarupa featured as a peripheral zone gradually assimilated into Sanskritic civilizational fold of Vedic, Aryan core. Thereby,

Pargiter denies Kamarupa its independent cultural legitimacy, subordinating it to a Sanskritic core that the colonial historians sought to reconstruct.⁴⁶

One of the foremost Sanskrit scholars in the early 20th century Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode would be clearly unhappy with the ‘clever, antiquarian’ representations of Kamarupa, that were disengaged from texts like Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra. Padmanath would point out Gait’s scanty treatment of the pre-Ahom past and reviewed his work in 1908.⁴⁷ His main contention was that Gait ignored the state formation in Assam prior to the Ahoms.⁴⁸ Contrary to Gait’s emphasis on Ahom history, Padmanath gave considerable attention to the early history of Kamarupa. Padmanath is situated in the thesis as a foremost critic of the claimed scientificity of orientalist history writing. If Padmanath’s critique is to be related in a broader context, it can be understood as targeting the greater grounds of authorization and accuracy of scholarship over indigenous texts. Padmanath’s critique is based on an empiricist stance. Padmanath points out racial binaries in Gait’s writing where the latter associates Naraka, the fountainhead of Kamarupa rulers, with Asuraic, non-Aryan affiliation – thereby not *Devata* or Aryan. Further, Gait’s description of Pragjyotisha and Navagraha to denote the ‘city of western lights’, was pointed out by Padmanath as misplaced, clever and antiquarian.⁴⁹ For the latter, a historical interpretation involved tracing the etymology in classical texts such as the *Puranas* or the epics. Gait’s limitations in engagement with Sanskrit texts is a considerable pitfall of his study, as aptly pointed out by Padmanath. This led to serious defects in Gait’s *History* as to the boundary demarcations of

⁴⁶ Pargiter, F. E. 1922. *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*. London: Oxford University Press

⁴⁷ Bhattacharya, Padmanath Vidyavinode. 1908. “Mr. Gait’s History of Assam, a critical study.” *The Hindustan Review* 1-22.

⁴⁸ Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2008. “History, buranjis and nation: Suryya Kumar Buuyan’s histories in twentieth century Assam.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 45 (4): 473-507.

⁴⁹ Bhattacharya, “Mr. Gait’s History of Assam”, 1-22.

Kamarupa, his unsound treatment of the religious and social history of Kamarupa as well as misunderstandings surrounding the demographics of the historic region. Following Dodson, what may also be read in Padmanath's critique is a 'Christian prejudice' in Gait's writing that views the religions of the so-called orientalist societies in a certain light.⁵⁰ Padmanath's critique of Gait is primarily in terms of the cultural characterization of Kamarupa. Padmanath's criticism leads some to question the actual authority of Gait's *History*.⁵¹ A crucial aspect of Padmanath's epigraphic studies is his polemics, such as the time when Padmanath critiqued Hoernle over the rendering of Balavarman's plates, or Rajendralal Mitra over the interpretation of copper plates recovered from Bhatera in Padmanath's birthplace Sylhet.⁵² Padmanath aptly noted that Dhireshwaracharya, another fellow Assamese intellectual and his compeer at KAS, studied and interpreted Balavarman's plates with greater accuracy and depth than Hoernle. His attention to local interlocutors and assigning greater accuracy to the studies by these traditional guardians of Sanskrit-based knowledge is a unique aspect of Padmanath's contribution.⁵³ The role of Padmanath as an Indian Sanskrit scholar in engaging with orientalist treatises has not been highlighted sufficiently. Padmanath's critique and *Kamarupashasanavali* not only present a unique academic contribution to the making and

⁵⁰ Dodson invokes this in the context of Guru Dutta Vidyarthi's rejection of orientalist interpretation and translation of the Vedas. Vidyarthi reasoned that in order to indeed produce a 'rational interpretation' of the Vedas, one must first be a complete master of all branches of Sanskrit knowledge that orientalists such as Max Muller simply lacked. It is in this context Dodson argues that 'orientalists laboured under a strong Christian prejudice that eliminated them as 'impartial' students of the Vedas. The propagation of such misunderstanding had caused untold damage to Indian understandings of the Vedas, Vidyarthi argued..' Dodson, Michael S. 2010. "Contesting Translations: Orientalism and the Interpretation of the Vedas." In *An Intellectual History for India*, edited by Shruti Kapila, 35-51. Delhi: Cambridge University Press. 48.

⁵¹ Bhattacharya, "Mr. Gait's History of Assam", 1-22.

⁵² Majumdar, R. C. 1978. "Rajendralal Mitra as a National Leader." *Rajendralala Mitra (150th Anniversary Lectures)*. Calcutta: Asiatic Society. 1-23.

⁵³ An important strand of colonial scholarship pointed out in Gait. Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1910. "Balabarmma'r Tamrashasan." *Sahitya Parishad Patrika*, 113-128.

interpretation of ancient Kamarupa but also a form of cultural resistance, a counter-colonial modernity, reinscribing Assam's past on its own terms.⁵⁴

Kanaklal Barua's *Early History of Kamarupa* (hereafter EHK) is widely regarded by modern historians, including Arupjyoti Saikia, as a significant early attempt to construct a cohesive narrative of Assam's ancient past.⁵⁵ Rooted in nationalist historiography, Barua's work sought to reclaim Kamarupa as one of the earliest Aryan settlements in eastern India, thereby positioning the region within a civilizational frame on par with the rest of India's ancient heartlands. Kanaklal relied on standard sources also consulted by contemporaries like Edward Gait and Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode – Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa*, the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang's travelogue, and Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*. However, epigraphic records, particularly copperplate inscriptions, formed the core of his source material for reconstructing the pre-Ahom past. That said, Barua's method raises critical questions. His selection and interpretation of sources are often not clearly explained, and he does not always appear to have engaged directly with Padmanath's findings – despite writing in the same period.⁵⁶ Despite these gaps, Kanaklal acknowledged Padmanath's pioneering efforts in collecting inscriptions from across the northeast and praised his role, along with that of scholars like

⁵⁴ Dodson, "Contesting Translations: Orientalism and the Interpretation", 35-51

⁵⁵ Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2008. "Gait's Way: Writing History in Early 20th Century Assam." In *History in the Vernacular*, edited by Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee, 142-171. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

⁵⁶ Padmanath mentions that neither of the plates issued by Dharmmapala that are read by the historian is that discovered by Major Francis Jenkins. Details can be found in *Kamarupashasanavalee*. However, Kanaklal remarks, "... it is not traceable now. Probably it was one of the Dharmapala inscriptions published by Pandit Vidyavinod." Bhattacharya, Padmanath, 1931-32. *Kamarupashasanavalee*. Calcutta: Rangpur Sahitya Parishad.; Barua K. L. 1933. *Early History of Kamarupa: From the earliest times to the end of the sixteenth century*. Shillong: Printed by Rev. Fr. Foglia S. C. at the Don Bosco Industrial School Press, v.

Hem Chandra Goswami, Hara Prasad Shastri, and P.R.T. Gurdon.⁵⁷ Kanaklal's work was also partly driven by a corrective impulse. He was dissatisfied with the scant treatment of early Assam in Edward Gait's *History of Assam* and felt that even Padmanath's rich epigraphic compilation lacked a fully connected narrative.⁵⁸ He appreciated the textual richness Padmanath brought to the field but also sought a modern historiographical structure, integrating various forms of evidence.

EHK registers a keen concern with the fragility of material heritage. Barua laments the lack of archaeological excavations and preservation infrastructure, observing how both natural degradation and human vandalism had already led to the loss of many ancient remains. This, according to the author stood in the way in producing a more comprehensive and definitive history of Kamarupa than existed at that point. While nature's ravages, such as vegetation and tectonic movements, tore down even the tallest of monuments into dust, construction work in Kanaklal's growing-up years too wreaked havoc. The author mentions an instance of the ravaging of an 11th-century citadel in Gauhati built by Ratnapala and the destruction of Sil-sako at Barpeta.

Barua's work reflects an important moment in the formation of Assamese regional nationalism. Like many Indian historians of the early 20th century, he used colonial tools – textual analysis, chronology, and epigraphy – to counter colonial silencing. Yet, his method remained tethered to certain colonial assumptions, such as an Aryan civilizational narrative.

⁵⁷ Not only that, Kanaklal prepared his manuscript in regular consultation with Pt. Padmanath. This apart, historian of the region S. K. Bhuyan and noted explorer Sarveswar Kataki, both also active members of the KAS, helped Barua materially in preparing his manuscript. Archaeological Survey of India and K N Dikshit too extended particular support and knowledge to the author of the seminal EHK. Barua, *Early History of Kamarupa From the earliest times*, i-xvi.

⁵⁸ Bhattacharya, *Kamarupashasanavalee*, 1-214

Unlike Padmanath, he did not challenge colonial epistemology at a foundational level, but rather worked within its grammar to enrich and localize it.

Kanaklal's emphasis on Kamrupi literary traditions and his geolinguistic framing of Kamarupa suggest an early attempt to reclaim vernacular histories, positioning the Brahmaputra valley as a civilizational unit distinct from the Ahom-dominated colonial 'Assam'. Yet, his labeling of the post-Pala Bhuyan period as a 'dark age' reveals the limits of text-centered history, neglecting other forms of knowledge like oral traditions or material culture when they did not align with classical models. In this sense, Barua's approach reflects a partial internalization of colonial archival logic, even as he sought to assert indigenous continuity.

History, Territory and Kamarupa

The interest in epigraphic studies on early Assam has continued in recent decades. A foundational contribution in this area is Mukunda Madhav Sharma's *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, which compiles twenty-seven inscriptions along with translations and notes.⁵⁹ Sharma also reconstructs genealogies of the three principal Kamarupa dynasties based on copper-plate charters. Nayanjot Lahiri's *Pre-Ahom Assam* (1991) marked a significant shift in perspective by offering a systematic analysis of the distribution, language, and palaeography of inscriptions, placing them within political, social, and economic contexts.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Sharma, Mukunda Madhava. 1978. *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*. Gauhati: Department of Publication.

⁶⁰ Lahiri, Nayanjot. 1991. *Pre-Ahom Assam: Studies in the Inscriptions of Assam between the Fifth and the Thirteenth Centuries AD*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

Despite the limited scale of excavations and epigraphic projects in the region, Chitrarekha Gupta has significantly advanced our understanding of the evolution of agrarian society in early Assam.⁶¹ Her work outlines three distinct phases of agrarian expansion, emphasizing shifts in settlement patterns and land use. More recently, Suchandra Ghosh has examined rural settlements mentioned in Kamarupa-era land grants.⁶² By analyzing boundary demarcations in charters, Ghosh argues that riparian rural settlements were neither uniform nor static, offering a more nuanced view of early spatial organization.

A parallel scholarly tradition has focused on placing Kamarupa within the broader cosmological and geographical frameworks of ancient India. Ajay Mitra Shastri has sought to situate early historic Pragjyotisha – often conflated with Kamarupa – within the intellectual sphere of Vedic learning and literature.⁶³ He traces its presence in canonical texts such as the Ashtadhyayi, Jataka tales, Tripitaka, epics, and the Arthashastra, affirming its enduring relationship with Bharatvarsha. D. C. Sircar too places Kamarupa within the eastern region of India, drawing upon the Puranic geography that crystallized during the Gupta period.⁶⁴ Saraswati, meanwhile, integrates literary and inscriptional sources with surviving

⁶¹ Gupta, C. (1992). Evolution of Agrarian Society in Kamrupa in Early Medieval Period. *The Indian Historical Review*, IX(1-2), 1-20; Gupta, C. (1997). Aspects of Rural Settlement in the Light of the Nidhanpur Copper-Plate Inscription. In C. P. Sinha (Ed.), *Dr. B. S. Verma Felicitation Volume*, (pp. 151-57). Patna.

⁶² Ghosh, Suchandra. 2014. "Understanding Boundary Representations in the Copper-plate Charters of Early Kamarupa." *Indian Historical Review* 41 (2): 1-16.

⁶³ It is clear in the writing of the author and another historian Jae Eun Shin as discussed after Shastri that allusion to Pragjyotisha far predates Kamarupa. And it is not just these modern historians but historians of early 20th century such as Padmanath too remind us that the early and extensive kingdom of Pragjyotisha is often viewed to represent a different spatial concept than Kamarupa. While the latter appears to variously mean the early monarchical state, the larger geographical expanse in which the former, i.e. Pragjyotisha often even features as the capital city. Even in the copper plates, there is a preponderance of allusion to Pragjyotisha than Kamarupa. Shastri, A. M. (2002). *Ancient North-East India: Pragjyotisha*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International.

⁶⁴ Sircar, D. C. 2017. "Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa". In *The Comprehensive History of Assam* edited by H. K. Barpujari, 59-78. Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, 63.

architectural evidence to argue for a continuous architectural tradition in the region during the Gupta cultural epoch.⁶⁵ His study highlights temples and fortress cities as material signs of early state formation and sacred geographies.

A distinct body of scholarship rethinks Kamarupa through the lens of colonial knowledge production and postcolonial regionalism. Jae Eun Shin approaches the region through the analytical frame of the early medieval period (6th – 13th centuries), tracing the socio-political processes that led to the consolidation of Kamarupa as a historical entity.⁶⁶ She also links its early mention as a peripheral polity in the Allahabad Prasasti with later formulations of regionhood and sacrality, especially within the framework of *pithas*, or goddess seats, central to Indological interpretations.

In a related vein, T. C. Bhagabati highlights how the institutional work of the Kamrupa Anusandhana Samiti (KAS) in the 20th century played a crucial role in reifying Kamarupa's ancient past.⁶⁷ This scholarly labor – archaeological, ethnographic, and textual – helped to frame the region as a historically distinct and culturally rich zone, thereby participating in the modern imagination of Assam's antiquity.

Ichimuddin Sarkar's work offers a physiographic reconstruction of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, guided by descriptions in the Yogini Tantra. He divides the region into five zones based on

⁶⁵ Saraswati, S. K. 2017 "Art". In *The Comprehensive History of Assam* edited by H. K. Barpujari, 423-71. Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam.

⁶⁶ Shin, Jae-Eun. 2018. "Region Formed and Imagined: Reconsidering temporal, spatial and social context of Kamarupa." In *Modern Practices in Northeast India: History, Culture, Representation*, edited by Lipokmar Dzuwachu and Manjeet Baruah, 23-55. London and New York: Routledge.

⁶⁷ Bhagabati, Tarun Chandra. 2009. "The Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti in Historical Perspectives (1912 AD – 1993 AD)." PhD Thesis, Department of History, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling.

geographical features: the northeastern frontier mountains, Purvachala, the Assam-Shillong plateau, the Surma Valley, and the Brahmaputra Valley – the latter seen as the political and cultural core.⁶⁸ Sarkar synthesizes a wide range of early Indian texts – including the Brahmanas, Puranas, Tantras, astronomical treatises, and Buddhist and Jaina sources – to delineate routes, cities, river systems, and territorial units. Importantly, he views inscriptions as the most ‘genuine’ records of administrative units such as bhukti, vishaya, and grama, underscoring their utility for mapping political geography.

Ancient India and the Production of Colonial Knowledge

This thesis's larger framework is significantly informed by Dodson's study of the translation undertakings of the Rg Veda.⁶⁹ Dodson focuses on the orientalist project in India during the 19th century, namely the translation of the Rg Veda, with a view to highlighting the ambiguous nature of the orientalist enterprise. Through the investigation of one of the key concepts, i.e. the translation of Indian classical texts, Dodson offers an intellectual history of the colonial encounter that moves beyond the usual focus on debates about colonial knowledge, to examining the contexts of the knowledgeable practices. The knowledgeable practices referred to by Dodson include the translations, the commentaries, dictionaries produced in negotiation with Indian interlocutors. The knowledgeable practices also subsumed how knowledge was searched, produced, interpreted, circulated, standardized and published. The main actors in these practices were the interlocutors and/ or the scholars – both the Indian and European. The present thesis focuses on the particular institutional, in this case, the local learned societies

⁶⁸ Sarkar, Ichhimuddin. 1991. *Aspects of Historical Geography of Pragiyotisha Kamarupa (Ancient Assam)*. Calcutta: Naya Prokash. viii

⁶⁹ Dodson, “Contesting Translations: Orientalism and the Interpretation”, 35-51

such as the KAS that ran parallel to but not dependent on colonial institutions and bureaucracies such as the Asiatic Society, or the Archaeological Survey of India; intellectual and, to an extent, political contexts mainly. Dodson's insights are helpful in understanding orientalism not merely as a colonial knowledge project but also in studying the micro-practices, the interpretive struggles and the actual people involved – Indian and European alike – who produced knowledge in interaction. At the centre of the thesis resides the concern with the orientalist context of the 19th and early 20th century knowledge production, colonial epistemology and various institutional apparatuses as it played out in Assam with respect to antiquarianism, archaeology and museums. Dodson also shows how "orientalism's dependence upon forms of Indian scholarship also allows us to understand these practices as not simply conducive to the empowerment of the colonial state, but as simultaneously providing opportunities for learned intermediaries – and Indian Sanskrit scholars more generally – to forge their own competing visions of Indian society and history within the emerging public sphere, thereby making important contributions to early formulations of counter-colonial modernity ..."⁷⁰

Dodson refers to a new kind of public, intellectual domain, in which Sanskrit scholars, translators, reformers, and newspaper writers, began to speak write and argue about the country's or the region's past and future. These scholars resisted, adapted and contested modern knowledge forms and asserted Indian agency. These societies represented vital nodes in the emerging vernacular public sphere and are key actors in the formation of counter-colonial modernity. Seen within this framework, the indigenously led KAS provided a public platform for scholarly discussion, publication and cultural self-assertion – an emerging vernacular public sphere.

⁷⁰ Dodson, "Contesting Translations: Orientalism and the Interpretation", 36

Thirdly, the thesis refers to Dodson's formulation around the utilization of the intellectual and cultural expertise of the "Brahman Pandits (learned men)" and subsequent dismissal and displacement of their authority in the process.⁷¹ This study seeks to examine the intellectual and cultural challenges that the 'Brahman Pandits' experienced as collaborators whose authority was strategically used and later discredited by colonial administrators. These Brahman Pandits were not just intermediaries but complex, political actors in knowledgeable practices, shaping a vision of modernity that challenged colonial dominance. Through recovery of examples like Padmanath Bhattacharya, Dhireswaracharya Kaviratna, Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyay et al. the present thesis seeks to unravel the scholarly contributions and intellectual labor, indispensable to the 19th and early 20th century knowledge creation, despite the structural constraints within which they operated.

The starting point of Dodson's essay includes two seminal secondary texts, namely Edward Said's classic *Orientalism* and Bernard Cohn's *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*. The principal thesis of both Cohn and Said is that orientalist scholarship principally served to empower and consolidate forms of European power. Said traces the genesis of the modern understanding of India's past within the broader Eurocentric episteme.⁷² The colonial scholars constructed and essentialized orient as a contrasting image of a Western self. The discovery, classification and categorization of ancient India is situated within this context. This was enabled through a complex interplay of textual recovery, field archaeology and the administrative discourses. Similarly, Cohn's anthropological perspective to the study of history of colonialism and its forms of knowledge is also central to the theoretical framework

⁷¹ Ibid, 36.

⁷² Said, Edward. 2003. *Orientalism*. New York: Penguin Books.

of the thesis. Cohn demonstrates that the systematic production of knowledge by the British government through surveys, censuses, legal codifications etc. transformed India conceptually.⁷³ While Cohn's study is not entirely infallible or without its error of judgement, it provides a useful point of reference to understand how colonial government weaponized knowledge to produce intelligible histories and subjects who could be ruled and controlled.

The violence involved in the knowledgeable practices of colonial power is also the theme of Ronald Inden's *Imagining India*.⁷⁴ Inden critiques the Indological assumptions around the nature of Indian society and people and argues that colonial knowledge systematically denied Indians agency and historical consciousness. Inden's call to recover Indian agency – rather than treating Indian society as a timeless essence – guides this thesis's orientation to forms of indigenous practices and participation and the historical subjectivity. Thomas R. Trautmann's study of British orientalism similarly reveals the relation between language and race science that developed around the later 18th century.⁷⁵ As William Jones announced the genetic affinity between Sanskrit and Indo-European languages it resulted in Indomania among the colonisers. But advances in linguistic sciences, geology and archaeology soon refuted the Biblical scheme of linguistic classification.

The thesis further draws on postcolonial critiques of the institutional emergence of archaeology in colonial India – its early practices, methods and intellectual dynamics. Dilip K. Chakrabarti's *A History of Indian Archaeology from the Beginning to 1947* charts this emergence from the establishment of the Asiatic Society in 1784 to the formation of the

⁷³ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 76-105

⁷⁴ Inden, Ronald B. 1990. *Imagining India*. London: Hurst and Company.

⁷⁵ Trautmann, Thomas R. 2004. *Aryans and British India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.

Archaeological Survey under Alexander Cunningham and its professionalization under John Marshall.⁷⁶ While antiquarian interests initially drove early surveys and site-mapping (by figures like James Rennell, Francis Buchanan, and Colin Mackenzie), their work gradually became part of a state-led project of territorial knowledge and historical reconstruction. Chakrabarti's *Archaeology in the Third World* problematizes the legacy of these practices in the postcolonial context, showing how archaeological heritage continues to be contested amid religious, regional, and political claims in India.⁷⁷

Upinder Singh's *The Discovery of Ancient India* critically examines the intersection of texts and field archaeology in colonial constructions of the past.⁷⁸ Her concept of “disinterested colonial scholarship” – a veneer of objectivity masking deep political interests – provided a key lens to understand colonial representations of Kamarupa. Singh's analysis of Alexander Cunningham's work and the participation of Indian intellectuals and princely states foregrounds the entanglements between archaeology and empire. She foregrounds how archaeological discoveries – such as inscriptions, ruins, and coins – were interpreted through a colonial lens that often privileged monumental evidence over vernacular histories. Singh's analysis highlights the central role of measurement, mapping, and documentation in institutionalizing archaeology as a ‘field science’. Similar themes emerge in Nadia Abu El-Haj's work on Israeli archaeology. Here, the author shows that archaeology is never a neutral act of recovery but a practice of discourse creation, often serving state or ideological

⁷⁶ Chakrabarti, Dilip K. 1995. *History of Indian Archaeology: From The Beginning to 1947*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

⁷⁷ Chakrabarti, Dilip K. 2003. *Archaeology in the Third World: A History of Indian Archaeology since 1947*. New Delhi: D.K. Print World Ltd.

⁷⁸ Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 1-134

imperatives.⁷⁹ Rama Mantena's study of Colin Mackenzie's extensive collections furthers this analysis by exploring what she calls the 'little practices of history' – the fragmentary, often overlooked, contributions of Indian intermediaries in shaping colonial archives.⁸⁰ These interlocutors not only provided linguistic and cultural insights but also mediated the knowledge regime that came to define India's antiquity. Mantena's work is especially valuable in understanding how the material and textual were fused in producing a legible, governable Indian past.

Recent critical historiographies, such as Javed Majeed's *Ungoverned Imaginings*, interrogate how British intellectuals like James Mill constructed a moral and political rationale for imperialism through historical writing.⁸¹ Majeed contrasts Mill's utilitarian approach in *The History of British India* with orientalist figures like William Jones, revealing how different modes of knowledge production converged in justifying colonial rule. Drawing on Said, Majeed argues that colonial texts not only described the orient but actively constructed it – shaping British identity in the process of defining the other.

The discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization in 1924, under John Marshall's leadership, marked a turning point in colonial historiography. While Schliemann's excavations at Hisarlik had already popularized the archaeological method in Europe, Marshall's declaration of an ancient urban civilization in the Indian subcontinent reoriented the civilizational narrative.

⁷⁹ El-Haj, Nadia Abu. 2001. *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago.

⁸⁰ Mantena, Rama Sundari. 2012. *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India Antiquarianism and Philology, 1780-1880*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-30.

⁸¹ Majeed, Javed. 1992. *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's "History of British India" and Orientalism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Nayanjot Lahiri's *Finding Forgotten Cities* reconstructs the intellectual and institutional dynamics behind this discovery, emphasizing the role of Indian archaeologists like Daya Ram Sahni and Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyay.⁸² Lahiri's later work on Emperor Ashoka also exemplifies how archaeological sources – especially inscriptions – were mobilized to construct authoritative historical figures, further reinforcing the text-field binary established in colonial times.⁸³

Deborah Sutton's *Ruling Devotion* explores another critical dimension of colonial archaeology, namely the management of religious sites.⁸⁴ She shows how Hindu temples, once embedded in local ritual economies, were reclassified as 'ancient monuments' under the 1904 Ancient Monuments Preservation Act. This juridical shift detached these structures from living traditions, inserting them into the secular domain of imperial heritage. Sutton's analysis of competing claims – between the colonial state and local authorities – exemplifies how colonial archaeology redefined sacred geographies while undertaking to preserve the religious architecture as relics of the past.

Zaheer Baber, sociologist of science, explores the complex social processes involved in the introduction and institutionalization of Western science in colonial India.⁸⁵ This colonial encounter in the sphere of science in India is based on questioning various ontological and epistemological assumptions around the nature of science and the relativism of modern

⁸² Lahiri, Nayanjot. 2005. *Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization was Discovered*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

⁸³ Lahiri, Nayanjot. 2016. *Ashoka in Ancient India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

⁸⁴ Sutton, Deborah. 2024. *Ruling Devotion: The Hindu Temple in the British Imperial Imagination*. Delhi: Permanent Black.

⁸⁵ Baber, Z. 1996. *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization, and Colonial Rule in India*. Delhi: SUNY Press.

science. Before the introduction of modern Western science in the 18th and 19th centuries in India, West drew extensively from Indian and Asian indigenous knowledge and science. It focuses on various processes of institutionalization of western science and technology in colonial India and how the apparatus of colonial science was structured to produce subordinate knowledge workers rather than autonomous scientific communities. Baber points to institutions like the Asiatic Society as emblematic of this epistemic asymmetry, even as they disseminated a selective ideal of scientific rationality within the colony. There are useful parallels too, to think with. Just the way amateur scientists viewed India as an unexplored, vast territory with promises of scientific advancements beneficial for the colonial rule, early antiquarians also perceived India as a vast open-air museum under the purview of colonial rule. Similarly, as Baber affirms that the scientific and technological projects in colonial India were perceived by British administrators as visible symbols of colonial power and deployed for the legitimation of colonial rule, so did museums. An important reminder provided by Baber is that the far-reaching structural transformations and its negative impacts caused by colonial rule are obvious. A critique of colonial epistemology should however be rooted in an analysis of the mutually constitutive interplay of structure and agency backed by empirical evidence and rigorous historical analysis.⁸⁶

Together, these works constitute a theoretical field that this thesis draws upon to examine how colonial epistemologies of antiquity were formed, institutionalized, and contested. Rather than treating the discovery of ancient India as neutral, this thesis investigates its ideological underpinnings that continue to shape contemporary understandings of heritage, history, and identity in postcolonial India.

⁸⁶ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 10

An overview of the thesis

The current study is an archival survey of orientalist (as well as) official, archaeological and museological documents. In this, it firstly stresses the importance of the local learned society viz. the KAS in making the regional history and heritage. It studies the orientalist documents on the region to understand the influence it exerted on the subsequent scholarship on the ancient history. Asiatic Society played a particularly crucial role as it sought more accurate information on the region and as a consequence much of the early military reconnaissance and antiquarian explorations came to be published in the pages of *Asiatic Researches* and the *JASB*. The thesis also focuses on the field archaeology as undertaken by various stakeholders including the Eastern Circle, ASI and the instrumental role played by the surveyors in recovering the momentous early relics. The study attempts to investigate what comprised scientific exploration or field archaeology. In so doing the thesis delves into the lengthy reports of the surveys produced by the surveyors. These activities came to reside at the heart of the discipline's formation in the region.

One of the central aspects of the thesis is the collecting enterprises undertaken by the Assamese and Bengali scholars of the KAS. Inscriptions were one of the main objects of collection as were archaeological relics such as sculptures and architectural members. The scholars went to great lengths to study and disseminate about these artefacts. In this, they came to challenge the earlier orientalist and imperialist representations and thereby forged an counter-colonial modernity. These scholars challenged the characterization of ancient Kamarupa by the European scholars. This debate ensued inside an emergent public sphere and within the scope of KAS' pioneering works.

This thesis consciously centers the Indian archival landscape as both a site of knowledge production and academic contestation. The archives for the thesis are located in Guwahati, Cooch Behar, Kolkata and New Delhi. In Guwahati, published and unpublished records were obtained from the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Assam State Archives, Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian studies as well as the rare collection of the Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan Library, Cotton University. In Cooch Behar, North Bengal State Library was consulted for the collection of manuscripts and administrative reports. Various archives in Kolkata including the collections of the National Library, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Jadunath Bhavan Museum and Resource Center and Center for Studies in Social Sciences, were consulted. In New Delhi, records on Assam were derived mainly from the National Archives and the Central Archaeological Library. Here, I want to add a brief note on the organization of the archives I consulted. Not all of these archives were maintained with the same level of order and accessibility. Some offered well-catalogued, digitized collections, while others remained fragmented and inconsistently arranged. Navigating these living, often disordered, and ideologically charged spaces of Indian archives sharpened my methodological approach and deepened my understanding of what it means to reconstruct a past from within a present that is actively negotiating and contesting that past. In contrast, the carefully curated holdings of archives in Europe and America are often highly organized and idealized in postcolonial Indian academia, but these curated holdings also reflect imperial or state-centric priorities. Engaging with Indian archives attuned me to the gaps, erasures, and silences that often remain hidden in global repositories.

The current chapter, i.e. Chapter 1 'Introduction', lays the theoretical and methodological foundation of the thesis through a discussion of texts and archives drawn on for the research. The discussion is arranged chronologically by selecting major colonial texts that provide the

earliest interventions into the formation of the idea of the historic entity of Kamarupa. But the representation of the ancient polity from a lost, dynastic perspective came to be challenged by the erudites of Assamese society. The chapter further analyses the production of parallel textual discourses by Assamese intellectuals such as Anundoram Borooah, Padmanath Bhattacharya, both of whom draw on epic traditions as authentic sources of Kamarupa's and thereby India's pasts; and Kanaklal Barua. In analysing these texts and the postcolonial legacy of an epigraphic and antiquarian discovery of Kamarupa, it identifies that the discourse of Kamarupa is essentially rooted in an orientalist production of the colonized other, often through forms of epistemic violence.

After clarifying the theoretical and methodological grounding in Chapter 1, Chapter 2, titled 'An Era of Antiquarianism: Searching Ancient Kamarupa' begins by charting the actual process and context of the emergence of surveys at the turn of the 19th century. It highlights instances of specific findings by colonial officials that set off a spirited, systematic and methodical search for Kamarupa. The concept of antiquarianism is engaged in this chapter in terms not as a static signifier, where the implication of antiquarianism remained same in all times and places; but as historically embedded and methodologically ambivalent category through time. The discussion is led by questioning the dominant and well-loved and accepted texts on the history of Assam and contends how more sound contributions, such as Padmanath's, are made invisible in the colonial, orientalist context. The chapter briefly engages with pre-colonial, non-textual forms of knowledge and explains it in terms of imperialist erasures of indigenous forms of remembering the past, focusing on Padmanath's use of mythology and traditions as credible sources of Kamarupa's past. Padmanath's use of mythology and traditions is formulated as a counter-imperial or counter-orientalist methodological innovation.

Chapter 3, 'In Search of Antiquity: Founding Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti' is a story of the establishment of Padmanath's brainchild and genius Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti. It is an archival survey of the records of the KAS. The living, unfiltered, and uncensored space of the archive enhanced my understanding of the colonial apparatus that classifies, orders, and disciplines knowledge. From this messy space of the KAS archives emerged the stories of exploration and collection activities by the KAS scholars, filled with immense physical and intellectual labour and sensational discoveries. This is formulated as an emerging vernacular sphere of intellectual and cultural life in later colonial Assam. The *Journal of the Assam Research Society (JARS)* came to be first printed in 1933. This furthered the creation and consolidation of regional archiving in Assam, that sought parity with institutions and societies in Bengal, Maharashtra and Madras. This is also viewed as the beginning of heritage-discourse in Assam rooted in region-specific histories and experiences. The chapter briefly introduces Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyay, pioneering contributor in dramatized history, within the archaeological sphere of influence in Eastern India, before Rakhal Das' entry in the next chapter as the Eastern Circle Superintendent, ASI, involved in a momentous discovery, namely the 6th century temple in Dah Parbatia.

Chapter 4, 'The Rise of Archaeological Explorations in the Brahmaputra Valley (1900-1930s)' is largely based on an archival survey of Archaeological Survey Reports and Home Department and Revenue and Agricultural Department files. Here, I begin by studying the later 19th century resolutions passed by the India government regarding matters relating to utilization, disposal, listing (of and) and archaeological remains in India and its provinces including Assam. This elucidates the background of the official discourse before the belated entry of the ASI in Assam. The next part of the chapter reads the colonial period reports

produced by the ASI to map a shift in approach to the region's archaeology that is not just technical but ideological. While Superintendent Theodor Bloch considered Assam unworthy of preservation and government expenditure due to a lack of monumental antiquity, this would be taken up by early archaeologists of colonial India such as K. N. Dikshit, Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, T. N. Ramachandran, who would reinscribe Assam within the archaeological map of the Subcontinent. Through an archival survey of early archaeological recoveries in Assam the thesis challenges the colonial myth about Assam as a 'terra incognita'.

Chapter 5 titled 'The Exhibitionary Order: Founding Provincial Museum in Assam' extends Timothy Mitchell's theory of imposition of western cultural hegemony not only through texts (in more literal sense of the term such as literature, official documents, reports etc.) but also through images, visual representations – orderly exhibitions to be specific. The situation of the Provincial Museum of Assam in one of colony's liminal provinces gave the Assamese intelligentsia, specifically the KAS scholars, an opportunity to negotiate this category of orientalist knowledge production, and forge their distinct identity and heritage. The concept of heritage as has been applied in the thesis follows Laurajane Smith, David Lowenthal, Tapati Guha-Thakurta's formulation of heritage beyond its west-centric understanding in terms of materiality that can be mapped, managed, preserved and displayed tied inherently to governance and legislation, to understand heritage as lived, plural, personal and intrinsically intangible. The chapter begins by tracing the specific trajectory of museum movement in Assam. The following section highlights the role of KAS scholars such as Hemchandra Goswami and Kanaklal Barua, specifically Barua, whose dream it was to see modern Assam boasting its own museum. The role of Sarveswar Kataki, Kanaklal Barua, Surya Kumar Bhuyan in organizing the earliest exhibitions in tandem with regional society museum exhibitions such as of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, is highlighted with specific nature of these

exhibitions such as innovative lantern exhibitions, publication of handbook and particularly the notices to generate awareness, enthusiasm and curiosity among Assamese populace. With its increasingly mounting collection, the KAS regularly participated in All India Orientalist Conferences. Through a survey of Directories of Museums in India by J. P. Voghell, S. F. Markham and H. Hargreaves and C. Sivaramamurti as well as Secretariat Proceedings and museum literatures, the chapter traces the particular trajectory of ‘museumization’ and heritage-making of Kamarupa. The thesis argues that the KAS and the Provincial Museum forged a heritage-discourse in modern Assam that deviated from imperial, oriental model of museology. The powerful idea of Kamarupa forged through archaeological and museological activities of the KAS continues to hold sway in present-day Assam and forms an integral part of the region’s identity. Chapter 6, Conclusion, synthesizes the arguments of the thesis by revisiting the key theoretical concerns introduced at the outset. The chapter links the theoretical questions to critical insights that emerge when the history of Kamarupa is read through the lens of ‘différance’, especially in relation to the deferral, fragmentation, and instability of historical meaning.

Chapter 2

An Era of Antiquarianism: Searching Ancient Kamarupa

It is established by now, that there is a direct relationship between knowledge – more specifically the expansion and consolidation of various academic disciplines in Europe – and colonial occupation across the globe.¹ In British India, this phenomenon played out in different degrees and at various stages in its regions. The stakeholders in this process were many, but the current chapter delves at a greater length into the changes brought about and initiated by colonial officials, in collaboration with Indian scholars – in this case, mainly scholars from Assam and adjacent regions.

The search for an overarching history of the subcontinent necessitated focusing on its constitutive regions. Several British officials were, de facto, amongst the first to search for this country's pasts. But such endeavour was certainly neither neutral nor what it is widely claimed to be. This chapter, therefore, begins by addressing the question – what was the nature of intervention by the British officials in the region in terms of knowledge production? As the discussion will show, the complexities of representation, interpretation, and what Nicholas B. Dirks calls 'documentation' are viewed uncritically, obscuring their complicity in the brute

¹ In recent times, number of modern Historians have delved into the subject of the influence of 19th century European academy on British inroads into different parts of the world and consequent historical, archaeological and allied practices in the colonies. Most notable would be, Singh, Upinder. 2004. *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology*. Delhi: Permanent Black; Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. 2004. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*. New York: Columbia University Press; Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2015. *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Said, Edward W. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage Books.

exercise of colonial power.² This chapter foregrounds such dimensions of early colonial surveys that have long remained overlooked in the intellectual landscape of history-writing in colonial Assam. To present a critique of the early surveys by the colonial rulers, it is worth delving into the next question, that is concerned with understanding the epistemic context before their arrival – locally as well as in the larger contexts of the subcontinent and beyond? In the course of addressing this question, this chapter briefly recounts the precolonial forms of remembrances including *Buranjis*, but more importantly, the non-textual forms, that are often erased, omitted or overlooked, especially in relation to the 19th and early 20th century historiographic experiments. The third aspect of the search for ancient Kamarupa concerns centrally with the contributors and collaborators coming up from within the region. This thesis is an effort to understand who these scholars were and in what ways they were contributing to the changes, if any. The chapter also examines the implications of such intervention, and tries to make sense why it is still relevant today. The relevance behind revisiting these questions anew is provided by the very fact that the ideological and practical narratives of and on India are still dominated by many of the presumptions and aphorisms that this chapter will discuss here.

The early colonial activities in Assam, as is also the case with other Indian regions, involved generating military and administrative accounts of various aspects of the region such as existing forms of governance, land, religion, demography, ethnography and so on. This particular form of knowledge that was being produced did not sit well with the existing systems in most cases. British officials were not its only creators, but there were earlier European travelers too who added to this practice of knowledge production in service of the

² Dirks, Nicholas B. 1996. "Foreword." In *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, by Bernard S. Cohn, ix-xviii. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

consolidation of colonial expansion and power. Certainly, these outlanders came with their own traditional epistemological baggage.

Information played a key role in what is generally termed colonial modernity. The creation of this knowledge pool ensued in the arena of an emergent modernist political order, often supplanting the previously existing monarchical or feudal orders. The initial surveys all across the subcontinent were conducted principally under the auspices of the trader-administrators of the East India Companies (hereinafter, EIC). The earliest surveys were results of military reconnaissance in the region. Later, one can find administrative, ethnographic and economic surveys taking place. The details of this background are too well-known to be reiterated here.³

The Search Begins: European Surveyors in Assam

The launch of British survey activities in India, from 1765 onwards, continued and grew in scale culminating in the unified and centralized report of the Survey of India, more than a century later in 1878.⁴ Survey dedicated specifically to archaeological remains came into the picture in the second half of the 19th century, with the first archaeological survey being conducted in 1861 by the founding figure of the Archaeological Survey of India, Sir

³ For detailed exegeses on the relationship between the colonial rule, the Empire and its Indian subjects in terms of creating specific forms of knowledge, categories and methods of assessing the societies of those ruled, current chapter mainly refers to *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* by Bernard S. Cohn (1996); for methodological understanding of History of Ideas, operating with distinctive set of questions within the overarching discipline of History *Archaeology of Knowledge* by Michel Foucault (2002) has been consulted; and *Discovery of Ancient India* by Upinder Singh (2004) has been referred back and forth throughout the thesis as presenting a framework for writing the colonial period search for the antiquity of colonized region.

⁴ Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 3

Alexander Cunningham.⁵ The need for a separate department dedicated to archaeological survey was realized during the earlier surveys, most notably the statistical surveys that began in the 18th century.⁶ As has been pointed out by scholars, these survey efforts were tied essentially to the necessities of governance and administration and favoured only ‘useful’ knowledge and histories that enabled the British government to gain better grasp over its subjects and develop strategies to control and govern more effectively.⁷

One of the earliest instances of information generated on Assam is Major James Rennell’s survey of the Brahmaputra in 1765.⁸ After Rennell, Ensign Wood, who served in the detachment of Captain Thomas Welsh (1792-94), would map the course of the Brahmaputra.⁹ Information on Assam in the course of the survey of India was most notably gathered by Dr. Francis Buchanan. Dr. Buchanan, and later Francis Hamilton, would be appointed by the Court of Directors in 1807 to conduct a statistical survey of the territories that fell within the jurisdictional boundaries of the Bengal Presidency and also of the adjacent countries and petty

⁵ And the official department dedicated to archaeological survey came to be established yet another decade later in 1871; Ibid, 1-22.

⁶ “.. statistical surveys of this period generally contained a good deal of undigested historical and archaeological material...” Ibid, 5.

⁷ The ‘usefulness’ of the information that the orientalist scholars or even surveyors of India were expected to supply to various bodies including the Asiatic Society of Bengal, the British government come up again and again in writings on 19th century orientalism. Ludden, David. 1993. "Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge." In *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament : Perspectives on South Asia*, edited by Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, 250-278. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press; Nicholas B. Dirks. 1993. “Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive” In *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives On South Asia New Cultural Studies*, edited by Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, 279-313. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press; Dirks, Nicholas B. 2006. *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

⁸ Phillimore, R. H. 1945. *Historical Records of the Survey of India*. Vol. I (18th Century). Dehra Dun: Surveyor General of India.

⁹ Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2020. *The Unquiet River: a biography of the Brahmaputra*. New Delhi: OUP.

states.¹⁰ The notable twentieth century Assamese historian Suryya Kumar Bhuyan later published part of Buchanan's original manuscripts deposited in India Office Library, London.¹¹ Bhuyan described Buchanan Manuscripts as a "huge mass of manuscript records representing the results of the survey of India made by Dr. Francis Buchanan alias Buchanan Hamilton, in 1807-1814".¹² These manuscripts were presented to the Library of the EIC by Dr. Charles Wilkins of the Asiatic Society, on March 1, 1830.¹³ The varied subjects of his enquiry into these regions covered, among other things, topography, history and antiquities.¹⁴ His survey of districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur, Purnea, Bhagalpur, Bihar, Shahabad and Gorakhpur took almost eight years. The reports of this survey remained largely unpublished.¹⁵ However, Buchanan's reconnaissance of the eastern regions, according to Surya Kumar Bhuyan remains unparalleled for its sound and accurate description.¹⁶ Although Assam was outside the pale of his direct survey, he contributed a section under the name, *Desultory Notice of Assam*, which contrary to the term *desultory* provided a detailed account of Assam around

¹⁰ Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 5; Hamilton, Francis. 1940. *An Account of Assam with some notices concerning The Neighboring Territories first compiled in 1807-1814*. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.

¹¹ Bhuyan accessed these manuscripts (175.MSS.EUR.D.98 of India Office Library London) in September 1928, containing the results of the survey of India made by Dr. Francis Buchanan in 1807-1814. Buchanan, Francis. 1958. "General View of the History of Kamrupa." In *Kamarupar Buranji*, edited by Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, 112-137. Gauhati, Assam: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.

¹² Ibid, 112.

¹³ Ibid, 112.

¹⁴ Bengal Government Letter, dated 11th September 1807, and Pub. Desp. from the Court dated 7th January 1807, Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 1-22.

¹⁵ Roy, Sourindranath. 1953. "Indian Archaeology from Jones to Marshall (1784-1902)." *Ancient India: Bulletin of the Archaeological Survey of India* (9): 4-28.

¹⁶ As such, Buchanan's detailed survey, spanning seven years, is indeed an important document of colonial enterprise and its strategies of control and supply crucial early information on sites as they existed at the time of the surveys, long before official archaeological intervention took place in these regions. Hamilton, Francis. 1940. *An Account of Assam With some notices concerning The Neighboring Territories first compiled in 1807-1814*. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies; Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 5.

the fall of Ahom supremacy.¹⁷ Here he presented, among other things, his observations on the machinery of the Ahom Government, enumerated various products of Assam and made a rapid survey of numerous administrative divisions of the region. The original manuscript of Buchanan Hamilton's seven-year-long survey was sent to the court of Directors in metropole in about 1816 and remained unpublished and in the India Office for a long period of time.¹⁸ Another of his important works is the *General View of History and Manners of Kamrup*. Buchanan's reports provide information on the landed history, tribal traditions and social customs of the time, as reminded by Buchanan's most notable commentator Hugh McPherson.¹⁹

The 'discovery' of the ancient polity of Assam dates back to the later decades of the 18th century.²⁰ One of the earliest of such expressions regarding the possibility of trade relations with Assam is to be found in the Calcutta Gazette of August 21, 1788.²¹ Regarding the colonial necessity for geographical information on Assam, the contribution by Dr. John Peter Wade, medical officer in the expedition led by Capt. Thomas Welsh in 1792-4 to expel the Bengal Burkundazes from the region, presented a crucial early colonial production of knowledge on a region that had hitherto remained beyond the compass of colonial governance. Wade's

¹⁷ Bhuyan, Suryya Kumar. 1949. *Early British Relations with Assam*. Shillong, Assam: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam.

¹⁸ Ibid, 19.

¹⁹ Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 1-22.

²⁰ The subject of 19th century colonial discovery of India's ancient and early past has appeared in writings of Upinder Singh, Nayanjot Lahiri, Brajadulal Chattopadhyay et al. Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*; Lahiri, Nayanjot. 2005. *Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization was Discovered*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black; Lahiri, Nayanjot. 2016. *Ashoka in Ancient India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black. Bandyopadhyay, Rakhaldas. 2018. *Bangalar Itihash*. Sixth. Kolkata: Dey's.

²¹ W.S. Seton Kerr. 1784-1788. "Calcutta Gazette" cited in Bhuyan, *Early British Relations with Assam*, 8.

various accounts are crucial for understanding the colonial discourse on Assam.²² In other words, it was pioneering for reasons more than one. In essence, Wade's pioneering *Account of Assam* and *Geographical Sketch* provided one of the first detailed treatments of the history and geography of Assam.

Explorations also took place external to the domain of official surveys. In terms of records relative to Assam, contributions published in the pages of *Asiatic Researches* were important. Assam, as an unexplored region from the historical point of view till then, communications relating to the province were deemed valuable by the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Henry Vansittart and Heinrich Blochmann translated Persian accounts that described Assam and its people.²³ These early surveys, especially those produced under the aegis of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, were marked by an orientalist fascination and administrative intent. It was a translation by Mr. Vansittart from an appendix in the Persian account *Alamgirnama* that dealt with the history of the Mughal military expedition into Assam. This was originally written by Mohammed Cazim, the well-known court historian of Aurangzeb. But before that, the *Memoire sur les Quatre Circars* written by Chevalier, was perhaps the earliest European literature with mentions of this region.²⁴ Monseieur Jean Baptiste Chevalier, deputed at

²² For a prefatory critique of Wade's engagement with the early and medieval history of Assam, see Saikia, A. 2019. "Geographical Exploration and Historical Investigation John Peter Wade (1762–1800) in Assam". In *Landscape, Culture and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India*, edited by J. L. K. Pachau and Neeladri Bhattacharya, 110-130. New York: Cambridge University Press.

²³ Vansittart succeeded Lord Clive as governor of Bengal in July 1760. Vansittart was an early contributor to the creation of colonial(ist) discourse on Asam. His writing on Assam is based on indirect observation. Cazim, Mohammed. 1799. "A Description of Assam.", Translated from Persian by Henry Vansittart. *Asiatic Researches; or, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal for Inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia* II: 171-186.

²⁴ An English translation of this memoir came to be published recently in 2008. Chevalier, Jean-Baptiste. 2020. *Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765): Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels*

Goalpara in the 1760s, from erstwhile Chandernagore (at present Chandannagore in West Bengal) was an important figure providing one of the earliest pieces of information available on the region.²⁵

Most of these earliest writings were not a result of any direct visit into the region, except Chevalier's. Even Chevalier's memoir is marked by experiences recorded under guided supervision of royal attendant, and not free movement across Assam and interaction with its inhabitants.²⁶ Further, it has to be remembered that at this point the search or survey was far from systematic. Further, these surveys were neither exclusively historical nor archaeological but rather amounted to a treatment of the region from a purely administrative point of view. However, their importance as historical archives on the region come up again and again in later colonial to post-colonial writings.²⁷ The subject of enquiry in these accounts ranged from the historical geography of the region,²⁸ such as in case of Vansittart to spontaneous notes by

in Assam, Bengal and Tibet. First. Translated by Jean Deloche and Caroline Dutta-Baruah. Paris: LBS Publications India in association with EFEO, Paris.

²⁵ He was initially in the employ of French East India Company, later became English Government's agent for the salt trade with Assam. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan remarked that 'Chevalier's extensive commercial activities in Assam, Bengal and Patna' are scattered in the pages of *Bengal Past and Present*. These letters to and from Chevalier and family, published under section 'Chandernagore Papers'. Vide, for instance, 1909. "The Chandernagore Papers 1778-1783." *Bengal Past and Present*, 4: 419-460.; Bhuyan, *Early British Relations with Assam*, 11.

²⁶ Bhagabati, Tarun Chandra. "Opening of Assam to the Western World (A Study on the memoir of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier, 1755-1757)" published online: https://www.academia.edu/28705944/Opening_of_Assam_to_the_Western_World._A_Study_on_the_memoir_of_Jean-Baptiste_Chevalier_1755-1757.

²⁷ Bhuyan, *Early British Relations*, 1-55, Bhagabti, "Opening of Assam", 1-11.

²⁸ The mid 19th century is characterized by a growing debate and scholarly writings on the subject of ancient place names and their identification. Increasing translation work by European scholars, based on the travelogues of famous Chinese pilgrims such as Fa Hien (alternately Faxian) and Huen Tsang (alternately Xuanzang) most notably, in South Asia, spurred interest in the identification of place names. Some foundational as well as representative works on this subject are Ancient

Chevalier, on day-to-day aspects related to nature, culture, royalty and the people of 18th century Assam.²⁹ Buchanan's survey covered a wide range of topics including antiquities.³⁰

The earliest independent account of the region produced by a European is Chevalier's *Memoire*. It is a little-known account and forms a compelling primary source.³¹ However, the historical memoir of Jean Baptiste Chevalier came to light relatively recently in 1926, first edited and published in French in 1984 and translated to English in 2008.³² It delineates the details of, to borrow from Rennell, the mysterious and extraordinary journey of Chevalier into the region. Chevalier's is a 49-folio manuscript and is one of earliest European accounts on

Geography and The Bhilsa Topes by one of the pioneers in this genre, Alexander Cunningham; However, the 19th century noted Orientalist H. H. Wilson's *Ariana Antiqua* is also considered influential in this direction. In 20th century F. E. Pargiter's *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition* has been treated as a major work on the subject of historical geography; B. D. Chattopadhyay provides a more modern take on the subject in his 1982 publication *Survey of Historical Geography in Ancient India*. In terms of Assam, Anundoram Borooah's *The Ancient of Geography of India* in the late 19th century is considered a major scholarship. In recent times, Ichhimuddin Sarkar's *Aspects of Ancient Geography of Pragiyotisha*. Cunningham, Alexander. 1854. *The Bhilsa Topes or Buddhist Monuments of Central India*. London; Cunningham, Alexander. 1871. *Ancient Geography of India I. The Buddhist Period Including the Campaigns of Alexander, and the Travels of Hwen-Thsang*. London. Pargiter, Frederick Eden. 1922. *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*. London: Oxford University Press; Borooah, Anundoram. 1971. *Ancient Geography of India*. Gauhati: Publication Board, Assam; Chattopadhyay, Brajadulal. 1983. *Survey of Historical Geography of Ancient India*. Delhi: Manisha Granthalaya; Sarkar, Ichhimuddin. 1991. *Aspects of Historical Geography of Pragiyotisha Kamarupa (Ancient Assam)*. Calcutta: Naya Prokash; Wilson, Horace Hayman. 1998. *Ariana Antiqua: A Descriptive Account of the Antiquities and Coins of Afghanistan*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.

²⁹ However, as will be discussed next section onwards the earliest surveys or 'discoveries' (or what will be termed in the later chapters more aptly as recoveries) were geographical in nature. Even in the case of Buchanan's survey or Chevalier's, geographical findings and details would comprise a significant part of their account. In short, there was an initial focus on geography as most of these earliest surveys would emerge in the context of war.

³⁰ Hamilton, *An Account of Assam with some notices*, 4-13.

³¹ Bhagabati, "Opening of Assam to the Western World", 9.

³² Chevalier, *Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India*, Preface.

Assam.³³ The relatively recent discovery of this record brings to light crucial details on the region in the later medieval and early modern times, to be found nowhere else, especially even Gait's *History*.³⁴ The memoir contains hitherto unknown details of later medieval and early modern Assam providing matter-of-fact details of its people including its rulers, society, culture as well as resources for the commercial prospect of the French EIC. The aforementioned details include information on Glanius, the only other European in the later medieval and early modern period to gain access to the interiors of Ahom Assam. All information obtained by Chevalier was done under the supervision of the Ahom government so a free exchange with Assamese people or the region could not be possible. Whatever little information Chevalier collected at will pertained to its geography. A large part of later British accounts drew significantly on Chevalier. His various descriptions corroborate the earlier Persian descriptions that were later translated by Henry Vansittart and Heinrich Blochmann among others.

Following Chevalier, direct visits to the region had been few. On the other hand, indirect accounts such as Vansittart's translation of the noted Persian account, *Alamgirnamah*, by Mohammed Cazim opened up a useful and new avenue into the search for Assam's history. The essay contained details of the geography and climate of Assam as experienced during the Mughal expedition in the late 17th century. The aim of the particular publication by the Asiatic Society read, "It is reprinted here, because our Government has an interest in being as well acquainted as possible with all the nations bordering on the British territories."³⁵

³³ Bhagabati, "Opening of Assam to the Western World", 4.

³⁴ Though Bhagabati infers the time period of Chevalier's discussion to pertain to 'medieval period', but his description on Assam during years around 1767 necessitates to rethink the designation medieval. While the pan-Indian periodization formulated famously by James Mill does not apply to the Brahmaputra valley, even then later medieval and early modern period may be more applicable for Chevalier in Assam.

³⁵ Cazim, "A Description of Assam", 171.

Vansittart's translation is marked by Mughal imperial view of Assam and demonstrates a vague understanding of geographical references, since it was one of the earliest and indirect accounts of the region.³⁶ And it will be discussed shortly, the EIC government would soon enough actively pursue more accurate knowledge on the geography of the region.

Another early philological recovery of Assam akin to Vansittart's in the pages of the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (JASB) is Blochmann's translation based on Mughal Persian accounts and therefore this work implicitly foregrounds the importance of Mughal accounts as a compelling source on Assam's history. These two early translations, despite not being a direct survey of the region in any manner, make an important intervention in terms of detailed exploration of medieval period sources on Assam.³⁷

What exactly was the purpose of these orientalist writers translating Mughal texts? They were clearly not simply collecting geographical information from Mughal Persian texts. Their act is one of inscribing Assam's location within a coherent imperial administrative geography. At the same time, these are to be classified as part of the philological discourse within orientalism in providing faithful translation of Mughal Persian accounts of wartime. These are also, once again to emphasize, two earliest entries in the pages of the Asiatic Researches and JASB on Assam. Naturally, in terms of history or source criticism these essays may be found wanting. Another drawback of both these translations is that it is unaccompanied by maps, which would

³⁶ For example, in the opening paragraph, the author expresses confusion about reference to Namrup, a prominent place during the Ahoms, and suggests a possibility of misprint for 'Camrup'. Ibid, 171.

³⁷ We see detailed treatment of Persian accounts from Mughal period, by most notably Jadunath Sarkar where information on Assam forms part of a larger discussion. But survey of Persian accounts with a focus on the history of Assam was perhaps initiated by Henry Vansittart and Heinrich Blochmann.

have been quite useful and appropriate. This is clearly because, both Vansittart and Blochmann were linguists unversed in cartography, no matter how much their works centrally were concerned with accurate geographic knowledge, their literature lacks it. The distances were expressed variously in terms of ancient Indian units of measurement namely *coss*³⁸ as well as hours of travel. The place names supplied by the Persian chronicles and as reproduced in the translations were all historical in nature for example, Ghergong is roughly modern Sibsagar district³⁹; Uttarkul and Dakshinkul, two denominations for northern and southern banks of Brahmaputra. These usages are found as early as 11th century inscriptions of Ratnapala and Indrapala alongside Persian accounts such as *Bahristan-i-Ghaybi*.⁴⁰

Barring Chevalier's *Memoire*, the other documents mentioned above have been known and referred by scholars for a relatively longer time during colonial and post-colonial periods. Among these, Buchanan's is a book-length work and part of early survey into the region. The survey was conducted from Rungpoor and Goalpara, based on accounts of Bengali visitors to the region or Assamese refugees hiding in Bengal at that time. While antiquities featured part of Buchanan's report, he refrained from writing about architecture and sculpture of the region. The reason being the report was based on second-hand information. However, it is one of the first systematic surveys of the region, produced following two earlier partial surveys namely by Captains Hugh Baillie and Thomas Welsh. A statement by the editor of Hamilton's account

³⁸ This measurement standard was followed in Bengal till as recently as 20th century. Evidences are to be found in different genre of literature in Bengali language.

³⁹ Blochmann, H. 1872. "Koch Bihar, Koch Hajo, and A'sam, in the 16th and 17th centuries, according to the Akbarnamah, the Padishahnamah, and the Fathiyah i 'Ibriyah." *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Baptist Mission Press) XLI (I-IV): 49-101.

⁴⁰ Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1931-32. *Kamarupashasanavalee*. Calcutta: Rangpur Sahitya Parishad; Nathan, Mirza. 1936. *Bahristan-i-Ghaybi: A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the Reigns of Jahangir and Shahjahan*, vols 1 and 2. Translated from Persian by M. I. Borah. Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.

deposited at Indian Office Library, London sums up the value of the document in the modern history of Assam. The editor of the manuscripts, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan remarks,

“... his account is an important contribution to our study of the political situation, the economic resources and of the social life of the people in the beginning of the nineteenth century immediately before the invasion of the country by Burmese. The value of the book has been enhanced by the description of the Garos added to the account of Assam. Hamilton’s love of accuracy, his sense of proportion, and his previous experience at compiling topographical and scientific reports have all combined to make his Account of Assam a valuable contemporary document.”⁴¹

These earliest forays into the region by the initiative of the British government took place around the Moamoria rebellion, i.e. from the latter part of the 18th to the turn of the 19th century. While the survey before the uprising, such as Chevalier’s, had more commercial imperatives, those conducted in the aftermath of the uprising would have an immediate geographic imperative. This immediate context aside, these early explorations were embedded in the traditions of the 19th century European knowledge system. The defining features of these surveys, as encapsulated in the remark by Bhuyan quoted above is characterized by faithful description of a place or event, proportionate treatment and most importantly done with a ‘scientific’ outlook. The term ‘scientific’ defined and guided a large part of the 19th century ‘discovery’ of the great antiquity of the region. Capt. Welsh’s expedition in 1792 marked the official beginning of the presence of the British government in Assam.

⁴¹ Hamilton, Hamilton, *An Account of Assam with some notices*, Preface

The British EIC sets foot on Assam

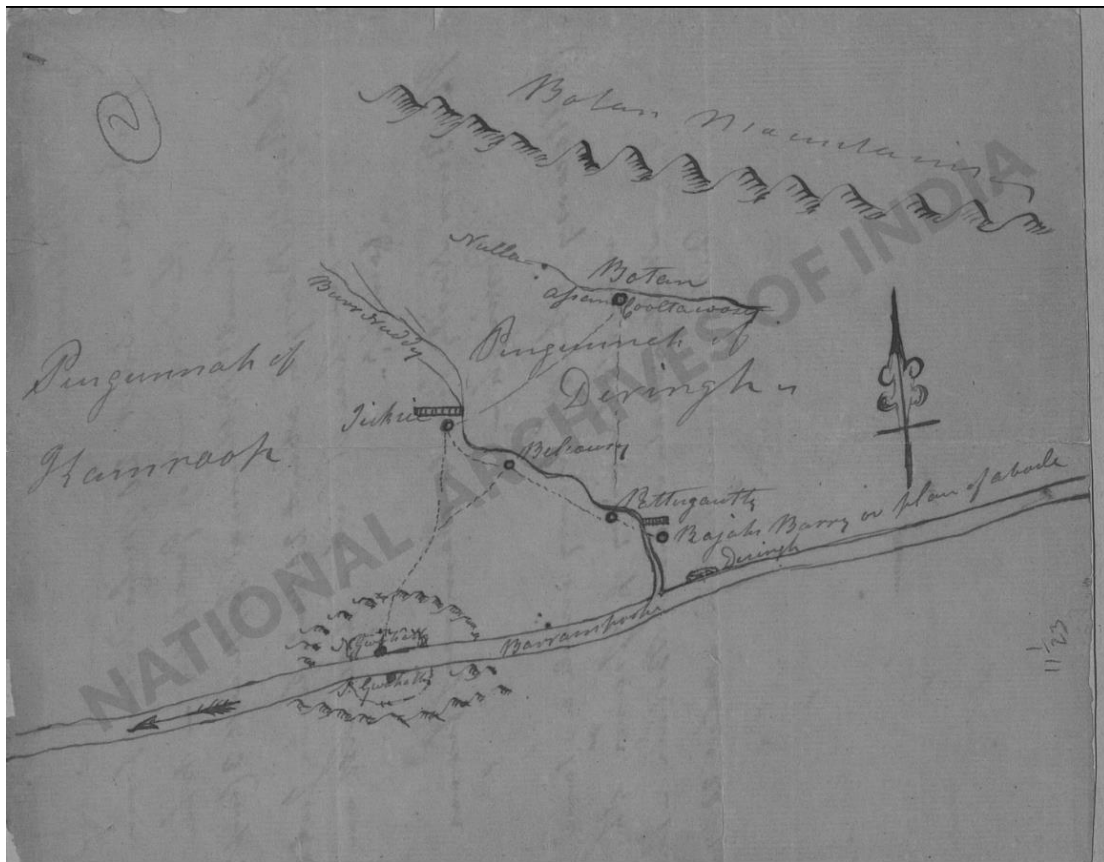
It is now clear that the province was ‘discovered’ in the colonial imagination only in the last decade of the 18th century. Due to the distance between the officials engaged in actual administration and the imperial headquarters, many dispatches and correspondences were exchanged containing minute details of this discovery and the EIC’s knowledge on the region. The value of these records consists in the observations provided by colonial officials about societies and governments of the past that underwent transformation resulting from the conflux of new influences and ideals.

Captain Thomas Welsh’s expedition in 1792 was a watershed event in the history of Assam. It was the first authorized troop of Englishmen to enter Assam, equipped with the latest methods of exploration and survey.⁴² Correspondences between Fort William, the Assam Raja and Captain Welsh throughout the period of two years of expedition are replete with details not only of internal management of Assam, terms of negotiations among the belligerents but also sketches of the country produced by the Captain.⁴³

⁴² Bhuyan, S. K. 1949. *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826*. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies Assam.

⁴³ Fort William, ‘Regarding the internal management of the affairs of Assam, dated 18th December 1792’, Foreign Department Proceedings, Political Cons. 21 December 1792, No. 17, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI); Capt. Thomas Welsh, ‘Letter to the Rajah of Assam containing written (terms) required of him to enter into, dated 8th February 1793’ Foreign Department Proceedings, Political, Cons. 22 Feb 1793, No. 15, NAI; Sir John Shore, Governor General, Fort William ‘Minutes with reference to affairs of Assam’, Foreign Department Proceedings, Political, Cons. 19 March 1791, No. 16, NAI.

Figure 1: Map of ‘Pergunnah of Kamroop’



Source: Captain Thomas Welsh, ‘Enclosed copy of a letter with map of Assam’, Foreign Department Proceedings, Cons. 11 January 1793 no. 23, [NAI].

However, the most important document on the expedition is the report prepared by Welsh himself and submitted to Edward Hay, Secretary to the Government dated 6th February 1794.⁴⁴ What can be interpreted, among other things, from the report, is that the EIC government’s concern at that point was mainly related to the commercial prospects in Assam. Three decades later, the Anglo Burmese war, however, brought to the fore a pressing need for more accurate geographical information on the region lying to the east of Bengal.⁴⁵ Apart from Welsh’s

⁴⁴ Welsh, Captain Thomas. 1799. “Welsh’s Report on Assam 1794.” In *The North-East Frontier of India*, by Alexander Mackenzie, 377-394. Delhi: Mittal Publications.

⁴⁵ Zou, David Vumallian. 2019. “Picturing a Region: A Geographical History of British Assam.” In *Landscape, Culture and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India*, edited by Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy L. K. Pachau, 89-109. New York: Cambridge University Press.

report, the unconnected bits of information on the region that were generated or published till then are mostly scattered across pages of different newspapers and periodicals. Thus, it remains largely inaccessible.⁴⁶

Two of the earliest geographical surveys of the region by Lieutenant Richard Wilcox and Captain John Bryan Neufville would set the stage for systematic surveys of the region.⁴⁷ The shift from mainly commercial concern during Welsh to a more geographical impetus, by the time of Wilcox and Neufville, surrounding especially the 'identity of Brahmaputra and Sanpo' was spurred by, what can be called 'the notice taken of the subject in Europe'.⁴⁸ What seems to be an after-effect, the Asiatic Society too was keen on generating more connected geographical information on what they called the North East Frontier.⁴⁹

In October 1824, during the Anglo-Burmese war, several of the officers employed in revenue surveys were placed, under the superintendence of Major Schalch in order to 'derive advantage to the utmost practicable extent of opportunities' of investigating the eastern

⁴⁶ Wilcox, R. 1873. "Memoir of a Survey of Assam and the Neighbouring Countries, executed in 1824-6-7-8." In *Selection of Papers Regarding the Hill Tracts Between Assam and Burmah and on the Upper Brahmaputra*, edited by Francis Jenkins, 1-82. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.

⁴⁷ Neufville, Captain John Bryan. 1828. "On the Geography and Population of Asam." *Asiatic Researches; or, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal for Enquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts and Sciences, and Literature of Asia* XVI: 331-347.; Wilcox, "Memoir of a Survey of Assam" in *Asiatic Researches*.

⁴⁸ Wilcox, R. 1832. "Memoir of a Survey of Assam and the Neighbouring Countries Executed in 1825-6-7-8." *Asiatic Researches; or, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal for Enquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts and Sciences, and Literature of Asia* XVII: 314-453, 315. While the current chapter looks into the less-known officials and reports, the geographical exploration by John Peter Wade, a first of its kind in the region, is fairly well known by now. One of the most recent studies on the value and nature of Wade's Geographical Exploration of Assam is provided by Saikia, "Geographical Exploration and Historical Investigation", 110-130.

⁴⁹ *Note by the Secretary in Neufville, "On the Geography and Population of Asam", 331.

neighbours of Bengal that had hitherto been exempt from such investigation.⁵⁰ On this survey of 'Asam' Wilcox was to assist Captain James Bedford, who was directed to consider Brahmaputra as the chief object of their enquiry.⁵¹ Around the same time Lieutenant Philip Burlton's survey of the Brahmaputra appointed by David Scott, was, as remarked by Wilcox, conducted in a commendable manner.⁵² With just a surveying compass and unfurnished with any instrument for measuring distance, Burlton surveyed the river and prepared a map with little error. Burlton's survey was published in the Government Gazette of 9th May 1825.⁵³ By the time Neufville arrived in 1828, the course of Lohit (i.e. Brahmaputra) from its origin in Brahmakund had been settled fairly accurately. So, Captain Neufville proceeded from where Lieutenant Colonel Ensign Wood, an early cartographic surveyor in the region, left off.⁵⁴ However, the antiquity of Kamarupa did not feature as a concern in these reports.

As noted in the previous chapter, survey of monuments appeared in the region with Captain Westmacott's visit to Chardwar on public duty. A few aspects of Westmacott's description are worth noting.⁵⁵ In determining the toponymic district of Chardwar, Westmacott combined local legends about the site with accurate geographic coordinate systems. The name of the

⁵⁰ Wilcox, "Memoir of a Survey of Assam" in *Asiatic Researches*, 315.

⁵¹ Wilcox, "Memoir of a Survey of Assam" in *Selection of Papers*, 1-82.

⁵² Ibid, 1-82.

⁵³ Jenkins, F. 1873. *Selection of Papers regarding the Hill Tracts between Assam and Burmah and on the Upper Brahmaputra*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press. For a recent take on the details of these explorations see Saikia, *The Unquiet River*, 219-221.

⁵⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Wood prepared a number of maps of Assam as an engineer in the detachment of Capt. Welsh. However, Wood's survey reached no further than Rungpore and he accounted for the paucity of his geographical information by the difficulties he had in holding an interaction with the local people. Wilcox, "Memoir of a Survey of Assam" in *Asiatic Researches*, 316; Neufville, "On the Geography and Population of Assam", 331-347; Also vide Saikia, *The Unquiet River*, 211-216.

⁵⁵ An earliest survey of temple ruins at Chardwar, Assam was conducted in November 1834 by Capt. Westmacott while on public duty in Assam. Westmacott, Captain G. E. 1835. "Description of Ancient Temples and Ruins at Chardwar in Assam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* IV(40): 185-195.

place is strongly drawn from two factors – its physical position as connecting to four passes of Bhutan as well as a tradition recounting a tale of encounter between a local ruler by the name of Raja Bahn and Lord Krishna.⁵⁶ The situation of the ruins amidst difficult terrain swarming with wild animals forced Westmacott to seek help from local peasants to reach the site. The temples at the site were made of stone and therefore, assumed by the Captain to be belonging to considerable antiquity.⁵⁷ The site however, yielded no inscriptions and the author considered the local traditions on the site to be not of historical value.

Given the historiographic approach embedded in 19th century Europe, Westmacott was quick to cite a textual and therefore historical data, based on a manuscript of Assam king. A manuscript about Pratappur, the strategic capital city of another ruler, namely Raja Ramchandra, was assumed by Westmacott as the same location as Banh raja's fortified city in the vicinity of Tezpur – what was in the contemporary time Chardwar. Westmacott was provided information on the site by local priests and old residents.⁵⁸ Westmacott's notice apparently had many fallacies. A few years down the line, Capt. E. Taite Dalton made a survey of about a dozen temples, including Chardwar. One of the unique features of the site, as reported by Westmacott, were ruins of enormous structures, especially altars of colossal

⁵⁶ Not much is detailed about the said king. The Captain makes an incidental reference to a local legend about the king connected to the origin of the location of Chardwar ruins. Westmacott mentions that the site of the ruins is connected to a fabulous tale of a fort amidst fire, built by the said Raja. Ibid, 185-195.

⁵⁷ Because for quite a considerable period of time buildings were stopped being made of heavy materials such as stone and brick and instead perishable materials were used in any construction, either for royal structures or ordinary ones. This view is supported by Dalton as well. The reason was the frequent convulsion of nature in the region. Westmacott further asserted that 'Chardwar at one period undoubtedly formed part of the ancient and extensive kingdom of Kamrup'. Ibid, 187.

⁵⁸ However, Westmacott found them largely ignorant about the history and tradition of their own homeland. Ibid, 185-195.

dimension. This was disqualified by Dalton two decades later as an error in Westmacott's observation and he observed that the structure was meant to be the flooring of the shrine.

Despite its shortcomings, Westmacott's earliest report on the ruins of Assam's Chardwar was crucial on several accounts. Before this report there was a widely held misconception about antiquarian remains of the region, that there was a general lack of it. And Dalton too at the very beginning confirmed the currency of this assumption. Westmacott's report helped initiate survey in this direction and probably as a direct or indirect result of that Dalton conducted his more wide-ranging survey. When Dalton visited the site, he observed the site to have been largely altered. Dalton notes,

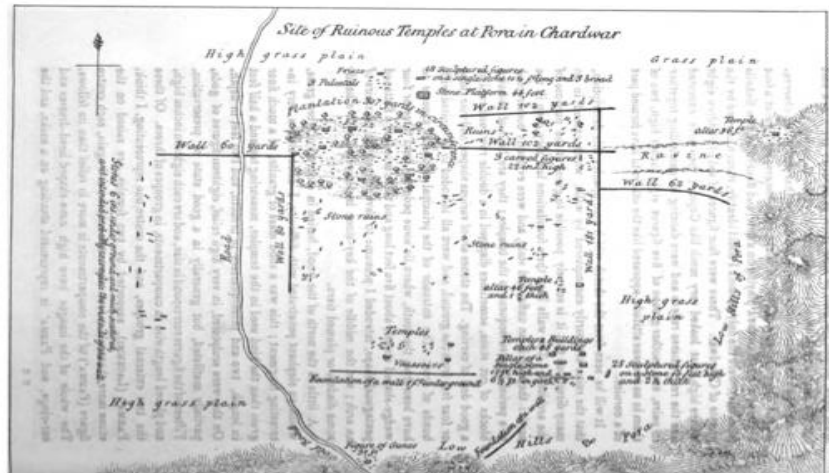
“...the modern station of Tezapore has risen amidst the ruins he described; the dense forests, that impeded his observation, have been removed, and, though vast quantities of finely cut stones have been buried, to form the foundations of modern buildings, the more ornamental fragments were spared, and still remain in sufficient number and variety, to enable us to form some idea of the structures of which they were members.”⁵⁹

Westmacott's report contained a ground plan or map tracing the entire setting of the ruins as it stood originally before the constructions began.⁶⁰ These are crucial aspects of the early documentation of antiquities of Assam.

⁵⁹ Dalton, Capt. E. Taite. 1855. “Notes on Assam Temple Ruins.” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* XXIV (1): 1-24, 15.

⁶⁰ Although the quality of the image is complained by scholars to be very poor, it still remains an early document worth reproducing in the current context. Westmacott, “Description of Ancient Temples and Ruins at Chardwar”, 185-195.

Figure 2: Plan of Chardwar Ruins presented by Captain G. E. Westmacott, 1835



Source: Westmacott, Captain G. E. 1835. "Description of Ancient Temples and Ruins at Chardwar in Assam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* IV(40): 185-195.

In the wider survey, the remains were visited by Dalton himself and illustrations were also presented by him. By the time Dalton contributed the implicit orientalist system of representation became conspicuous.

Figure 3: Illustration of a temple in Kamrup presented by Captain Dalton in 1855 implicitly represents lived spaces of colonized culture as mysterious, once-glorious relic of archaeological curiosity.



Source: Dalton, Capt. E. Taite. 1855. "Notes on Assam Temple Ruins." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Baptist Mission Press) XXIV (1): 1-24.

In his descriptive account of the ruins, Dalton documented the religious and defense structures of Assam. He also looked for inscriptions and local traditions connected to the ruins. Westmacott's Chardwar ruins found special and separate treatment by Dalton. A notable aspect connected to the ruins of Chardwar is that the legendary Raja Bahn featured centrally in the recovery of the site.

Prior to Dalton and following Westmacott, another EIC official Major S. F. Hannay had written an essay, 'Notes on ancient temples and other remains in the vicinity of Suddyah, Upper Assam' in June 1848 while he was on his yearly visit to Laikwah.⁶¹ Here he supplied details of some temples based on local knowledge and writings of previous visitors. The places he visited were namely, Bhishmook Nuggur Copper Temple, designated by Buchanan "the Eastern Kamakhya"⁶², fortification walls and stone remains among sundry other structures including Ahom.

Captain G. E. Westmacott, who reported the discovery of seven ancient temples in Chardwar, speculatively associated the site with the legendary Raja Bahn. This romantic attribution was later echoed by E. T. Dalton. Similarly, Major S. F. Hannay's survey of the copper temple, fortification walls, and other stone remains at Sadiya was linked to the mythical figure Raja Bhishmaka, known from the *Bhagavata Purana* as the father of Krishna's consort Rukmini. These associations – whether with Raja Bahn or Bhishmaka – reveal a recurring pattern, the

⁶¹ Hannay, Major S. F. 1848. "Notes on Ancient Temples and other remains in the vicinity of Suddyah, Upper Assam." In *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, XVII(Part I), 459-76.

⁶² Ibid, 462.

regional reinterpretation of pan-Indian mythological figures through local landscapes, which colonial antiquarians then absorbed into their orientalist quest to anchor India's past in classical Sanskrit texts. Other officials like Majors John Butler and H. H. Godwin-Austen conducted surveys of the ruined fortress city of Dimapur, further contributing to the expanding antiquarian archive. A recurring feature across these early reports was the narrative of civilizational decline, often paired with the racialized assumption that such monumental achievements could not have been the work of contemporary local populations, but of some earlier, 'superior' or 'foreign' race.

Another crucial aspect emerges on a close reading of these early survey reports that is worth noting. These early reports are significant within the broader landscape of antiquarian pursuits in India. Several key features emerge from their accounts of Assam, (a) architecture served as the principal object of early antiquarian interest; (b) historical geography and local mythological traditions were closely entwined with the interpretation of architectural remains; (c) detailed descriptions of principal structures were emphasized; and (d) particular attention was paid to inscriptions. What is evident is that these early antiquarian endeavours were characterized by descriptive documentation as compared to excavation. Notably, these very elements later formed the basis of Alexander Cunningham's *Memorandum of Instruction* – a foundational document in the institutional history of Indian archaeology, formulated in his *Report for the Year 1871–72*, several decades after these initial surveys in Assam.⁶³ This suggests that Cunningham's methodological framework did not arise in isolation or solely from his personal field experience, but drew upon an already emerging set of antiquarian practices. These formative phases of Indian archaeology merit closer scholarly attention and more sustained critical engagement.

⁶³ Cunningham, Alexander. 1873. *Report for the Year 1871-72*, Archaeological Survey Report, Calcutta in Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 85.

The Trajectory of Antiquarianism from Europe to Empire:

The root of the modern notion of antiquarianism may be traced to the 16th and 17th century humanism centred in Italy. Momigliano, however, opines that the predecessor of modern antiquarianism is to be found in Greece during the second-half of the 5th century BCE.⁶⁴ Plato referred to the science called ‘archaeology’ in his *Hippias maior* that systematically studied genealogies and traditions. Plato’s *Hippias* may not essentially be a direct predecessor of *Lehrbücher der Alterthum* but dealt with subjects or the form of systematic treatise that would be closely connected to modern antiquarian interest. At this point, there was a distinct separation between history and antiquarianism. The former would be a sole preserve of the politicians and the government rather than scholars. Antiquarians, on the other hand, were driven by learned curiosity. Antiquarian pursuit gained impetus after Alexander and Romans followed suit. Varro’s *Antiquitates divinae et humanae* was the most systematic survey of all aspects of Roman life and set a new standard and name for ‘Antiquitates’ – the systematic character of this type of erudition. In the Middle Ages in Europe, the idea of antiquarianism evolved in its meaning and definition to include the classical focus on inscriptions and archaeological remains with a special focus on monuments; from Varronian idea of civilization recovered by systematic collection of all relics of the past. The Varronian concept of survey of all aspects of a nation was re-introduced at this time, but the 15th and 16th century humanist definition of ‘antiquarius’ included a lover, collector and student of ancient traditions and remains, though not a historian. The great antiquarians of the 16th century improved upon Varro by combining literary, archaeological and epigraphic evidences. They slowly pieced together Roman chronology, topography, law and religion and extended beyond Greece and Rome to include local antiquities of France, Germany, England and then the

⁶⁴ Momigliano, Arnaldo. 1950. “Ancient History and the Antiquarian”. *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13(3/4): 285-315

‘oriental’ kingdoms. Political and religious reasons after the Reformation impelled radical rewriting of various national and local histories outside Greece and Rome. While students of Greek and Latin antiquities did not identify themselves as historians, but students in Britain, France and the rest of Europe were willing to forget such distinction. In the 16th and 17th centuries there were both antiquarians and historians for non-classical and post-classical history, but only antiquarians in the classical world. In the second half of the 17th century these demarcations began to blur and accounts of events came to be based on coins, inscriptions and archaeological evidence, and ordering and reinterpretation of ancient literary evidence from the moral and political point of view. At this point, earlier uncritical acceptance of ancient historiography by the likes of Tacitus, Livy, Florus, Suetonius gave way to a general scepticism. Erudits and Pyrrhonists like Pierre Bayle, Daniel Huet expressed scepticism on the subject of historical sources. Discussion on Pyrrhonism raged in German protestant universities that were making conspicuous contributions to historical method. Textbooks came to be written around the method of interpreting and criticizing sources and it was assumed that charters and other public statements, coins, inscriptions and statutes were more reliable historical evidence than literary sources. Historians’ source of traditions based on eyewitness accounts came to be collated and verified with coins, inscriptions and charters. Further, in case of the absence of sufficient epigraphic and archaeological material, criteria came to be developed to establish the bona fides of the sources. The miracles of Jesus and the truth of the Bible came to be a major subject of contention among skeptics in the early 18th century. It was believed that thousands of official documents, inscriptions and coins could not be forged as easily as isolated literary texts. One of the prominent antiquarians of the ‘century of numismatics’ and monuments, Francesco Bianchini believed archaeological evidence is the “symbol and proof of what happened” (*storia per simboli*) and makes a firmer basis for history than literary evidence. Bianchini was an astronomer. Jacques Spon, another noted antiquarian

of 17th century France, was a doctor, so were his friends Charles Patin, Charles Vaillant and other numismatists and antiquarians of Europe. These scholars introduced scientific method of direct observation into historical research. However, Phyrhonists pointed out that inscriptions, coins and monuments too can be falsified and are open to diverse interpretations. Historian's readiness to take over the study of non-literary evidence was officially recognized in 1766 with the establishment of Historical Institute in Gottingen dedicated to the auxiliary sciences of diplomatics and numismatics. Two sharp distinctions emerged in terms of success in laying down the rules for the 18th century examination and interpretation of non-literary evidence. The rules for coins, charters and inscriptions were more complete while vases, statues, reliefs and gems spoke a much more complex language. Winckelmann's *Versuch einer Allegorie besonders fur die Kunst* (1766) is to be understood in this context.

The discovery of pre-Roman Etruscans proved a turning point. It generated not only a flow of books and dissertations but a successive formation of learned institutions around the antiquarian movement of the 18th century. The Academia di Cortona with its Lucumoni in 1726, Società Colombiana of Florence in 1735, Etruscan Museum of Volterra – all started during this period. The archaeological revival spread from Tuscany to other parts of Italy with the discovery of Herculaneum and Pompeii being the most conspicuous outcome. These made a hit for its focus on local patriotism gratified by high antiquity of pre-Roman civilizations. The antiquarian method, combined with patriotic revival, produced excellent scholars unknown in Italy for over a century. Much of Foscolo and Leopardi's writings and poetry can be traced back to these museums and learned societies.

In the 17th century it was also realized that oriental languages and history were necessary to understand Christianity, as was non-literary evidence collected by antiquarians to the study of

religions of the world. Up to the end of the 17th century, antiquaries continued to study customs, institutions, art and religion that were outside the purview of political history and were based on non-literary evidence. But, towards the 19th century, it was realized, due chiefly to Winckelmann and Gibbon, that antiquarian erudition and philosophic history were not incompatible. Antiquarian method of collection, classification and details at various points recounted above connected closely to theology and law. It was the time when learned historians increasingly accepted methods of antiquarians of checking literary by non-literary evidence, resulting in a decrease in claim of antiquarians over epigraphy, numismatics, diplomatics, theology and jurisprudence. Antiquarians' preference for original documents, his ingenuity in uncovering forgeries, his skill in collecting and classifying the evidence and above all his unbounded love of learning informed the ethics of historian.

In the colonial context, especially in South Asia, the concept and practice of antiquarianism underwent a critical transformation. Colonial administrators, missionaries, and scholars deployed antiquarian methods to catalogue, translate, and often reconstitute the Indian past through the evolving knowledgeable practices in Europe. As Nicholas Dirks and Ronald Inden argue, this was not a neutral act of recovery but one deeply enmeshed in the project of colonial knowledge production – where the past was made legible for governance.⁶⁵ Antiquarianism thus became a tool of classifying Indian texts and material culture into fixed, often hierarchical civilizational schemas. The founding of institutions like the Asiatic Society (1784) and the proliferation of translation projects under William Jones and Charles Wilkins reveal how antiquarian labor fed into an orientalist desire for mastery over the colonized past.

⁶⁵ Dirks, Nicholas B. 2001. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. United Kingdom: Princeton University Press; Inden, Ronald B. 1990. *Imagining India*. London: Hurst and Company.

Yet this colonial deployment of antiquarianism was not unidirectional. As scholars like Thomas R. Trautmann emphasize, Indian intellectuals were not passive recipients of these methods.⁶⁶ Rather, many engaged with antiquarian techniques – such as philological analysis, textual collation, and epigraphic documentation – to construct alternative historical imaginaries. The so-called ‘native’ antiquarians, in case of Assam, the likes of Gunabhiram Barua, Hemchandra Goswami, Kanaklal Barua often drew on both traditional knowledge systems and colonial forms of historicism – partly aligned with orientalist frameworks, but also invested in local histories, genealogies, and nascent nationalist aspirations.

When seen through the lens of counter-colonial modernity, antiquarianism emerges as a contested site where the archive became a space of both imperial discipline and indigenous reimagination.⁶⁷ For instance, in Assam, the recovery of manuscripts and inscriptions by local scholars was both an act of preservation and a mode of asserting cultural distinctiveness within India and colonial rule. These engagements reveal that the antiquarian method contributed to constructing parallel histories that challenged imperial narratives of stagnation or decline.

In this thesis, therefore, antiquarianism is not treated as a static signifier but as a historically embedded, ideologically charged, and methodologically ambivalent category. The concept of antiquarianism as employed in the thesis enables tracing how the local and colonial archives were shaped, contested, and reanimated Kamarupa. The thesis examine how antiquarian tools, assumptions, and tensions permeated historical writing and search in Assam – both colonial and indigenous – informing the structure of modern regional historiography.

⁶⁶ Trautmann, Thomas R. 2004. *Aryans and British India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press; Trautmann, Thomas R. 2006. *Languages and Nations: Conversations in Colonial South India*. London: University of California Press.

⁶⁷ Dodson, Michael S. 2010. “Contesting Translations: Orientalism and the Interpretation of the Vedas.” In *An Intellectual History for India*, edited by Shruti Kapila, 35-51. Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

The Colonial Production of Assam's Ancient Past

The earliest recovery of epigraphic remains of the region occurs in the context of an administrative enquiry urged by A. J. M. Mills, Judge, Sudder Court, on deputation in Upper Assam, from Lieut. Col. Francis Jenkins, agent to the governor general, N.E. Frontier.⁶⁸ The report chronologically presented various grants of Lakhiraj lands, beginning as early as the 12th century up to their status during the colonial present. The report supplied valuable information on the types of grants such as, *phullees*,⁶⁹ *sunmuds*, *pera kagaz* and so on. But, for the purpose of the current research the discussion on the copper plates of Dharmapala and Vanamala, as discovered by Jenkins, will be in focus. The inscriptions were, reported by Jenkins, “written in the old Sanskrit character of Lat and stone inscriptions” and were deciphered using the alphabets of ancient forms of Sanskrit writing, that had been published by Mr. James Princep.⁷⁰ The ‘Kamroop’ repeatedly referred to in the correspondence, implied the modern administrative unit as it stood during the time of the correspondence. Two copper plates were reported by Jenkins to contain the oldest of the said grants (i.e. Lakhiraj). The grant by Dharmapala, which was a religious grant⁷¹ was made towards the formation of Maha

⁶⁸ Lieut. Col. F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, North-East Frontier ‘Letter no. 327 of 1853’ Sudder Court proceedings, Upper Assam dated 13th June 1853 in Mills, A. J. M. 1984. *Report on the Province of Assam*. Gauhati: Publication Board.

⁶⁹ These phullees would often come with a supplementary document, known as *pera-kakat*, providing elaborate details of the grant. Such valuable documents are often reported to be destroyed due, most notably, to Burmese invasion and the civil war. S. K. Bhuyan, Secretary, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, ‘Resolution: Extract from the Proceedings of Executive Committee Meeting of Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti, Gauhati held on 11.10.28’, in *Permission to the Kamrup Anusandhan Samity to take copies of old Assam Inscriptions & Historical Records*, General Department Proceedings, No. XVII-54 of 1928, Assam State Archives (hereafter ASA).

⁷⁰ Thereby confirming the antiquity of the inscriptions. ‘Letter no. 327 of 1853’ from Lieut. Col. F. Jenkins (op. cit.), 84.

⁷¹ Two types of grants are specified by Jenkins viz., Burmutter and Dharmutter. Jenkins, Major F. 1840. “Paper on Ancient Land Grants on Copper, Discovered in Assam.” *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* IX (Part II): 766-782.

Rudra Dewali, that was in existence in a dilapidated state at the time of the publication of the paper in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1840 based on this finding.⁷² In this article we get one of the earliest descriptions of inscriptions pertaining to the Pre-Ahom period, witnessing its apotheosis from the 4th to the 8th century CE.⁷³ This was a crucial discovery and a few of the opening lines of Jenkins' contribution to the JASB support this inference. They mention,

“A putter of three copper plates, joined by a large copper ring to a seal, containing within a raised rim a figure of Ganesh,⁷⁴ was lately dug up near the station of Tezpore, in the Durrung division, and I have the pleasure to enclose a copy of the inscription...at the time it was first brought up, there was no person in the province who could read the inscription, but having given to a Pundit the alphabets of ancient forms of Sanscrit writing, published by Mr. James Prinsep to illustrate his discoveries, he was soon able to make out the inscription...It was a grant of land as Burmuttur, by Durmpal, in the year 36, without any mention what era, to three Brahmins, and detailed the boundaries of the grant.”⁷⁵

These observations provided the earliest description of Kamarupa inscriptions, of which the seal was an important part. It is the image of the seal, which was a standard appendage to all Kamarupa inscriptions, that was used in modern times by the Assam Research Society as the emblem signifying the institution, promoting research on the ancient and early pasts of the

⁷² It may be considered one of the earliest articles on epigraphic evidence from this region. Ibid, 766-82.

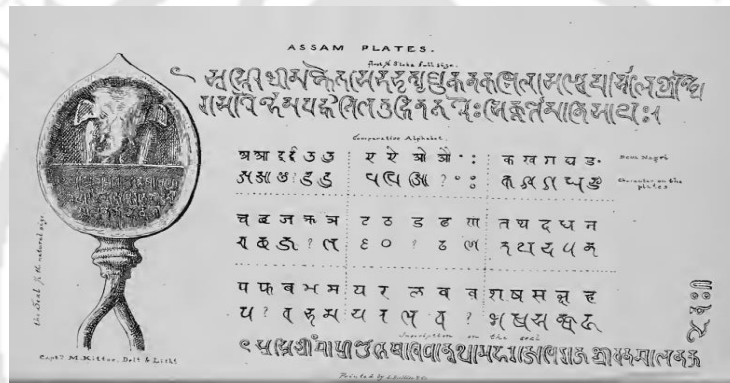
⁷³ Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1913-14. “No. 13 Nidhanpur Copper-plates of Bhaskarvarman.” Edited by Sten Konow. *Epigraphia Indica and Record of Archaeological Survey of India* XII: 65-79.

⁷⁴ Padmanath identifies it as an image of elephant and not a representation of Ganesh. Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1910. “Balabarmma'r Tamrashasan.” *Sahitya Parishad Patrika* 113-128.

⁷⁵ Jenkins, “Paper on Ancient Land Grants on Copper”, 766.

region. Secondly, the enthusiasm inherent in the discovery could also be gathered from the ‘pleasure’ the author felt in presenting the seminal finding. Further, the paper clearly informed the nascent stage at which historical archaeology or antiquarian study was in the province at the time of the discovery of the said plates. It also suggested the indispensable contribution made by an indigenous scholar towards this major development.⁷⁶ And, at the very outset the paper gave a fair idea of the key aspects of Kamarupa inscriptions – i.e. the time period and, most notably, the boundary specifications.⁷⁷

Figure 4: Drawing of the first verse and legend of the seal of Tezpur C. P. of Vanamala



Source: Jenkins, Major F. 1840. “Paper on Ancient Land Grants on Copper, Discovered in Assam.” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* IX (Part II): 766-782.

However, there are contentions about the validity of these plates. Writing 90 years after these plates were chanced upon, Padmanath argued that the background of the plates were shrouded

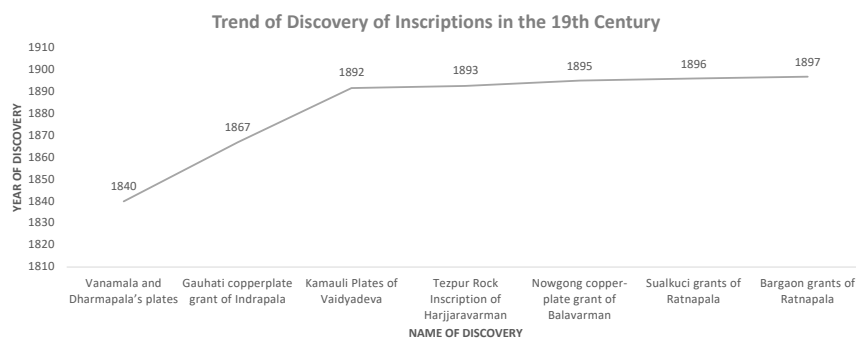
⁷⁶ The ambiguous reference to ‘a Pundit’ most likely denotes Pundit Saroda Prosad Chuckerbutty, whose translation is appended in a separate note in the same paper. Ibid, 772.

⁷⁷ The topic of boundary as represented in pre-Ahom Kamarupa inscriptions has been taken up with great zeal by several scholars in recent times. Of note among them is B. D. Chattopadhyay’s pioneering study on boundary demarcation as an indicator of the physical landscape of a particular place and its relation to human factors. For papers on specific study on Kamarupa vis-à-vis boundary demarcation vide Chattopadhyay, Brajadulal, Suchandra Ghosh, and Bishnupriya Basak. 2017. *Inscriptions and agrarian issues in Indian history: essays in memory of D.C. Sircar*. Kolkata: The Asiatic Society.

in obscurity as the plates were lost and could no longer be studied. Whether the Dharmapala of the said plates belonged to the Pala dynasty of Kamarupa is also called into question by Padmanath. He further argued that these plates had been issued by Ratnapala and a misreading of the name might be owed to the want of an expert to decipher the plate accurately at that point of time.⁷⁸

The beginnings made by Jenkins was not followed up for several decades subsequently.⁷⁹ In about 1863, however, 11th century Pala ruler Indrapala's Gauhati plates were discovered by locals of village Bar Panara, Mauza Pati Darrang, District Kamrup. But it would be handed to eminent epigraphist Rudolf Hoernle by E. A. Gait only late in the 19th century, in 1893. The closing decade of the century would be quite eventful in terms of epigraphic discovery and study, facilitated a great deal by Edward Gait as a colonial administrator in the Assam valley.

Figure 5: Trend showing the discovery of copper plates in the 19th century



⁷⁸ Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1931-32. "Kamarupa-rajavali" in *Kamarupashasanavalee*, Calcutta: Rangpur Sahitya Parishad.

⁷⁹ The next four decades following Jenkins' discovery remain a complete blank in terms of discovery and study of copper-plates from Assam. This creates one of the most puzzling problems from the 40s till the early 90s of the 19th century – a surprising absence of study and discovery of inscriptions from the region. It seems during these following decades epigraphic studies remained marginal to British interest. Lahiri, Nayanjyot. 1991. *Pre-Ahom Assam: Studies in the Inscriptions of Assam between the Fifth and the Thirteenth Centuries AD*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

Source: Data compiled referring to Sharma, Mukunda Madhava. 1978. *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*. Gauhati: Department of Publication.

Gait and Assam's Ancient Past: New Directions

Gait is an important figure in modern Assam's search for its ancient antiquity. Gait, the future Lieutenant Governor of the Bihar and Orissa, arrived in Assam as Extra Assistant Commissioner at Mangaldai, Darrang in the 1890s. Gait held various important offices within the Eastern region. Some of the crucial positions held by him, especially linked to his historical pursuit, were Census Superintendent in Bengal, and importantly the Director of the department of Land Record and Agriculture and the department of Ethnography in Assam.

While in Mangaldai, Gait took interest in studying and publishing Darrang royal genealogy. That was his first attempt at the search for Kamarupa.⁸⁰ Eventually, Gait's *Report* in 1897 is often taken as the entry point or advent of modern historical method in Assam. It is an official document sifting through and drawing out the 'reliable' sources of Assam's history.⁸¹ This report of not more than 26 pages was momentous on various counts. The pioneering *Report* had a particular focus on written records. Alongside manuscript texts, epigraphic evidences too became a prominent feature of Gait's report and thereby for constructing a modern, 'scientific' history of ancient Kamarupa. What did it have in store for Assam and its history? And what did this 'scientific' method mean or comprise? To begin with, a lot of this

⁸⁰ Gait, E. A. 1893. "The Koch Kings of Kamarupa." *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* LXII (4): 268-308; Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2008. "Gait's Way: Writing History in Early 20th Century Assam." In *History in the Vernacular*, edited by Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee, 142-171. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

⁸¹ Gait, E. A. 1897. *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam*. Shillong: Superintendent of Assam Secretariat.

‘scientific’ method comprised tabulations – classification and catalogue of an untapped storehouse. However, for the history of Assam, Gait’s initiative proved far-reaching. Firstly, this report was focused not just on Brahmaputra valley but subsumed Manipur, Jaintia, Koch, Tippera as well as Persianate material-cultural remains. Gait’s observations in the *Report*, especially with regard to inscriptions were groundbreaking.

In his *Report*, Gait recorded about 50 inscriptions of which approximately 10 were from pre-Ahom era i.e. belonging to Bhauma-Varman to Pala periods. In supplying these details, Gait classified the inscriptions according to date, provenance, ruler etc. The inscriptions recorded were both rock and copper plate inscriptions, and while not the Kamarupa era inscriptions but some later inscriptions included grants from women donors alongside a predominance of male. The finding of inscriptions on mediums such as canon, conch shell, stamped bricks also formed a brief but useful part of the *Report*. Gait described inscriptions as a separate class of evidence as compared to ‘historical texts’⁸² These epigraphic evidences illuminated many details about local dynasties. Part of these details would be found and corroborated through other historical sources such as bardic traditions. The languages used in these epigraphic remains were mainly Ahom and Sanskrit and characters would be mainly Devnagari, with occasional use of Bengali.

The intervening period prior to the publication of the *Report*, Gait made regular contributions in the pages of the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (JASB)*.⁸³ As could also be seen in

⁸² That is to say, the author discusses the epigraphic remains under two headings, viz., Coins and Inscriptions. All the manuscripts or *puthis* are classed as ‘historical writings’. Ibid, 1-2.

⁸³ Examples are: Gait, "The Koch Kings of Kamarupa.", 268-308; Gait, E. A. 1895. "Abstract of the Contents of one of the Ahom Puthis." *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* LXIII (Nos. I - IV): 108-111; Gait, E. A. 1895. "Historical Research in Assam." *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 98-108.

the *Report* itself, he constantly referred to essays published in the journal.⁸⁴ Most of his writings in the JASB and in form of the *Report*, and later the *History* appeared mainly during the 1890s and the turn of the 20th century. An 1894 article published in the journal presented one of the earliest accounts of the search for an Ahom manuscript in Assam.⁸⁵ Here, Gait briefly recounted a mythological tale from a manuscript, connected to worship of Hindu deities in the region. He also provided brief details of the origins of the Ahom language and their assimilation into the Hindu tradition. This essay seemed to be an outcome of Gait's initial search for historical documents in the region. Similarly, his abiding interest in historical documents from the region was reflected in another earlier article.⁸⁶ It is one of the earliest historical accounts delving into the early history of Kamarupa and based on textual sources such as the epics, *Bhagavata* and *Kalika Puran*, *Yogini Tantra*, accounts of Chinese travellers and Assamese *Buranjis*. Much of these came to be critiqued by Padmanath in the early part of the 20th century.⁸⁷

Gait's *A History of Assam* was a culmination of his decades-long engagement with Assam as an administrator, and as Padmanath asserted, it was not free from its share of blemishes and problems. Gait's treatment of the early period, i.e. the Kamarupa kingdom, was quite linear and cursory, and in a sense it enumerated the succession of various kings and ruling families. Gait's choice of sources for the early historic kingdoms of Kamarupa was predominantly epigraphic. While material and literary evidences for the said period kept coming to light,

⁸⁴ Citations in the report show a predominance of Asiatic Society Journals and proceedings. Such as Vols. IX part II, 1894; LXII, part I; LXIII, part I, (1894); July 1895, part I; Proceedings of May 1895. Gait, *Report on the Progress of Historical Research*, 1-26.

⁸⁵ Gait, "Abstract of the Contents", 108-111.

⁸⁶ Gait, "The Koch Kings of Kamarupa.", 268-308.

⁸⁷ Vidyavinode, Padmanath Bhattacharya. 1908. "Mr. Gait's History of Assam, a critical study." *The Hindustan Review* 1-22.

Gait's engagement with such new sources appeared to be of little depth. While Gait's professed aim for writing the *History* might have been to fill the gap in historical knowledge on the region, the broader purpose of the book aligned with the key objective of British administrative comprehension. Gait's book served as a kind of imperial ethnography – providing information on the political and dynastic past, social structure, and ethnic composition of the province. The dynastic narrative of Assam's past further sought to produce an account endowing colonialism with natural legitimacy. These are echoed in Padmanth's critique where he questions marginalization of Kamarupa and privileging Ahom rule, his limitations in knowledge of Sanskrit and thereby textual traditions of Kalika Puran and Yogini Tantra and for reproducing orientalist assumptions about Indian society.

Gait's references were also difficult to locate. One instance was quoted in Padmanath's review where Gait referred to Pemberton but failed to cite any particular source as to the argument.⁸⁸ Further examples would be,

“But, Dr. N. K. Bhattashali is of the opinion... that Pushyavarman was a contemporary of Chandragupta I and named his son and daughter-in-law after the son and daughter-in-law of his friend, namely Chandragupta I. Hence, Bhattashali placed Pushyavarman in the early part of the 4th c. AD.”⁸⁹

It is difficult to immediately situate the source of the excerpt or Bhattashali's inference here. Another example would be,

⁸⁸ Vidyavinode, “Mr. Gait's History of Assam”, 2; Gait, E. A. 1926. *A History of Assam*. Calcutta and Simla: Thacker, Spink & Co. 8.

⁸⁹ Gait, *A History of Assam* (1926), 23.

“According to an inscription, “When kings of the Naraka family, having enjoyed the position of rulers for three thousand years, had all attained the condition of gods, Pushyavarman became the Lord of the world.”⁹⁰

Again, it is not clear from which exact inscription the excerpt was quoted from.⁹¹ That is, it has not been mentioned what the name or findspot of the inscription was. Further, the thousand-year rule of the Naraka family too comes under scrutiny by a section of modern historians.⁹²

Nevertheless, Gait drew attention to facts, hitherto unnoticed and thereby opened up new spaces for enquiries into Kamarupa. For example, Gait’s notice of Bhaskarvarman and in relation, the historic visit of Xuanxang to his court are considered seminal. But, the current chapter questions this credit attributed to Gait and argues that he was rather following a template within broader specifications of antiquarian explorations done by a range of others, such as, Cunningham.⁹³ However, his work is often s often hallowed for its use of inscriptions

⁹⁰ Ibid, 22-23.

⁹¹ In this regard, it can be said that a lot of Gait’s approaches are situated in the Cunningham era, but Gait differed greatly from Cunningham’s framework. The latter would be unsparing in his records and descriptions. That is, if the example of inscription is taken, Cunningham, although descriptive in approach like Gait, would not perhaps leave out thorough details of a potentially crucial inscription. Ibid., Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 77-134.

⁹² While the division of periods in Indian history as introduced most famously by James Mill is subject of an ongoing debate, the periodization of the region is further debated for its distinctive characteristics within India. Almost all modern historians who have studied the ancient past of the subcontinent critique this colonialist tendency of painting with a broad brush histories spanning millennia. Various writings by D. D. Kosambi and Romila Thapar are the most notable references in this regard. Thapar, Romila. 1982. "Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History." *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* (Research Foundation of State University of New York for and on behalf of the Fernand Braudel Center) 5 (3): 389-411.

⁹³ While evidences on Bhaskarvarman are not Gait’s discovery, it is Padmanath; neither is a preoccupation with foreign accounts, especially the Chinese, of early India. A search following Xuanxang’s route, is Alexander Cunningham’s brainchild. Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 28.

as a compelling source for the early history of Kamarupa. The author listed close to 20 inscriptions connected to early Kamarupa, which was supposed to be quite substantial in revolutionizing the popular consciousness surrounding the region's antiquity.⁹⁴ However, one can find Gait's engagement with them to be rather perfunctory, dynastic and descriptive than interpretive. This critique is a reiteration of the ones by scholars such as Hoernle and Padmanath. This question gains weightage as one thinks about 19th century historical tradition in Europe.⁹⁵ In view of this, one is led to rethink and reformulate whether or not Gait's approach can be considered entirely historical, in the modern sense of the term.

Padmanath, in his review, repeatedly termed Gait's approach as 'antiquarian'. Now let us try to dissect Padmanath's view of Gait. Padmanath found Gait's views on caste,⁹⁶ his appreciation of the local genealogies among other things questionable. Similarly, Gait's views on the religions practised within the province were also found by him to be based on a flimsy understanding. He sharply pointed out the colonial practice of vilifying the cultural other based on an unsound selection of evidence. Padmanath further criticized Gait's observations about the name of the region, which the latter claimed to be Pragjyotisha.⁹⁷ He found Gait's conclusions ill-informed.

⁹⁴ Given especially the amount of work done on them by Padmanath and data generated by reading these inscriptions. Gait's use and engagement, despite the availability of sufficient information on them, is rather cursory. Gait, *A History of Assam* (1926), 22-35.

⁹⁵ Although the broader frame of Gait's *History* is imperialist but one also feels inclined to question whether it is also to be considered within a Utilitarian paradigm of James Mill, Rankean positivism or a part of Indological discourse? Padmanath in his critique of Gait's history describes him as an 'antiquarian', due specifically to the nature of his assumptions. Vidyavinode, "Mr. Gait's History of Assam", 1-2.

⁹⁶ A subject Gait had close association with linked to his census duties. Further, Herbert Risley, a pioneer in colonial ethnographic studies in India was Gait's immediate senior at work.

⁹⁷ This concern of Padmanath's is also reflected in one of Gait's articles in JASB, namely 'The Koch Kings of Kamarupa' where he discusses 'Origin of name "Kamarupa"' in one paragraph. And it's difficult to ascertain the

“Mr. Gait has given a clever interpretation of the name Pragjyotisha... An *antiquarian* (my emphasis) is more naturally led to interpret this city as ‘the city of eastern astrology’ than to accept the orthodox naming as given in the Kalika Puran.”⁹⁸

Here, it is crucial to note that Padmanath assigns Gait the designation of an antiquarian rather than historian. Padmanath had doubts on the foundational merits of Gait’s interpretation. These were some serious pitfalls that had been overlooked in Gait’s history for a long time.

Writing in the opening decade of the 20th century Padmanath pointed out another very contentious aspect of Gait’s scholarship, an appropriate conceptualization of which is only of recent development viz. ‘disinterested colonial scholarship’.⁹⁹ Gait’s work could be treated as an instance of this category. Gait’s engagements in terms of the census, ethnography, antiquities had no doubt been extensive, but they were performed as an adjunct to his official duties as a colonial administrator. In fact, Gait himself acknowledged the fact that his work was a product of his official assignments. He writes,

“Most of the materials for the present work were collected while I was serving in Assam, but I had no leisure at that time to devote to the critical examination or to the compilation of a continuous narrative... The book has been printed since my return to India, at a time when heavy official duties have left me but

source from which he was building the assumption. The same concern in Gait’s narrative has been shown by various modern scholars as well. Vidyavinode, “Mr. Gait’s History of Assam”, 1-22.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁹⁹ Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*. 338.

little leisure to devote to the revision of the proof sheets, or to the further consideration of the conclusions arrived at.”¹⁰⁰

If one reads Gait’s above acknowledgement correctly, one can understand that his writings were secondary and cursory as compared to his more pressing official duties. Gait’s discussion on the history of Sylhet and his engagement with Nidhanpur plates, have been met with criticism from Padmanath and later scholars who have disqualified them as injudicious and erroneous.

In recent times, historians on Assam have delved exclusively into Gait’s *History*. These scholars unanimously arrive at a few crucial contradictions inherent in Gait’s scholarship, especially in his *History*. The presence of a convenient binary, viz. Hindu civilization in relation to the tribes, is a defining aspect, omnipresent in Gait’s account.¹⁰¹ A resultant juxtaposition of opposites such as Bodo/ Sanskrit, Folklore/ Puranas, Aryans/ Mongolians are writ large in the official history of the region.¹⁰² Often the contrapuntal ‘inversions’, such as Bodo primacy over Sanskrit corruption, are viewed as groundbreaking elements in Gait’s history. However, what is held in general consensus about Gait’s History is its pioneering use of sources. Yet, even that is not without its inherent seams, as Baruah writes, ‘While the Sanskritic legends and myths, inscriptional, numismatic, and archaeological sources were used to construct the early history of Assam till approximately the twelfth century AD, the Buranji chronicles, the genealogical narratives, the neo-Vaishnava literature and the Persian

¹⁰⁰ Gait, *A History of Assam* (1926), xii.

¹⁰¹ Baruah, Manjeet. 2016. "At the frontier of imperial history: revisiting Edward Gait's A History of Assam." *Asian Ethnicity* 1-18.

¹⁰² Kar, Bodhisattva. 2007. "Framing Assam: Plantation Capital, Metropolitan Knowledge and a Regime of Identities 1790s-1930s". Doctoral Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

records comprised his major types of sources to construct the history from the thirteenth century onwards till the coming of the British'.¹⁰³

It will be useful for a modern reader or a researcher or student to know the principle underlying such shuffling of sources. A further statement instantiates an untenable use of sources in Gait's account. Baruah mentions, 'Gait began his third chapter ('Events of Thirteenth to Fifteenth Century: Excluding Ahom History') using Persian sources such as *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* or *Alamgirnamah*. But very soon he wrote, "The scanty accounts of these expeditions throw very little light on the internal condition of the country east of the Karatoya".¹⁰⁴

With regard to the gaps in Gait's account, few crucial questions come up. Although the professed mode of Gait's investigation was 'scientific', what actually transpired was rather political. To a considerable extent, legitimizing British rule as a logical succession of Ahom state seemed to guide a lot of Gait's objective for the study. Thus, a consequent back and forth is observed between the state chronicles or *Buranjis* and various other sources sporadically and according to convenience of the author. Further, for the study to have been objective the context of the sources could not possibly be disregarded by Gait, a line of thought echoed by Padmanath in his *Critique*.

It is often reminded that the conservation imperative originally guided Gait's appointment and search for historical manuscripts or *puthis* in the region.¹⁰⁵ Reference to C. J. Lyall's official direction might be relevant and useful in this regard,

¹⁰³ Baruah, "At the frontier of imperial history", 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 4.

¹⁰⁵ Gait, *Report on the Progress of Historical Research*, 1-26.

“...the time had come for a sustained and systematic endeavour to arrest the process of destruction of such historical manuscripts as still survived in the province...he was of opinion that the first and most important work to be done was to catalogue and rescue from oblivion the historical records of Assam.”¹⁰⁶

The beginning of modern history writing in Assam as inspired by Gait was inextricably tied to an ethnographic approach. This was unequivocally pointed out in the circular that resulted in Gait's historical survey dated 6th September 1894.¹⁰⁷ This less highlighted aspect of Gait's research calls for elaboration. This official initiative directed by Charles Lyall resulted in the creation of the Department of Ethnography in 1894 – a trailblazing new department that later transformed into the Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Research in Assam. This department still stands tall and remains unparalleled in the subcontinent. In this light, it is a reminder of the famous Indologist's relevance in the study of the history of Assam to this day. Two aspects of Gait's search are notable – an ethnographic rooting of the initial studies, and Gait's scholarship in Indology.

Gait's classification of all six categories of historical evidences from the region resulted, in logical succession, in the production of his 'magnum opus' as a historical work based on modern method. However, few persistent points of contention remained, firstly the sweeping treatment of long historical span of Assam by Gait in his book. It needs questioning how Gait justified his treatment of the long early historical span preceding the Ahom inroads, with the use of mythological, 'Muhammadan' and architectural sources. Secondly, the author's

¹⁰⁶ Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Government of Assam 'Circular: Historical Research in Assam, Shillong, 11th October 1894', in *Ethnographical Research in Assam*, Commissioner's Office Proceedings, No. 36 General and Misc 1894, ASA.

¹⁰⁷ E. A. Gait, Director, Department of Land Records and Agriculture, Assam 'No. 4302, dated Shillong, 29th September 1894', in *Ethnographical Research in Assam*, Commissioner's Office Proceedings, No. 36 General and Misc 1894, ASA.

convenient shuffling between these sources are received by the historians with an underlying hint of concern. Also, what rendered 'Muhammadan' sources more reliable and authentic? Such questions were brought to the fore. Further, Gait's ethnographic productions vis-à-vis his ideas surrounding the languages, caste and physical features of the people of Assam are repeatedly put under the microscope.¹⁰⁸

Gait's use of *buranji*, as a historical source and as a document of local origin, and his presentation of a unique periodization of the region's history as compared to the rest of the subcontinent created a major break with the colonial historiography at that time. Despite the merit, what remains at issue is Gait's fragmentary treatment of a time-span, that he described with a broad brush of pre-Ahom, as reflected in his rather unsystematic use of a motley assortment of sources.

The Search for Ancient Kamarupa

By the early 20th century, the political idea of the ancient Kamarupa emerged as a reality, now pieced together by seasoned historians and administrators. This new 'discovery' of Kamarupa began with the arrival of the British in the region, taken up thereafter by the Assamese and Bengali scholars such as Padmanath and others. Discovery also denotes adding knowledge to the recovered structures and artefacts that were unknown earlier.¹⁰⁹ How then Kamarupa was discovered and to what end, have been the main concerns of the chapter.

¹⁰⁸ Saikia, "Gait's Way: Writing History in Early 20th Century Assam", 142-171.

¹⁰⁹ El-Haj, Nadia Abu. 2001. *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago.

As told earlier, the modern search for the region's ancient past emerged in the context of war, the Anglo-Burmese War to be more specific.¹¹⁰ Even the earliest sporadic visits by Europeans were largely in the context of a civil war, namely Moamoria.¹¹¹ Further back in past, the first visit by Glanius, a conscripted sailor and translator of Frans Heiden's sensational narrative of his journey into Northeast India, was in the context of Mughal invasion (1662-63) of Assam.¹¹² But visits also at the same time happened in the context of trade and commerce, as in the case of Chevalier and the emergence of the Survey of India, with Francis Hamilton in Assam.¹¹³

These early visitors into the region were constantly engaged in generating as much information, especially on the geography and administration of the region, as possible. The enriching outcome of this process was numerous maps and travelogues.¹¹⁴ This was the beginning of what would culminate in Gait's search. Gait's history was not merely an academic exercise but deeply embedded in the logics of colonial governance and control. Compared to that, Jenkins' finding, as referred above was incidental in connection with revenue enquiry, but marks a foundational moment in the discovery of Kamarupa. It has been observed that while sources were a defining factor and strong point in Gait's study they are also ironically its weakness. If one is to correctly assess the nature of Gait's involvement or contribution to the discovery of Kamarupa, it is to be understood in terms of sources and his

¹¹⁰ Zou, "Picturing a Region: A Geographical History", 89-109; Saikia, *The Unquiet River: a biography*, 218.

¹¹¹ Welsh, "Welsh's Report on Assam 1794", 377-394.

¹¹² Sarkar, Jadunath. 1928. *History of Aurangzib (mainly based on Persian sources)*. Vol. III. Calcutta: S. C. Sarkar & Sons Ltd.

¹¹³ Chevalier, *Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India*, Preface; Hamilton, *An Account of Assam With some notices*, 3-13.

¹¹⁴ A few classic references for the earliest survey, reconnaissance and maps produced are to be found in Wilcox, "Memoir of a Survey of Assam" in *Selection of Papers*, 1-82; Phillimore, *Historical Records of the Survey of India*, 49-66.

modernist approach to it. As has been attempted to drive home in the discussion above, Gait was an administrator with official backing enabling avid collection of textual and material remains on the recent and remote pasts of the region. The result of which was the *Report*. But the current research finds Gait's *History* as an undigested report of the *Report*. That is, by the time the second edition of Gait's *History* is published in 1926, extensive amount of research and data had already been generated on the sources collected and catalogued by Gait. Gait's *History* however, may be found to be desultory in its engagement with these sources at times, especially for the pre-13th century epoch.

Having said that, it is also to be understood that the foregoing fact does not alter or diminish the importance of contributions like Gait's. If one is to situate Gait's works, it is to be done within the rubric of the project of making India more knowable to the British and to an end of upholding the colonial political reality. However, a lot of their assumptions or findings later came to be challenged, refuted and even debunked. But the intellectual stirring or stimulation it caused was pioneering and momentous. As one of the sections above suggests, it, in fact, ushered in a new perspective, a new mode of thought. Foundation of departments such as that of Ethnography in the region, provided institutional footing and platform to many individual queries, that had hitherto remained haphazard.

A simple and obvious context of all Gait's writings is indeed administrative, as have been repeatedly argued in this chapter. Then is it not an administrative endeavor that actually led scholars like Padmanath to engage and rectify some critical historical errs? An evidence of this is the 'Assam as a Field of Research' by J. P. Mills.¹¹⁵ An excerpt that has preoccupied scholars from the northeast for the longest time is worth quoting in this regard,

¹¹⁵ Mills, J. P. 1933. "Assam as a field for research." *Journal of the Assam Research Society* 1 (1): 4-10.

“It is time to turn for a moment to dumb records. The spade, the chief tool of the archaeologist, has hardly been used in research in Assam.”¹¹⁶

While there may be some truth in this argument, such hasty assumptions are always open to dismantling. For example, in Chapter 4 it has been delved in detail that rather than spade the conservation efforts, the immediate imperative of the early 20th century necessitated scientific exploration of the recovered monuments and artefacts. A few further remarks in support of disinterested writing may be presented from the same article, for example,

“Fortunately, excavation in Assam is not as complicated as it is in the Middle East. There is no evidence here of the building of successive towns on the same sites throughout the ages.”¹¹⁷

or,

“Nor is there any evidence that potsherds, far the most valuable archaeological evidence in any parts of the world, will tell us anything here.

¹¹⁶ Mills, “Assam as a field for research”, 4.

¹¹⁷ This statement can immediately be refuted by the example of Ambari site, came to light only a couple of decades later. The site in Dighali Pukuri of modern Guwahati city presents vestiges at various levels of occupation starting from the Neolithic phase, through early historical periods, so termed Sunga-Kushan, of early centuries CE up to more recent times from the 12th to 17th c. CE. Most certainly, Mills would not know writing a few decades earlier, and a lot of findings from Ambari are as recent as 2008-09. But the certainty with which he delivers the verdict, is problematic. Ibid, 4; Dutta, H. N., ed. 2006. *Ambari Archaeological Site: and interim report*. Guwahati: Directorate of Archaeology Assam.; Dhavalikar, M. K. 1970-71/71-72. “Archaeology of Gauhati.” *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute* 31/32 (1/2): 137-149.; Hazarika, Manjil. 2008. “Archaeological Research in North-East India: A Critical Review.” *Journal of Historical Research: An Annual Publication of the Department of History Dibrugarh University* XVI: 1-14.

It is probable that pottery in Assam has always been plain and uniform, with no distinctive types belonging to different periods.”¹¹⁸

Extensive research has been and continues to be carried out on pottery such as buff colored Kaolin, Arretine, celadon, green glazed potteries and number of other variances.¹¹⁹ Padmanath’s critique provided a useful intervention into debunking many of the assumptions that informed the colonialist approach to Assam’s history at that time.

Precolonial Historiographic Discourses and the Early 20th Century Intellectuals

While speaking of a rationalist historical approach in relation to Assam, discussion on *Buranji*, even if briefly, becomes indispensable. According to Gait, operating within a circle of Indologists, the textbook definition of *Buranji* is as follows,

“...Buranji is one of the very few Assamese words which are derived from the Ahom. The literal meaning is “a store that teaches the ignorant”. (but “ignorant persons”, ran “teach” and ji, “granary”)¹²⁰

However, *Buranji* is variously understood as Ahom court chronicles, ‘authentic’ historical document produced by a monarchical order as well as ‘a set of vernacular historical literature’.¹²¹ It was Gait who treated them as valid sources for writing a scientific history of Assam. These chronicles were produced by the Ahom monarchy for a relatively long period of time spanning six centuries. Originally these *Buranji puthis* would be written on the strips

¹¹⁸ Mills, “Assam as a field for research”, 4.

¹¹⁹ Simply excavation at Ambari has revealed a preponderance of potteries. Vide Chapter 4, 36.

¹²⁰ Gait, *A History of Assam* (1926), x.

¹²¹ Saikia, “Gait’s Way: Writing History in Early 20th Century Assam.”, 143.

of the bark of *Saci* tree.¹²² The first turn to changing historical sensibilities emerging out of an interaction with the British EIC in Calcutta, resulted in experiments with and modernization of these chronicles. Foremost in this endeavor were a handful of families holding important offices in Ahom monarchy. The Dhekial Phukans were the most prominent among them. While Anandaram is considered the first from the region to embark on a 'secular pilgrimage'¹²³ to Bengal, other men, namely Haliram, Gunabhiram and others left mark of no mean measure in the intellectual milieu of modern Assam. These early writers variously called 'gentry', 'new colonial elites' etc. represented a transitional phase in the formation of modern disciplinary approach to history. While Gait, Padmanath, Kanaklal and the likes were keener on looking at the epigraphic evidences, the beginning of the search for the political and cultural lineage of the ancient Assam is marked by a focus on textual historical tradition preserved in *Buranji* writing.

To draw a comparison in the context of inscriptions, the owners of the inscriptions or even its avant-garde interpreters like Padmanath were never commended as much as the *Buranji* contributors in the region. Furthermore, the Brahman owners of the inscriptions, who held important positions in the Ahom cultural sphere never found a place in colonial writings. Similarly, a historian of Padmanath's stature, as the region's foremost epigraphist, remained on the margins of such a crucial discourse surrounding modern Assam. While these questions are addressed or rather intensified throughout this chapter, the current section chooses to focus briefly on a few developments that are located at the interstices of the Ahom order and that of the British.

¹²² Gait, *A History of Assam* (1926), 1-21.

¹²³ As referred to Benedict Anderson by Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, Introduction.

The American Baptist missionaries in Assam launched its first periodical, *Orunodoi* in 1846 from Sibsagar Baptist Mission Press.¹²⁴ One of its prominent and early contributors was Haliram Dhekial Phukan. A Dravidian Brahmin by the name of Lakshminarayan had fostered a close relationship with the Ahoms and was placed in charge of customs duties at the Hadirachoki checkpost, Goalpara. His family became a very prominent one in the Brahmaputra Valley. Haliram was the son of Lakshminarayan's foster son Parashuram, most prominent of Lakshminarayan's six children. After Parashuram, Haliram assumed his father's mantle at the checkpost. This was the only trade route connecting Bengal with Assam. Needless to say, this strategic role exposed the family to a lot of first-hand interaction with adjacent territories. As an abiding necessity of their role, both Parashuram and his progeny Haliram became natural polyglots, speaking all important official languages such as English, Persian, Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali and Assamese. Haliram's experimental use of languages such as Assamese, Sanskrit and Bengali in his seminal writings *Assam Buranji* and *Kamarupa Yatra Padhhati* is a result of his family and occupational exposure. So much so that it started receiving accolades of Bengal intelligentsia in no time.

“Only seven years have elapsed since the occupation of Assam by the English. It has amazed us to observe that the well-educated gentlemen of the country have become so much successful in the pursuit of knowledge in such a short period of time, it's worthy of praise. The more engrossed they are in such initiative the more satisfied it will make us.”¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Brown, Nathan, ed. 1983. *The Orunodoi (1846-1854)*. Vols. I-IX. Gauhati: Publication Board Assam.

¹²⁵ *Samachardarpan (News Mirror)*. 1831. "Assam Deshe Jnan Briddhi (Increasing Knowledge in Assam)" July 30. In Phukan, Haliram Dhekial. 1962. *Assam Buranji*. Gauhati: Mokshada Pustakalay, 9.

The *Buranji* and the *Yatra Padhhati* present the best chronicles of 19th century Assam. *Jatra Padhhati* was penned by Haliram to facilitate pilgrimage to Kamarupa, one of the most prominent religious sites of the Subcontinent; while his *Buranji* (1829), presents a complete chronicle of the history of Assam, beginning from the mythical line of Naraka to the advent of British Raj.¹²⁶ Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan's work found place in the contemporary practice of history writing in Bengali published largely from Serampore.¹²⁷ Most of such works were translation of earlier English and Sanskrit works. Haliram's stood out as the first original contribution.

“The only independent writing [i.e. not a translation] on the subject of history at the time was Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan's Assam Buranji. The author has particular flair for Bengali language. The compositional style of the book is astounding for the time in question.”¹²⁸

Another prominent member of Haliram's family, namely Rai Bahadur Gunabhiram Barua composed the modern *Assam Buranji*, representative of the transitional phase in the region's history writing.¹²⁹ Gunabhiram's account, especially a more limited treatment of Kamarupa, is based largely on puranic tales, local traditions, hearsay, legends and so on. However, Barua presents information contained in these sources without any objective sifting, as the 19th century Orientalist tradition of enquiry based on 'concrete evidence' was yet to make its way

¹²⁶ Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Introduction.

¹²⁷ *Sadgun o Birer Itihash (History of Virtuosity and Valence)* (1829), *Moral Tales of History* (1819) by Capt. Stuart, Rajabali (Royal Genealogy) (1808) by Mrityunjay Bidyalonkar &c. in Ibid, Introduction.

¹²⁸ Comment by Bengali linguist and historian of literature Sh. Sukumar Sen in Bengali. Translation, self. Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, 15.

¹²⁹ Barua, Gunaviram. 1884. *Assam Buranji*. Calcutta: New Arya Press;

to Assam. Yet, the author refers to Xuanxang's account to describe Bhaskarvarman's rule.¹³⁰ Further, the division of *Pithas* (traditional Hindu religious sites) was later appropriated within Indological discourse of the region.¹³¹ It was *Assam Buranji* that dispelled all of wrong notions and disinformation previously held about the place.

According to him ancient Kamarupa was a holy and celebrated place following the legend of Siva's consort Sati. Mahiranga Danava¹³² was its earliest ruler with four more rulers from the same family. Following the Danava family Naraka became the king. The Narakasur hilltop in Guwahati was named after this ancient king of Kamarupa. Naraka displayed tendencies opposed to God and of enmity. That is the reason he was slain and his son Bhagadatta was nominated to the throne. In Gunabhiram's time records of subsequent rulers such as Bhauma-Varman, Salastambha were not yet retrieved, therefore Gunabhiram regarded Bhagadatta as the king who united the entire Kamarupa region. Kamarupa included Shonitpur (Tezpur), Koundilya (Sadiya), Hirhombo (Cachar), Manipur; Karatoya river on the west, parts of Rangpur, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri as well as some parts of Mymensingh and Sylhet. Further, according to Gunabhiram though Kamarupa represented a different and glorious time, not much could be obtained about it due mainly to a paucity of sources. Barua's approach reflects the epistemological tensions of his time. His account of Bhagadatta and Kamarupa's territorial expanse reveals both a vernacular pride and a reliance on pre-colonial memory systems in the absence of formal archaeological or epigraphic data.¹³³

¹³⁰ Xuanxang's account became a foremost source for history writing within 19th century antiquarian tradition. Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 28.

¹³¹ Gunabhiram describes ancient Kamarupa as comprising four geographic divisions viz., Kama-pitha, Ratna-pitha, Suvarna-pitha and Saumara-pitha. Barua, *Assam Buranji*, 16-17.

¹³² *Danava* literally means monster. By *Danava* what is implied is cruel and uncivilized.

¹³³ Barua, *Assam Buranji*, 11-61.

Gunabhiram Barua was a prominent figure in the later 19th century revival of the Assamese language and literature centred in Nowgong. Barua discovered the literary talent of Hemchandra Goswami early on while the latter was residing in Nowgong at a relative's place to complete his school education. Goswami, a later nationalist historian, further advanced this tradition. His scholarship bridged Puranic references, antiquarian recovery, and philological analysis. Goswami's role in collecting manuscripts, inscriptions, and relics across Kamarupa was pivotal. As a founding member of the KAS, he positioned historical recovery as both an intellectual and nationalist pursuit. He read papers on the antiquities of Kamakhya at Bangiya Sahityanushilani Sabha, a precursor of the KAS.¹³⁴ His affiliations with figures such as P.R.T. Gurdon, K.N. Dikshit, and D.R. Bhandarkar situate him at the intersection of indigenous scholarship and emerging archaeological science.¹³⁵ Hemchandra Goswami was unstinted in his labour to collect and preserve the manuscripts besides numerous inscriptions and archaeological relics scattered across the historic region of Kamarupa. These formed crucial raw materials for constructive and scientific criticism. Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode and Kanaklal Barua would later build on the endeavours of Hemchandra Goswami, in their efforts to reconstruct the history of Kamarupa. Goswami's contributions exemplify how memory traditions – ritual, oral, textual – were not simply preserved but actively reinterpreted as tools of cultural assertion in colonial Assam.

Imperial institutions and practices favoured epigraphy, reports, textual documents, and museums as sources or repositories supplying reliable information on Assam's past. Gait, who in his *Report* (1897), classified the Ahom puthis as parts of folklore and mythology, did not

¹³⁴ Goswami, Hemchandra. 1918. "Kamakhya Mandir." *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Patrika* 25 (2): 77-83.

¹³⁵ Goswami, D., and S. Katak. 1931. *Swargiyo Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Likhito aru Sampadita Grantha aru Prabandhabalir Talika (A Bibliography of the Work of Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Compiled under the Auspices of Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti)*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti.

record oral traditions prior to the Ahom era.¹³⁶ Precolonial texts of religious and historical purport, namely the *Charit puthis* and the *Buranji puthis* were viewed for its great possibility as historical sources. Colonial historians like Edward Gait, Charles Lyall were operating within a text-centric framework of European historiography.¹³⁷ They considered written documents as the most legible, verifiable and authentic historical sources – in contrast to local, unwritten traditions, which they often dismissed as ‘fabulous and uncertain’.¹³⁸ *Buranjis*, court chronicles written in Assamese or Tai-Ahom, offered chronological accounts of events, treaties, wars, diplomacy – all of which resembled the kinds of annals and royal records European historians were trained to read. Pre-colonial hagiographies (*Carit Puthis*, *Darrang Rajvamsavali*) appeared to provide genealogical and narrative continuity. This was critical to tracing dynastic legitimacy, which was central to both colonial and indigenous conceptions of political order. In short, these texts fit the colonial format of ‘useful history’ – chronological, elite-centric, and intelligible to the European eye.¹³⁹ Authors like Lyall and Gait were influenced by the Orientalist project – they believed it was their role to rescue or reconstruct the histories of ‘oriental’ societies that had supposedly fallen into decay or forgotten their pasts. This ‘rescue mission’ was never neutral – it allowed colonial officials to claim civilizing authority, epistemic control over the subcontinent, legitimacy in reshaping or administering these societies.¹⁴⁰ By privileging the *Buranjis* and royal genealogies, they could claim the preserving and interpretive authority over India’s past, that its own inhabitants have gotten

¹³⁶ Gait, *Report on the Progress of Historical Research*, 1-26.

¹³⁷ Among others, Bernard S. Cohn underscores the centrality of the collection of facts through texts to the colonial imperial project. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 3-15; Other scholars include Michael S. Dodson, Nicholas B. Dirks and Sheldon Pollock, who have traced the deeply textual process of colonial knowledge production.

¹³⁸ William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, 146

¹³⁹ Dirks, Nicholas B. 2006. *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

¹⁴⁰ Said, Edward. 2003. *Orientalism*. New York: Penguin Books.

oblivious to. Colonial historians were operating in the same intellectual milieu as European historians like Leopold von Ranke, who shaped the 19th-century ideals of objective, document-based, empirically verifiable history; focus on state, diplomacy, war, and elite actors; linear chronology and archival evidence as cornerstones of 'truth'.¹⁴¹ Thus, *Buranjis* came to be viewed as the royal archives, *Carit puthis* the saintly biographies and *Genealogies* akin to European dynastic records. Colonial scholars selected sources that resembled their own categories of history and conveniently ignored other forms, such as traditions, ritual memory or myth, as unhistorical. This approach was aimed at the political utility of justifying British rule. By interpreting *Buranjis* and genealogies, colonial scholars could frame Assam's political past as fragmented, feudal, or in decline. It further implied that the pre-colonial polities as lacking modernity. The colonial intervention served the broader imperialist discourse that the colonial masters were bringing rationality, law and proper historical consciousness to a hitherto ahistorical, primitive society. But this was clearly a partial and fraught reading of Assam's past.

During this process, what was often overlooked are the indigenous memory traditions. Historians who worked on ancient Kamarupa did not forget to emphasize their importance. Kanaklal refereeing to these are oral traditions of Kamarupa mentioned about 'nursery songs, pastoral ballads sung by cowherds, songs of boatmen, songs describing twelve months, songs for the propitiation of the goddess of small-pox (*Sitala*) and wedding songs'.¹⁴² These traditions played a key role in maintaining and transmitting alternative historical imaginaries. As Mandy Sadan has shown in the context of Kachin memory cultures, oral traditions often

¹⁴¹ Marwick, Arthur. 2001. *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language*. Hampshire: Palgrave.

¹⁴² Barua, *Early History of HistoryKamarupa*, 319

constitute alternative archives through which communities articulate belonging and history.¹⁴³ Similar dynamics may be observed in the Assamese context, where ritual and oral practices serve as vital repositories of the lived and remembered past. Indigenous memory traditions in Assam, often transmitted through oral narratives, mythic lineages, performative rituals etc. constituted an enduring reservoir of historical imagination. These traditions preserved cosmologies, dynastic memories, and sacred geographies long before the colonial imperative to 'scientifically' write history emerged.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, among the first Assamese intellectuals to bridge the realms of mythology and historical method was the quarrelsome giant Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath Vidyavinode. This was despite many contemporaries either mimicked colonial positivism or fell into nationalist romanticism. Padmanath forged a distinct path that neither dismissed indigenous memory as superstition nor uncritically embraced imperial narratives of civilizational decline. For Padmanath, mythological figures such as Naraka, Bhagadatta, and Vajradatta were not ahistorical legends but symbolic anchors of collective memory. He treated them as crucial to reconstructing the ideological and cultural scaffolding of ancient Kamarupa. In doing so, Padmanath was not being 'orthodox', as some critics alleged, but rather challenging the Eurocentric binary that separated myth from fact.¹⁴⁴ Padmanath as a methodological innovator, was not just a collector or compiler of epigraphic or historical data. Mythology was central to Padmanath's method – a way of thinking history outside colonial dichotomies. By refusing to treat mythology as mere prehistory, Padmanath disrupted the

¹⁴³ Mandy Sadan, 2013, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma*, Oxford: OUP

¹⁴⁴ Barman, Prasun, ed. 2018. *Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode: Nirbachita Prabandha Sankalan*. Silchar: Cachar District Committee of Barak Upatyaka Banga Sahitya O Sanskriti Sammelan.

linear, teleological time of colonial historiography. Only in recent decades has Padmanath's legacy begun to be reclaimed in Assam. His vision of history as rooted in indigenous narrative traditions – yet subject to rigorous philological and epigraphic analysis – offers a compelling early model of decolonized historical practice. His sidelining, historically, reveals more about the anxieties of a colonial-modern episteme than about any scholarly limitations of his own.

Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath and His Defence of Ancient Kamarupa

Early 20th century witnessed emergence and efflorescence of scholarly investigations into the history, literature and antiquities of Assam in individual capacity. Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode is a foremost figure in this regard. His seminal *Kamarupashasanavali* (an in-depth exposition of pre-Ahom early inscriptions of Assam), opens by stating that,

“সন ১৩১৫ সালে গৌহাটিতে 'বঙ্গসাহিত্যানুশীলনী সভা' প্রতিষ্ঠিত হয় – উদ্দেশ্য, আসাম প্রদেশ সম্পর্কীয় নানা বিষয়ে তথ্যানুসন্ধান পূর্বক বঙ্গভাষায় প্রবন্ধাদি প্রকাশ করিয়া এই প্রান্তীয় প্রদেশটিকে বাঙালির নিকট সম্যক সুপরিচিত করা; কেননা বঙ্গের অতি সন্নিকটস্থ থাকিলেও – এবং বহু বাঙালি এখানে উপনিবিষ্ট হইলেও – আসামের প্রকৃত কাহিনী বঙ্গীয় সমাজে যথোচিত পরিজ্ঞাত নহে – বরং তৎসম্বন্ধে নানা অলীক কথাই প্রচারিত হইয়াছে।”¹⁴⁵

“In the year 1315, the 'Bangasahitya Anushilani Sabha' (which at the time of the publication existed as the Gauhati branch of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad) was established in Gauhati - the aim was to make this peripheral province

¹⁴⁵ Bhattacharya, *Kamarupashasanavalee*, Foreword, 1.

well-known to the Bengalis by publishing articles in Bengali language by researching various topics related to the province of Assam; because although it is very close to Bengal - and many Bengalis are settled here - the real story of Assam is not well known in the Bengali society - rather, many false stories have been spread about it.” (Translation, self)

কামৰূপ শাসনাবলী ইংরেজি ভাষায় সংকলিত হইলে সমগ্র ভারতবর্ষে - তথা ইউরোপ আমেরিকায় ও - পঠিত হইবার পক্ষে সুবিধা হইবে, এই নিমিত্ত কেহ কেহ ইংরেজি-তে ইহার সংকলনের জন্য উপদেশ দিয়েছিলেন; কিন্তু তাহা আমার মনঃপুত হয় নাই। শাসনগুলি যাহারা পাইয়াছিলেন তাহাদের বর্তমান বংশধর বা প্রতিনিধি অসামবাসী - তথা বাংলার অধিকাংশ স্থানবাসী - ব্রাহ্মণ পণ্ডিতগণ তাহাদের পূর্বববর্তিগণের বিবরণ ও রচনা পথ করিবেন - ইহা আমার একমত উদ্দেশ্য।¹⁴⁶

“If *Kamarupashasanavali* is compiled in English, it will be beneficial for it to be read throughout India - and also in Europe and America, for this reason, some people suggested compiling it in English; but that did not appeal to me. The present descendants or representatives of those who received the edicts are the people of Assam - that is, most of the people of Bengal - the Brahmin scholars should read about their ancestors – this is my consentaneous intent” (Translation, self)

In the above statements Padmanath’s articulation of a clear vision is rooted in his ideology and espousal of scholarship stemming from and grounded in the necessities and experiences of the region. Whereas colonial historians wrote for administrative utility or metropolitan

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, Foreword, 4

academic consumption, Padmanath was deeply invested in counter-orientalist history-making of the region.¹⁴⁷ His work fed into the formation of regional identity and cultural renaissance in Assam. He asserts that the rightful audience for these records are the present-day descendants of those named in the edicts, namely the people of Assam and Bengal. This decision reflects his belief that historical memory and cultural inheritance should not be alienated from its communities of origin. His contribution, situated within a framework of nationalist recovery of Assam's past, may be read as one of historicizing community memory and belonging and laid a strong intellectual foundation. While Padmanath may not have used the vocabulary of 'decoloniality' as understood today, the telling opening statements offer an early expression of a decolonial position. It foregrounds Assamese and Bengali populace, privileging cultural self-determination, while more importantly decentering Europe as a locus of scholarly authority. The ambit of Padmanath's contribution was not just confined to the Brahmaputra valley, but extended to include the entire northeastern and adjacent regions.¹⁴⁸ His contributions have been diverse and entail, alongside history, folk culture, travel literature, memoirs and much more. Language, literature and critique of contemporary experts, not only in history, such as Edward Gait or Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, but also the likes of Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore, form a crucial part of Padmanath's oeuvre. Of all, a

¹⁴⁷ Here one notes that Padmanath encourages re-reading of papers or discoveries that have already been published in the pages of the JASB. The eminent epigraphist thought that firstly, the circulation of the JASB was limited and those articles often did not reach readers of local languages. Secondly, even the JASB articles were liable to be mistaken and repeated discussion and re-reading and publication lessens such mistakes. In this regard, Padmanath enthusiastically congratulated Nagndranath Vasu, a lauded antiquarian of the time, bestowed the title Prachyavidyamaharnava, for his propagation for publication of papers first upon any discovery in the pages of Sahitya Parishad. Bhattacharya, "Balabarmma'r Tamrashasan.", 114.

¹⁴⁸ Barman, Prasun, ed. 2018. *Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode: Nirbachita Prabandha Sankalan*. Silchar: Cachar District Committee of Barak Upatyaka Banga Sahitya O Sanskriti Sammelan.

dominant aspect of Padmanath's scholarship is a distinctive sense of past or history, crucial to the formation of a strong regional identity.

In writing the 'glorious' past of the province Padmanath put special emphasis on epigraphic study, especially the inscriptions. He considered them indispensable as these material fragments of the past, formed living, resonant parts of the regions that in turn constituted a larger but incomplete text of identity of the nation.¹⁴⁹ If one were to imagine India's past as a great historical manuscript, then inscriptions – the relict copperplates, temples, stone carvings – appear as its torn and scattered pages. Fragmented, ruptured, and often displaced, they do not offer a seamless history. Yet, in their very incompleteness lies their historical urgency. In his review of the inscription of Balavarman, for example, that was already published in the *JASB*,¹⁵⁰ this outlook of Padmanath became clear. In his reading of the sources for reconstructing the ancient history of Assam, he acknowledged the colonial setting within which his search was situated. But one could not say the same about his assumptions in these foundational studies. One finds a very dispassionate and disillusioned view maintained by the author as regards Europeans and their often-pedantic academy. This was an outlook that was not shared by many, not just in Padmanath's time but even in the third decade of the present century.¹⁵¹ His deep familiarity with the intellectual currents of his time – across regional, national and colonial scholarly domains – that few historical publications, whether in Bengali or English, escaped his critical scrutiny. For example, he sharply critiqued Rajendralal Mitra's

¹⁴⁹ He, in fact, considered well-rounded histories of regions formed the very building blocks of an overarching history of the nation. One of the recurring statements regarding inscriptions, that he makes in his different essays is – “তাম্রফলকগুলি আমাদের জাতীয় ইতিহাসের এক একটি ছিন্নপত্র।” “The inscriptions are each torn pages of India's past as a book of history or a text” (Translation, self) Bhattacharya, “Balabarmma'r Tamrashasan”, 113.

¹⁵⁰ Hoernle, “The Nowgong Copper-plate Grant of Balavarman”, 285-97.

¹⁵¹ Bhattacharya, “Balabarmma'r Tamrashasan”, 113-28.

interpretation of a copperplate inscription discovered in his native Sylhet. Not only that, he pointed out a persistent colonial blindspot. It was the non-recognition of indigenous collaborators and contributors in the 19th century production of historical knowledge. Before dissecting further, it needs to be clarified at first why such detailed perusal of this article is absolutely necessary. It is particularly this inscription that was Padmanath's entry point for rethinking the early history of Kamarupa.¹⁵² In this, he was led by another illustrious Assamese scholar namely, Dhireshwaracharya Kaviratna.¹⁵³ Padmanath details the background of the acquisition of the plates and the crucial role played by Dhireshwaracharya towards the study of the plate. The promising beginning represented in Dhireshwaracharya's works was developed exponentially by Padmanath.¹⁵⁴

Padmanath's contribution towards a cogent reconstruction of the early history of Assam is to be understood from the perspective of his usage of sources.¹⁵⁵ It is specifically his deployment of the same kind of sources that Gait or on a pan-Indian scale Cunningham and the likes were working with. But Padmanath engaged in a complex negotiation with colonial historical paradigms. While they often employed the same tools – philology, epigraphy, textual criticism – his interpretive frameworks drew upon indigenous comemory, culture and identity. This

¹⁵² Barman, *Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode*, 11-16

¹⁵³ The plate was originally in possession of the Srijut for thirty years and was received by Edward Gait from him in 1895. This background does not find mention in Hoernle's paper in JASB. Srijut Dhireshwaracharya later on presented its reading in Bangasahityanushilani Sabha in Gauhati. Pundit Padmanath remarks that Dhireshwaracharya's reading was more accurate than Hoernle. Hoernle, "The Nowgong Copper-plate Grant of Balavarman"; Bhattacharya, "Balabarmma'r Tamrashasan", 113-28.

¹⁵⁴ A devout scholar like Padmanath never failed to commend where it was due. In the article Padmanath informs in no uncertain terms Pandit Dhireshwaracharya's dedication towards recovery and dissemination of the particular plate. This must be emphasized that Dhireshwaracharya's contribution marks an important moment in building the history of Kamarupa. Bhattacharya, "Balabarmma'r Tamrashasan.", 113-28.

¹⁵⁵ Akin to the paradigm within which to locate Gait's *Report, History* and other writings too.

resulted in an epistemic tension – colonial scholars viewed mythology as symbolic and irrational, whereas Padmanath treated it as a valid historical source with layered meanings. The resulting body of Assamese historical writing, especially in the early 20th century, thus becomes a site of epistemic contestation – where competing ideologies (imperialist orientalism, regional-nationalism) clashed over what constituted legitimate knowledge of the past.

Padmanath's articles concerning epigraphic study and the topic of early Kamarupa kingdoms are to be found scattered in the pages of leading Bengali and English journals of the time. Of them, notable are his Sahitya Parishad Patrika publications, Epigraphia Indica articles and his magnum opus *Kamarupashasanavali*, a collection of epigraphic plates representing early Assam or Kamarupa. Most of Padmanath's essays would be based on particular finding of inscriptions. Padmanath's decision to publish in Bengali rather than English resists the colonial linguistic hierarchy. It asserts that meaningful historical engagement must occur within vernacular spheres – not just global or metropolitan intellectual circuits. His critique of the misrepresentation of Assam in neighboring Bengali society echoes a broader concern with imperialist and orientalist distortions. By anchoring knowledge production in local institutions like the Bangasahitya Anushilani Sabha, he locates Assam within a network of self-organized regional historiography. His refusal to write in English despite knowing it would gain more circulation globally is a political act of refusal and resistance. His stance can thus be viewed as an early articulation of what may be termed, following Dodson, a counter-colonial modernity.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Dodson, "Contesting Translationsodson: Orientalism and the Interpretation", 35-51

Padmanath's intellectual resistance to colonial hegemonic forms is also inherent in his direct epigraphical engagements within its cultural settings. His command of Sanskrit and deep grounding in indigenous literary, mythological, and philosophical traditions gave him a philological brilliance unmatched by leading European epigraphists such as Rudolf Hoernle or Georg Bühler. For this reason, he brought greater contextual sensitivity to his epigraphic studies than these European coevals. While European readings of inscriptions often involved selective cherry-picking of dynastic names and genealogy, geographical references – imposing and fitting in a European framework of linear time and historiography, Padmanath did not approach epigraphy mechanically, as a source of dry historical data. Padmanath's work sought to restore the dignity and complexity of Assam's past that consciously deviated from an Eurocentric model of civilization and scientific history. In this matter one is tempted to find Padmanath as a gifted epigraphist and an unsung hero at it. Operating in the same region as Gait, Padmanath worked with insufficient resources and a lack of institutional support. Further, Padmanath's epigraphic study is marked and distinguished by his methodological rigor, comprising the critical apparatus of dense footnoting and exhaustive interpretive debate.¹⁵⁷ His incisive critique of Gait's history, corrections of Hoernle's misreadings, assertion of scholarly accuracy of Dhireshwaracharya – all point to a significant gesture of counter-colonial agency and intellectual resistance.¹⁵⁸

Speaking of criticism, an aspect of Padmanath's translation that has been pointed out among others by B. M. Barua and D. Neog, which is his correction of the text of the inscriptions,

¹⁵⁷ Here the readers will find carefully quoted excerpts from classics are provided with clear citations. In comparison with most other key texts on Kamarupa being produced in the early 20th century Assam, Padmanath's practice proves a rarity. Bhattacharya, *Kamarupashasanavalee*, 1-45.

¹⁵⁸ Throughout the article one comes across minute critique of Hoernle's reading of the same plate as well as Dhireshwaracharya's. Bhattacharya, "Balabarmma'r Tamrashasan", 113-128.

especially Sanskrit, that prevents any understanding of the evolution of the scripts.¹⁵⁹

However, an explanation for this seems to be provided by Padmanath in the instructive introduction,

“ভাস্কর বৰ্মা হইতে আরম্ভ করিয়া ধৰ্মপাল পর্যন্ত প্রত্যেক শাসন প্রদাতার সময় শাসনলিপির অক্ষর

কিরূপ ছিল, প্রধানতঃ তৎপ্রদৰ্শনার্থ প্রত্যেকের শাসনের অন্তত এক এক খানি ফলকের চিত্র গ্রন্থ

মধ্যে নিবেশিত হইয়াছে। ইহা হইতে অনুসন্ধিৎসু কেহ কামৰূপের প্রাচীন লিপির ক্রমবিকাশ লক্ষ্য

কৰিতে সমর্থ হইবেন।”¹⁶⁰

“Starting from Bhaskaravarman to Dharmapala, what was the character of the script during the time of each ruler, mainly to show that at least one plate of each edict has been included in the book. From this, an inquisitive person will be able to trace the evolution of the ancient script of Kamarupa.” (Translation, self)

By the end of the 19th century close to 10 inscriptions came to light in connection with colonial administration. Padmanath informs that most of the inscriptions reached Gait since he was the Director of Ethnography in the province and he took initiative to send them to the Asiatic Society for decipherment.¹⁶¹ If one pays attention to the chronology of Varman rulers prepared

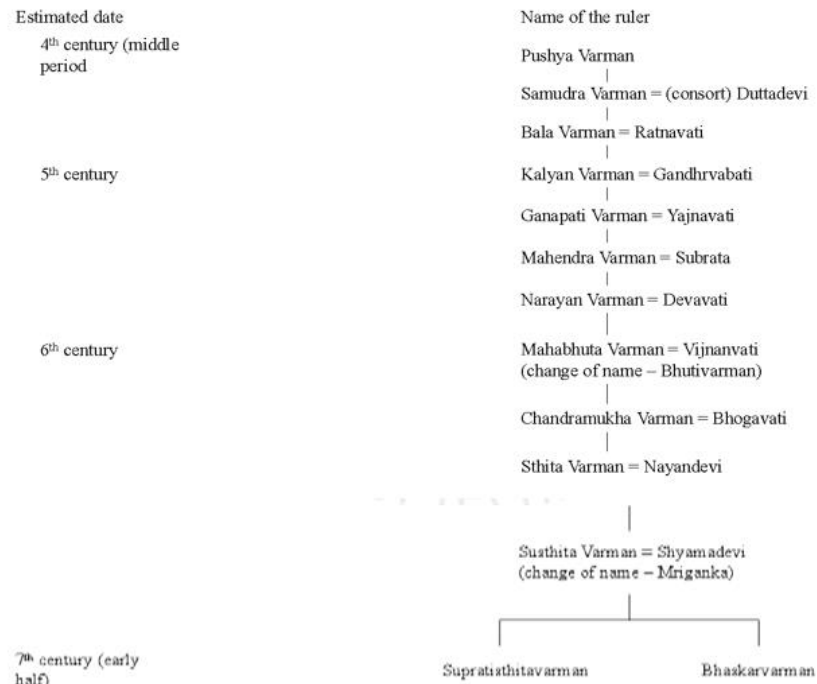
¹⁵⁹ Barua, B. M. 1947. "The Common Ancestry of Pre-Ahom Rulers and Some Other Problems of the Early History of Assam." Edited by Narendra Law. *The Indian Historical Quarterly* XXIII (1): 200-220; Neog, Dimbeswar. 1964. *The Origin and Growth of Asamiya Language: New Light on the Development of Asamiya Script*. Dispur: Xuwani Prakasan.

¹⁶⁰ Bhattacharya, *Kamarupashasanavalee*, 6.

¹⁶¹ Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1915. "Pracheen Kamruper Rajamala." *Sahitya Parishad Patrika* 189-194.

by Padmanath, a noticeable difference with that presented by Gait in the same context becomes prominent.

Figure 6: The long Bhauma-Varman line of rulers, as gleaned from *Kamarupashasanavali*, showing kings of Kamarupa with their queen consorts



Source: Bhattacharya, Padmanath 1931-32. *Kamarupashasanavalee*. Calcutta: Rangpur Sahitya Parishad, 13.

Figure 7: Gait and his chronology of ancient Kamarupa

Name	Date
Pusyavarman	4 th Century
Samudravarman	
Balavarman	
Kalyanvarman	5 th Century
Ganapativarman	
Mahendravarman	
Narayanavarman	6 th Century
Mahabhutivarman	
Chandramukhavarman	
Sthitavarman	7 th Century
Susthitavarman	
Supratisthitavarman	
Bhaskarvarman	

Source: Gait, E. A. 1926. *A History of Assam*. Calcutta and Simla: Thacker, Spink & Co., 22-35.

The inscription considered in this context is none other than the most coveted discovery of the 20th century, viz. Nidhanpur copperplate inscription. As is too well-known the plates were discovered in two different phases at the initiative and expenditure by Padmanath himself. The plates supplied a new source of the chronology of ancient Kamarupa. This represented an official document directly connected to the imperial institution of Kamarupa. The discovery of Bhaskarvarman's inscriptions hugely pushed back the frontiers of Assam's past and the discoverer of the inscription i.e. Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath played a leading role in shaping the account around the remote past of Assam. To quote Nayanjyot Lahiri, "Before such a discovery could be made, there had to be men who believed that such a past existed and that it could be archaeologically explored."¹⁶²

¹⁶² Lahiri, *Finding Forgotten Cities*, 59.

Texts were often treated as tangible remnants of the past – sources from which concrete historical data could be extracted. In this context, a few distinctions must be made. While both Padmanath and Gait operated within a shared framework of source discovery, particularly concerning the epigraphs of Kamarupa, Padmanath's engagement reveals a more sustained and critical historical consciousness. His treatment of chronology, textual evidence, and historiographical method demonstrates a depth and rigour absent in Gait's more detached and linear narrative. Although historians such as Kar have referred to Padmanath as an Indologist, the scope and sophistication of his approach suggest that he was, in fact, a fully developed modern historian – one whose intellectual horizons aligned with global disciplinary trends in historical scholarship.¹⁶³ This is also evident in Padmanath's negotiation of colonial toponymic discourse.¹⁶⁴

Padmanath's seminal *Kamarupashasanavali* is distinguished by merits recounted above. Another key element in Padmanath's scholarship is his interrogation of existing, contemporary categories such as the term 'প্রত্নতত্ত্ববিদ'. It seeks to highlight a very fundamental difference, and that is between an antiquarian and a modern historian. This chapter argues that the antiquarian impulse in 19th-century Assam was not a neutral academic enterprise but a

¹⁶³ Kar, *Framing Assam: Plantation Capital, Metropolitan Knowledge*, 213-255.

¹⁶⁴ *Nepalasya Kanchanadrim Brahmaputrasya Samgamam |
Karatoyam samarabhya yavad Dikavasini ||
uttarasyam Kanjagiri Karatoya tu paschime |
tirthasreshtha Dikshunadi purvasvam, girikanyake ||
dakshine Brahmaputrasya Lakshyah samgamavadhi |
Kamarupa iti khyata sarvasastreshu nischitah || Yoginitantra, patala XI*

Kamarupa extended from the Kanchana mountain of Nepal up to the junction of the Brahmaputra, beginning from Karatoya up to the Dikkaravasini, its boundaries being, to the north, the Kanjagiri; to the west the Karatoya, to the east the Dikshu; to the south the confluence of the Brahmaputra with the Laksha. However, according to Padmanath Bhattacharya, this boundary does not stand a test of close historical scrutiny. Bhattacharya, "No. 13 Nidhanpur Copper-plates of Bhaskarvarman.", 68.

deeply political act tied to territorial mapping, imperial classification, and, most importantly, not just a colonial military but epistemic conquest. It finds that colonial surveys transformed local ruins into evidence for imperial histories, while early Assamese intellectuals like Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode offered a counter-antiquarianism that was both methodologically rigorous and politically assertive. By restoring indigenous chronologies and vernacular epistemologies, Padmanath's work is shown to prefigure modern historical criticism in Assam. The chapter thus reframes colonial antiquarianism as a site of contestation rather than passive knowledge accumulation.

Chapter Conclusion

By the earlier half of the 20th century, historians would increasingly consider the early period in the history of Assam as more eventful compared to later epochs such as 13th century onwards.¹⁶⁵ The center of early period activities under the patronage of the Kamarupa kingdoms was the Brahmaputra Valley. Historians refer to more than 30 inscriptions that have been recovered from this region in addition to the sculptural and architectural remains as well as various archaeological sites.¹⁶⁶ These sites and relics of the past have suffered the ravages of time and nature and were often viewed in colonial perception as vast mass of shapeless remains. But it necessitated a research society at the turn of the 20th century to study and

¹⁶⁵ Choudhury, P. C. 1959. *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.* Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam; Barua, B. K. 1951. *A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period)*. Nowgong: K. K. Barua.

¹⁶⁶ Banerji, Rakhaladas. 1928. "Eastern Circle." In *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1925-26*, edited by J. F. Blakiston. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch.; Sharma, Mukunda Madhava. 1978. *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*. Gauhati: Gauhati University; Barman, B. 2017. 'Early Medieval Archaeological Landscape of Assam (AD 600 to AD 1200) Preliminary Survey in Western Assam, District Goalpara'. *Ancient Asia* 8 (4): 1-11.

interpret this considerable amount of materials that kept coming to light from all across Assam.

Early in the 20th century scholars from Assam conceived the idea of forming such a society that would systematically search, collect and disseminate these abundant early historical data.¹⁶⁷ Objects of antiquarian and historical importance kept surfacing from the early 19th century. But, attention of the then government to this vast mine of material sources was meagre till about the turn of the new century. Colonial endeavours to retrieve the ancient past of Assam began as early as the early years of the 19th century. In view of a meagre response to a large mass of early historical data, the local scholars felt the necessity to systematize the records that displayed spirited and extensive artistic and cultural activities. Colonial and Indian scholars alike, individually studied this early past. However, these studies were not inspired by a common goal of enquiring into the antiquities of Assam.

The history of Kamarupa before the arrival of the Ahoms was relatively unknown to the country as well as the colonial government. The search by the British government definitely had in it embedded commercial and administrative impulses, in terms of better and smooth governance of the newly acquired territories. But a regional approach to the study of the early past would emerge as a consequence of such a quest for a glorious ancient past, that would in turn feed the subcontinent-wide burgeoning idea of civilizational pride of the Indian subcontinent. The foundation of the Asiatic Society of Bengal paved the way for institutions driven by a critical spirit of the western thought and a cultural consciousness and urgency for

¹⁶⁷ Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for the Year 1916-17 in Sarma, Chandra Nath ed. 1920. *The Work of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

intellectual revival and reawakening centering in Bengal.¹⁶⁸ Colonial antiquarian methods created particular interest in ancient scriptures and classical languages. Assam was not left behind and a need for an institution with facilities for research into history, literature and antiquities came to be articulated no sooner. For the Indologists and antiquarians, this region presented an intriguing fusion of ‘pre-civilization’ and the ‘civilizational Sanskritic’ cultures. This opened up newer prospects for the Indologists working in a wider terrain.



¹⁶⁸ Guha, Amalendu. 1991. "The Impact of Bengal Renaissance." In *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, by Amalendu Guha, 206-218. Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta.

Chapter 3

In Search of Antiquity: The Founding of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti

By the early decades of the 20th century, as the previous chapter has shown, colonial efforts at classifying and cataloguing historical sources in Assam had gained momentum under the administrative leadership of E. A. Gait. However, this archival and historiographical enterprise was not purely historical in nature; rather, it was deeply rooted in the demands, assumptions, and classificatory impulses of colonial anthropology. As a frontier province perceived to lie at the margins of the ‘civilized’ subcontinent, Assam emerged in the colonial imagination as a fertile terrain for ethnographic inquiry.¹ It was increasingly viewed as a liminal, transitional space – where ‘pre-civilizational’ tribal worlds intersected with Sanskritic and Indo-Aryan civilizational markers – making it an ideal object of anthropological study in the expanding European academy.

The formation of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti (KAS) must be understood within this entangled landscape of imperial knowledge production. It did not emerge in isolation but was inextricably embedded in the intellectual milieu shaped by orientalist institutions such as the Asiatic Society of Bengal and colonial departments like the Department of Ethnography in Assam. These institutions, animated by sweeping Enlightenment ideals, sought to systematically catalogue every conceivable detail of ‘Asiatic’ life – languages, customs, religious beliefs, physical features, and material culture.² In Assam, however, the Department of Ethnography soon found this ambition overwhelming and administratively unmanageable,

¹ Bhuyan, S. K. 1934. “Historical Research in Assam” in *Bulletin II of the DHAS in Assam*. 1-15. Guwahati: DHAS.

² Jones, Sir William. 1783-84. *A Discourse on the Institution of a Society for Enquiring into the History, Civil and Natural, the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia, Delivered at Calcutta, January 15th, 1784*. London: T. Payne and Sons, xi-xv.

revealing the limits of colonial control over knowledge.³ It is within this context that the KAS arose as a vernacular intervention – partly responding to, but also exceeding, the epistemic and institutional constraints of colonial ethnography.

The development of anthropology as a discipline in 19th and early 20th century Europe was deeply intertwined with imperial expansion, as scholars such as Bernard S. Cohn, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, and Zaheer Baber have argued. India became a ‘living laboratory’ and ‘museum’ for testing European theories of race, society, and history.⁴ The scientific gaze of the etic and legitimate knowers constructed the indigenous subject as static, ‘primitive,’ and in need of ordering through the epistemic authority of Europe. Against this backdrop, the KAS’s formation and its efforts in founding historical and archaeological research in Assam mark a significant moment. It not only reflected regional intellectual aspirations but also asserted a cultural and historical autonomy for one of the empire’s most marginalized provinces. The lukewarm support of the Assam government, evident in the chronic financial and institutional constraints faced by the Samiti, further underscores how the KAS emerged not from official sanction but from vernacular initiative and intellectual labour.

Founding the Society: Early Functions

The proposal for the formation of the KAS was taken at the fifth session of Uttar Banga Sahitya Sammelan (North Bengal Literary Convention), organized in the Bengali year 1320,

³ Bhuyan, “Historical Research in Assam”, 15.

⁴ Baber, Z. 1996. *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization, and Colonial Rule in India*. Delhi: SUNY Press; Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. 1997. "The museumised relic: Archaeology and the first museum of colonial India." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* (SAGE) 34 (1): 21-51

corresponding with 1912 CE.⁵ The assembly was held at the historic site of the Kamakhya temple, and the main objective was to search the history of ancient Kamarupa.⁶ The jurisdiction of this enquiry would primarily comprise Assam, Eastern Bengal, North Bengal and Cooch Behar.⁷ There are many reasons that distinguish the KAS from corresponding societies, many of which preceded the KAS, in different districts of Bengal and Eastern regions at large. But as mentioned in its Prospectus, it was KAS's methods and focus of work that played a particularly instrumental role. The objective of the KAS at the moment of its advent stated,

“Rule 3. The main object of the Samiti is to carry on researches in matters relating to history, archaeology, ethnography etc. – all that usually comes under the purview of a Research Society, and to collect books, manuscripts, coins, copper-plates, statues, carved stones- etc. – i.e. the things that should find place in a library and museum of such society.”⁸

To fully grasp the implications of the formation of the KAS, it is necessary to examine its precarious financial foundations and the broader structures of institutional support – or the lack thereof – that shaped its trajectory. The Society's initial capital consisted of a modest donation of Rs. 25 by Sasadhar Rai, President of the Uttar Banga Sahitya Sammelan in 1912

⁵ Vidyavinode, Padmanath Bhattacharya. 1913. “Kamarupa-shasana-avali Bhaskarabarmma'r Tamrashasan” read at its first annual meeting of Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Gauhati. in Sarma, Chandra Nath, ed. 1920. *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*. First. Gauhati: Office of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, 49-77.

⁶ Bhuyan, S. K., ed. 1927. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti or the Assam Research Society*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti.

⁷ The selection of archive for current thesis has been made in reference to the foundational objectives of the KAS. Primary documents have been collected from academic and administrative archives in Assam, parts of Bengal including and with special focus on the coterminous Cooch Behar and North Bengal.

⁸ Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 4.

and an advocate at the Calcutta High Court.⁹ This symbolic beginning foreshadowed the persistent financial fragility that would characterize the KAS in the years to come. Efforts to expand its activities – such as building infrastructure, conducting archaeological expeditions, or acquiring antiquities – were often hindered by chronic underfunding. While sporadic donations from local nobles provided some relief, the Society remained heavily dependent on the colonial government for grants that were irregular and largely insufficient.

The first official grant of Rs. 250 was received on 18 December 1915, followed by an annual allocation of Rs.1,000.¹⁰ Yet, these contributions paled in comparison to the scale of the Society's ambitions and the significance of its collections. Even as the KAS grew in stature, it reported the inadequacy of funds in acquiring key materials such as the Nidhanpur copper plates, Dubi plates, and the Tezpur inscription – artefacts of immense historical importance that deepened the understanding of Kamarupa's early political lineage.¹¹ The need for a permanent structure to house the expanding collection remained unmet for decades, and government allocations ranging from Rs. 50 to Rs. 100 were reported by the KAS with growing concern.¹²

Despite this chronic scarcity, the Society attracted a range of patrons – both British and Indian – including Archdale Earle (Chief Commissioner of Assam), Edward Gait (Governor of Bihar and Orissa), P. R. T. Gurdon, as well as Jitendranarayan Bhupa Bahadur of Cooch Behar and Prabhat Chandra Barua Bahadur of Assam. Nevertheless, the level of support was still not

⁹ “Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Work during the Year 1916-17” in Sarma, *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*. 1-9.

¹⁰ Ibid, 1-9.

¹¹ The credit for the recovery of Nidhanpur plates in a couple of phases goes entirely to Padmanath Bhattacharya. Bhattacharya, Padmanath.1913-14. “No. 13 Nidhanpur Copper-plates of Bhaskarvarman.” Edited by Sten Konow. *Epigraphia Indica and Record of Archaeological Survey of India* (British India Press) XII: 65-79.

¹² “Report for the year 1917-18” in Sarma, *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 9-16.

commensurate with the Society's contributions to historical and archaeological research in the province.

The KAS's inaugural event and its early reports offer a window into its intellectual vision and research movement initiated by its endeavor.¹³ The most remarkable of its early achievements was the discovery of the Nidhanpur copper plates of Bhaskaravarman, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, provided critical information on the Pushyavarman dynasty from the 4th to the 7th century CE.¹⁴ This find enabled not only a reconstruction of a continuous dynastic chronology but also a comparative reading of Xuanzang's accounts of Kamarupa. The KAS also proposed the establishment of a dedicated museum to house its growing collections – an initiative that would bear fruit only decades later, and without substantial support from the colonial government.

Curiously, even as the KAS struggled to secure basic institutional support, another research body – the Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) – was established shortly thereafter with full government patronage.¹⁵ While DHAS drew inspiration from the KAS and even recruited members from it, this state-backed institution highlights the uneven institutional trajectories of recognition and support within colonial knowledge systems. The KAS, in contrast, remained a vernacular initiative, driven by local scholars and shaped by the specific cultural and intellectual milieu of early 20th-century Assam.

¹³ Shastri, Biswanarayan. 1993. *An Account of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti (Assam Research Society)*. Guwahati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

¹⁴ Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1931-32. *Kamarupashasanavalee*. Calcutta: Rangpur Sahitya Parishad.

¹⁵ Barua, Kanaklal. 1933. "Introductory." *The Journal of Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) 1 (1): 1-2; and also, among recent historians, who have highlighted this dichotomy, includes Kar, Bodhisattva. 2007. "Framing Assam: Plantation Capital, Metropolitan Knowledge and a Regime of Identities 1790s-1930s". Doctoral Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

The rules and constitution of the KAS reflected a clearly articulated purpose – a rigorous and methodical pursuit of the region’s antiquarian, literary, and archaeological past. Its model was inspired by research societies in the colonial metropole, such as the Asiatic Societies of Calcutta and London. Yet, as will be explored subsequently in the thesis, the KAS’s self-identified cultural position was grounded in the vernacular and intellectual traditions of eastern India.¹⁶ In spite of its methodological ambitions and archival innovations, it remained institutionally marginalized, caught between colonial indifference and limited local resources.

As the early publications detailing the works accomplished and undertaken by the KAS in its opening decades indicate, it circulated widely among Indians as well as European readers.¹⁷ Even the inaugural meeting of the construction of its building, presided over by Lieutenant P. R. T. Gurdon, was attended by enthusiasts and professionals both British and Indian. In this regard two names, viz. those of P. R. T. Gurdon and Chief Commissioner Archdale Earle come up as really crucial figures.¹⁸ Both these officials actively promoted the cause of the KAS. For example, Archdale Earle, promoted various educational causes in the valley. He was a crucial proponent of the idea of the establishment of the museum. It was Commissioner Earle who secured an annual grant of Rupees 1000 for the Samiti from the year 1917-18 onwards.¹⁹ Similarly, as can be seen in the opening ceremony of the Samiti’s building, the seminal discoveries of rock inscriptions at North Guwahati and Tezpur discussed by P. R. T. Gurdon in his presidential speech set the stage and energized the early archaeological nature

¹⁶ Sen, Kalicharan. 1914. *Prospectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

¹⁷ “Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Work during the Year 1916-17” in Sarma, *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*. 1-9.

¹⁸ Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 1-27. This information is found recurrent in almost all reports and proceedings of the Samiti in the early 20s. Such as *Reports and Conspectuses* of 1927, 1931 and 1937.

¹⁹ “Schedule of Income and Expenditure, 1917-18, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti” in Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 15-16.

of the search.²⁰ A very systematic identification of material remains along the bank of Brahmaputra in North Guwahati commenced with participation of officials like Gurdon. As may be understood, this amiable association must have provided much necessary impetus to undertake such demanding activity. And the outcome was innovative. Further, if papers read in general meetings and anniversaries of the KAS are reviewed it will be found representing some of its choice and earliest works. Let us take for example more than thirty papers presented between years 1915 and 26.²¹ While historical treatises comprised half of all writings, seven articles would be on inscriptions. This stresses the primacy given to inscriptions in writing the history of Kamarupa. Other papers would cover a mixed bag of ethnographic accounts, royal genealogy, hagiography, archive of American Baptist Mission, miscellaneous archaeological and historical topics. This created an opportunity for the scholars of the KAS to forge their own vision of the Assamese society within an emerging public sphere in the urban centres of Assam. Such an approach made crucial contributions to burgeoning ideas and practices of counter-colonial or anti-colonial modernity. Such interrogation of the regional identity and representation could not be compared with other historical and antiquarian societies that had come up at the behest of the Victorian colonial government.²² Evidently, these trilingual publications (Assamese, Bengali and English) from the region are an unappreciated storehouse. They caused much enthusiasm among the people of the province by providing them with a sense of pride as regards their historical and archaeological heritage.²³

²⁰ Ibid, 28-35. feat. Presidential Speech of the Hon'ble Colonel Gurdon, Commissioner AVD: ASSAM VALLEY DIVISION, dated Gauhati the 19th November 1917, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

²¹ Item No. 5 in Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 43-45.

²² Reference to the (unpublished) Catalogue of Transcripts maintained by DHAS presents the list of archival documents preserved by the organization. It is an assortment of documents comprising private papers of colonial and Indian officials and a predominance of *Buranji* and similar manuscripts.

²³ Barua, "Introductory", 1-2.

Around the 18th century, following the formation of the Asiatic Society in then Calcutta, autonomous organizations of historical, archaeological and/or antiquarian pursuits sprang up in different locations.²⁴ Eastern India happened to be leading in this regard along with Maharashtra and peninsular India.²⁵ In terms of an overarching Indological and antiquarian search for the subcontinent's past, Asiatic Society is viewed as a pioneer and exemplary organisation. But this view obscures the Asiatic Society's complicity in the brute realities of colonial power and discourses. The search for regional pasts with a particular focus on the regional literature was initiated by another leading academy from Bengal, namely the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. Established in 29th April 1894, it inspired not only several of its branches to be formed in numerous regions of undivided Bengal but independent research institutes such as Varendra Anusandhan Samiti in Rajshahi as well as Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti in Assam.²⁶

²⁴ This antiquarian nature of the search, before archaeology as a discipline came with its definite framework, guidelines and definitions, has been classified mainly and broadly as Indological. But it is also a part of an even broader Orientalist study, which covered all non-Western cultures.

²⁵ While the importance of Maharashtra in the Orientalist enterprises in India is too well known because of the prominent presence of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and Indian Numismatic Society in Pune, Dipesh Chakravarty's recent exegesis namely, *The Calling of History* covers the lively interaction on Indian history between Bengal and Maharashtra in the early 20th century. Further, Rama Mantena's *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India* provides details of the 19th century antiquarian search as it ensued in the peninsular India, with a focus on the private collection of Col. Colin Mackenzie. Mantena, Rama. 2012. *The origins of Modern historiography in India: Antiquarianism and Philology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2015. *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁶ The latter is an offshoot of Gauhati Bangiya Sahityanushilani Sabha that operated as the Gauhati branch of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. Bhagabati, Tarun Chandra. 2014. *The Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti in Historical Perspectives (1912 AD to 1993 AD)*. Delhi: B R Publishing Corporation.

While Gurdon and Earle were crucial colonial figures associated with the Assam Research Society, the entire credit for the KAS' foundation goes to its twelve founding members.²⁷ More specifically, it is Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode whose intellectual and institutional vision behind the formation of the KAS remains underacknowledged. Chandra Nath Sarma's 1916-17 Annual Report of the KAS unequivocally attest to Padmanath's foundational role in conceiving the very idea of the Samiti.²⁸ This acknowledgement positions Padmanath not merely as a contributor, but as the architect of Assam's first organized and systematic historical and antiquarian institution. When Padmanath refused to stand for the executive committee in 1916-17 he was not concerned with accruing personal acclaim but with institution-building, setting in motion a scholarly tradition that would outlast him. The most challenging task before the KAS was organizing its mounting collection. It was, inter alia, taking a systematic view of traditional modes of recording Assam's past. It emerges again and again in different reports produced in the early decades of the 20th century that epigraphic remains, particularly inscriptions, occupied a singularly important place especially for writing the history of Kamarupa.²⁹ But, the collection and study of classics taken up by the organization was also notable. Among classical texts in the early years for example, 1916 onwards collection of manuscripts of *Jogini Tantra*, *Hara Gauri Sambad* in combination with the Asiatic Society was important. As can be seen in some seminal historical writings of the time, these and further compilations by the KAS would form the body of sources for scholars

²⁷ The other twelve founding members include Mahamahopadhyay Dhireshwaracharya Kavirantna, Ananda Chandra Vedantabagish, Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode, Shibnath Smrititirtha, Uttam Chandra Barua, Govinda Chandra Sarma, Taranath Kabyavinode, Protap Chandra Goswami, Rajani Kumar Das, Gopal Krishna Dey, Suresh Chandra Bandyopadhyaya and Umesh Chandra Dey. Barua K. L. 1933. *Early History of Kamarupa: From the earliest times to the end of the sixteenth century*. Shillong: Printed by Rev. Fr. Foglia S. C. at the Don Bosco Industrial School Press; Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 1-9.

²⁸ Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 4.

²⁹ Gait, *Report on the Progress of Historical Research*, 1-26; Bhattacharya, *Kamarupashasanavalee*, 1-214.

to build their history of Kamarupa.³⁰ In other words, these became key sources providing illustrative and historical reference to Kamarupa. Another crucial enterprise was the sweeping survey of manuscripts meticulously carried out by the noted manuscriptologist Hemchandra Goswami. The Samiti was vested with the task of a custodian of a wide range of *Buranji puthi* collected by the scholar on behalf of the administration. The subjects covered in the collection would range from epics, chronicles, song-books to mathematical treatises.³¹ The report of 1916-17 further shows that the KAS also initiated the preparation of a list of material and textual remains from different parts of the region, and that the KAS was first to identify the need. In comparison, DHAS is well-known for its intervention in the preservation and publication of old *puthis*. But, this crucial yet overlooked aspect serves as a link in connecting how the 19th century background of the preservation of *Buranji* tradition is understood in the region by and large.³²

In terms of an overall assessment, the various early decade reports of the Samiti's workings present an illustrative picture of the organization. Comparison is often drawn with the adjacent and a predecessor organization namely Varendra Anusandhan Samiti or the Varendra Research Society in Rajshahi, where the latter is frequently lauded. Additionally, the need for

³⁰ Attention has to be drawn in this regard to the series of publications under the flagship *Kamarupa-shasanavalee* by Padmanath Vidyavinode. The term *Kamarupa-shasanavalee*, translates literally to the inscriptions of Kamarupa or implying the *shasanas* or the copper plate epigraphs issued by early Kamarupa rulers holding sway over Brahmaputra valley, parts of North Bengal, Sylhet and Rangpur. The epigraphic articles described as *Kamarupashasanavalees* formed the core sources for 20th century seminal texts on Kamarupa, most notably Kanaklal Barua's *Early History of Kamarupa* and Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*.

³¹ Vide the *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Mss* by Hem Chandra Goswami, published by Calcutta University for the breadth of the activity. The mss so studied would be handed over to the KAS for preservation. The list of antiquities transferred from the Samiti to the Provincial Museum would present a count of about 238 such manuscripts. Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 3-34; Goswami, Hemchandra. 1930. *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta on behalf of the Government of Assam.

³² Barua, "Introductory", 1-2.

better and up to date facilities such as its own auditorium for the anniversary meetings would not stop the KAS from carrying out some of the region's earliest and most notable research and survey works.³³

The pioneering KAS has further overlooked merits that the current thesis aims to foreground. An obvious and well-known background of the beginning of this search for the antiquity of the subcontinent is the 'technologies' of colonial governance that deemed knowledge was the precondition of effective governance.³⁴ This would result in colonial narratives and its skewed representation especially of the early history, directed at justifying colonial despotism. This would in turn induce various regions to rise up in contributing to subcontinent-wide survey of sources for writing the ancient history. The KAS fits in well in this sphere of influence. Ancient and early medieval Assam would feature regularly in the pages of *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, *Indian Historical Quarterly* and *Indian Historical Records Commission Proceedings*.³⁵ But not enough is highlighted about its far-reaching impact or dialogue with the rest of the country.

³³ Almost all early reports on the Samiti's work, most notably S. K. Bhuyan, D. Goswami and S. Kataki compiled *Conspectuses*, and a very important archival issue namely Chandra Nath Sarma, a leading intellectual of the region of the time, edited *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti* (op. cit.) furnish the survey of Samiti's works. These documents form sound empirical data on the early works of the Samiti. Ibid, 3-34; Goswami, D, and S Kataki. 1931. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti; Goswami, D., and S. Kataki. 1937. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

³⁴ Scholars like Bernard S. Cohn, Timothy Mitchell frequently use the term 'technology of rule' to refer not to machines or tools but a systematic, repeatable way of producing knowledge and thereby effects of power. Such 'technologies' are deployed by government and institutions like museums, schools and even historians. Mitchell, Timothy. 1989. "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order." In *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Donald Preziosi, 409-423. Oxford: Oxford History of Art: OUP; Cohn, Bernard S. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³⁵ Vide Gait, E. A. 1895. "Historical Research in Assam." *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 98-108; Gait, E. A. 1893. "The Koch Kings of Kamarupa." *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* LXII (4): 268-308;

Scholars like Tarun Chandra Bhagabati and Jae Eun-Shin have pointed out how the search for the ancient Brahmaputra valley that began around the turn of the 20th century is still incomplete. Eun Shin argues,

“Reconsidering Kamarupa never means bypassing the main concerns of the historiography nor using very different source materials. Rather, it involves us asking new sets of questions in order to see the past from a different perspective and read the relevant sources with a different interpretive strategy.”³⁶

Such a perspective serves to show the central role played by the factor of organizing historical sources of ancient Kamarupa. The current chapter aims to provide illustrative details on how the KAS’s efforts in carrying out this central task in the region has gone severely neglected.

It is not only the KAS but its preeminent scholars, especially Padmanath, Hemchandra, Kanaklal and also to a considerable extent Dhireshwaracharya, who embarked on a task, previously dismissed as untenable by the early British surveyors. The period from circa 4th century till the inroads of the Ahoms, often flattened in terms of periodization as a sweeping

Hoernle, A. F. R. 1897. “The Nowgong Copper-plate Grant of Balavarman of Pragjyotisha in Asam.” *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Asiatic Society) LXVI (Nos. I - IV): 285-297; Barua, B. M. 1947. "The Common Ancestry of Pre-Ahom Rulers and Some Other Problems of the Early History of Assam." Edited by Narendra Law. *The Indian Historical Quarterly* XXIII (1): 200-220; Bhattasali, N. K. 1946. "New Lights on the History of Assam." Edited by Narendra Law. *Indian Historical Quarterly* XXII (4): 245-252.

³⁶ Shin, Jae-Eun. 2018. "Region Formed and Imagined: Reconsidering temporal, spatial and social context of Kamarupa." In *Modern Practices in Northeast India: History, Culture, Representation*, edited by Lipokmar Dzuwichu and Manjeet Baruah, 23-55. London and New York: Routledge, 25-26.

‘Pre-Ahom’, as per the colonial scholars is marked by a paucity of ‘sources’ and therefore the history is difficult to retrieve and narrate in a coherent form. However, the KAS’s extensive explorations prove otherwise. Although, soon another research institute, namely DHAS, would come up inspired by the KAS, its government funding and focus on Ahom chronicles would equate the latter with the sole history of the region.³⁷ That is to say, the medieval Ahom chronicles or the *Buranjis* would come to stand for the concept ‘history’ in the region. To further explain, history in this region does not translate to an expression equivalent to *Itihasa*, but *Buranji*. A deductive reading may bring forth hitherto overlooked factors. The KAS’ venture, notwithstanding objectivity and modernity of approach, would run contrary to colonial interest. The sovereign and independent rule of Kamarupa dynasties would simply not serve to justify colonial imperial interests. Whereas a text-centric archive like DHAS, dedicated to preserving Ahom court chronicles, would be a much more logical choice for the purpose of colonial conquest and its various enterprises – both economic and epistemic.

The Antiquarian Explorations (1912-40): People, Passion and the Ideas

The foundation of the KAS in 1912 was neither fortuitous nor bureaucratic – it was an intellectually charged and emotionally invested endeavour. While Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode is credited as the visionary behind this institution, it would be a disservice to isolate him from the broader constellation of scholars and bhadraloks of the region who contributed to this collective endeavor. As acknowledged in the 1916-17 report of the KAS, Padmanath ‘conceived the idea’ of the Samiti, and without his effort ‘it

³⁷ The Directorate came up also as a sequel to the pre-eminent Department of Ethnography. Both KAS, as well as the Directorate remain at the forefront of the 20th century phenomenon of the consolidation of historical scholarship of Assam. Bhagabati, *The Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*, 1-64.

would not have reached this stage'.³⁸ Yet, the Samiti's evolution reflects the convergence of many regional aspirations and a newly emerging intelligentsia who sought to carve a place for Assam within the larger civilizational map of India.

The formation of the KAS must be seen as part of a pan-Indian moment of vernacular scholarly mobilization in the early 20th century. Across India, regional intellectuals were founding similar institutions – such as the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (1894) in Bengal, Bharat Itihas Samsodhak Mandal (1910) in Pune, Andhra Historical Research Society (1928) in Rajamundry – to reclaim and systematize knowledge of their respective pasts.³⁹ The KAS shared with these institutions a nationalist impulse for indigenous knowledge production, but also operated from a distinct spatial and cultural location. Assam's geographical and historical marginalization within colonial India generated a particular urgency among its thinkers to recover and legitimize its past. The KAS emerged from this charged atmosphere of scholarly and cultural assertion.

What also defined the KAS was the extraordinary physical and intellectual labor of its members. Expeditions to recover inscriptions, survey monuments, and collect artefacts were often self-funded, strenuous, and required traversing rough terrain. The intellectual effort to interpret, contextualize, and systematize these materials, often in conversation with Sanskrit texts and colonial historiography, reflected a complex balancing act between deep appreciation of tradition and scholarly rigor. The beginning of KAS's antiquarian excursion is presented first in its prospectus (1914).⁴⁰ It informed, that by that time, the KAS already

³⁸ "Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Work during the Year 1916-17" in Sarma, *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 4.

³⁹ Guuha-Thakurta, Tapati. 2004. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁴⁰ Sen, *Prospectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*, 1-5.

started conducting 'Research Tours' with 'small bodies of tourists' embarking regularly to inspect sites of historical importance in and around Guwahati.⁴¹ These research tours would be characterized by survey of sites, identification of sites and remnants such as sculptures and other artefacts that could eventually be placed in the Museum. As the early notice and subsequent discussion in the report also suggested, a prime motivator of the Samiti for taking up such demanding initiative would be the formation of the Museum. The Prospectus further noted that 'high patronage' was received on this ground – i.e., for collection and research. However, as one goes through the budget allocation of the year, one feels inclined to question the actual sufficiency of the financial support.⁴² The amount appears not more than a sum of 75 rupees. Further, Government funding would only be sanctioned on 18 July 1915.⁴³ Notwithstanding the budgetary limitations, the KAS would regularly conduct explorations and expeditions to sites identified, that now form the core of archaeological heritage in postcolonial Assam.

First considerable reconnaissance takes place in the year 1916-17. The first such site explored would be *Kannachal Ruins*, located to the east of Navagraha Temple in Guwahati. Information on the presence of two Shiva lingums at the site was first received by Hemchandra Goswami.⁴⁴ The research team of the KAS would clear the vegetation to survey the site. The findings from the region would comprise chiseled stones and bricks of huge dimensions and three Shiva Lingums in varied state of preservation. This expedition by the KAS is reminiscent of Westmacott's pioneering survey of Chardwar region.

⁴¹ Ibid, 5

⁴² Ibid, 1-5.

⁴³ Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 1-27.

⁴⁴ "Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Work during the Year 1916-17" in Sarma, *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 1-8.

The same season, exploration would also be conducted in *Saraniya Hill* and the site in Guwahati. The former yielded stone carvings, bricks and Ganesha sculpture containing mystic diagrams. The other site, situated to the north-east of Saraniya Hills, 3 miles from Guwahati, showed presence of what appeared to be a natural fortification. The Samiti expressed a possibility of this unnamed site being an ancient town, perhaps Pragjyotishpur of Mahabharata fame. Saraniya and Kannachal on the other hand, were conjectured by the explorers of the Samiti to have temples that might have been lost in oblivion by nature's ravages.

The Samiti recognized the promises of the sites. In collaboration with the Department of Ethnography, it urged further the Superintendent of Archaeological Survey of India's Eastern Circle to conduct excavation in the regions identified first-hand by the Samiti.⁴⁵ Although in the following year, i.e. 1918-19, the Assistant Superintendent of Archaeological Survey would visit the sites, as requested by the KAS; he expressed inability to conduct excavation immediately due to the ongoing excavations undertaken by the department. This was conveyed to the Honorary Director of Ethnography at that time. At this correspondence the KAS intended to start an excavation at its own behest.⁴⁶ The only exploration reported that year would be *Rakyashini Hill*.

The log of the tour maintained by Hemchandra Goswami indicates the immense energy put in by the members of the KAS. The visit undertaken by a team of two comprising H. C. Goswami and Dhireswaracharya Kaviratna, commenced in March 1918 with their arrival at the *char*

⁴⁵ Ibid, 1-8.

⁴⁶ "Report for the Year 1917-18 in Sarma" in *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 8-14.

surrounding Rakshyasini Hill, in the middle of Brahmaputra, above Soalkuchi village.⁴⁷ This very site had two forms of barriers that hindered them from reaching the archaeological remains present in the region. The difficult terrain was full of dense forest and wild animals that proved to be an obstruction. The cultivators around or the boatmen who ferried the researchers to the site would refuse to accompany even at the offer of *Bakshish* (tips). The physical reason apart, the tradition went such that monstrous snakes resided in the hillock. This legend was the reason behind the naming of the site as *Rakshyasini* or a she-monster. However, the site was, in fact, infested with snakes apart from leopards and tigers. None of this, however, would prevent the researchers from surveying the site. Here, one feels inclined to compare similar antiquarian undertakings by the DHAS. Description of overcoming such difficulty and original identification of sites would be missing in DHAS accounts of historical and antiquarian surveys.⁴⁸ KAS faced consistent underfunding and institutional neglect, which contrasts starkly with state-backed efforts like the DHAS. This reveals the hierarchy of knowledge systems within the colonial order, where the ASI and government-sponsored ethnographic projects were prioritized over vernacular initiatives.

On the other hand, the KAS's persistence in this context reflects a contest over epistemic authority – who has the right to study, name, and interpret the past. It complicates the binary of colonial dominance and native passivity, instead showing a layered structure of negotiation and exclusion. Upon reaching the top of the hill, the team would come across a hollow similar to what it had noted in previous excavations. The findings from the site would be cut stones

⁴⁷ Ibid, 8-14.

⁴⁸ Kataki, Sarveswar. 1933. *Historical and Antiquarian Survey of the District of Goalpara*. Transcript (No. 302, Serial No. 10), Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies; Barua, Birinchi K., 1933. *Historical and Antiquarian Survey of the District of Nowgong, Assam*. Transcript (No. 301, Vol. 50, Serial No. 10), [DHAS]. Unpublished.

and broken bricks. The researchers would further approach from another side of the slope to see if there were more antiquities to be found. Goswami and Dhireshwaracharya would find a cave and in it three stone slates cut in the shape of cleavers, that are commonly found in Bengali households. There would be no other object of antiquarian interest, however, vermillion marks observed on the roof of the cave betrayed clear evidences of practices of worship.

The report of the following year, i.e. 1918-19 would begin with the formation of a fresh team of researchers comprising members including Hemchandra Goswami, Jogendra Nath Barooah, Bishnu Ram Medhi, Sishir Kumar Barooah and Sona Ram Chowdhury.⁴⁹ The outcome of this season's exploration was another impressive discovery namely *Kanai Barasi Rock inscription*. It is a pre-Ahom inscription dating 1206 CE. It depicts the defeat of Bakhtiyar Khilji at the hands of the king of Kamata, ruler over the tract between Barnadi on the East and Karatoya on the West. A paper on this finding would be presented by one of the team members Sishir Kumar Barooah.

A feather would be added in the KAS's cap with the government's promises concerning the protection of Kannachal Hillock (KAS's exploration during years 1916-17) under the ancient monument Preservation Act, 1904.⁵⁰ The Samiti further reported moving the Government through Deputy Commissioner to preserve the other two important sites it explored the previous years, namely Rakshasini and Saraniya. Another important development noticed in the same year would be when the KAS thanked the Government for preserving the stone relics by means of an executive order. Several archaeological relics, such as a sculpture of

⁴⁹ "Report for the Year 1918-19" in Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 18-27.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 18-27.

Mahadeva, inscribed stone slabs and some other stone carvings would be retrieved from the bungalow of Deputy Commissioner Budmerson and placed in the compound of the KAS. Furthermore, it would commission the task of describing an earthen mound in village Ukhura Mauza Upper Barbhag, so that it could take steps to protect the mound.⁵¹

By virtue of extensive and ardent efforts of members such as Goswami, Kaviratna and various others, the organization would soon be on firm ground, especially in terms of collection and explorations achieved. The exploration activities conducted regularly during the first two decades would result in a considerable collection of a wide assortment of articles.⁵² The Samiti came to acquire a large number of manuscripts, sculptures, inscriptions with a special focus on inscribed cannons⁵³ and other weapons used in warfare waged by the Ahoms; alongside coins, potteries, paintings and so on. Further explorations include, namely a valuable inscribed stone slab obtained from one Tunstall's indigo plantation at Lanka on the Assam Bengal Railway, a Vishnu image (a sculpture) from Dibrugarh, further acquisition of relics out of an excursion to the royal families of Rani and Dimarua, a Durga sculpture from Tinsukia acquired by the Assam Government that was presented to the KAS, ancient coins and cowrie shells. The coins and shells would be a donation by Wilkins, manager of the Kaliabar Tea Estate.⁵⁴ However, it is to be mentioned that the occurrence of the War seemed to have caused disruption in the Samiti's work and funding during this period. As S. K. Bhuyan reports, the original annual sanction of Rupees 1000, which was granted first in 1915 was hoped to be

⁵¹ Ibid, 18-27.

⁵² A preliminary idea of the collection till about 1927 is hinted in Table 1 appended.

⁵³ A special feature of the region's archaeology as indicated not only by annual reports of the Samiti but also by Edward Gait in Gait, *Report on the Progress of Historical Research*; Also vide, Kataki, Sarveswar Sarma. 1920. "Asomor Purohi Bortop." *Annual Convention of Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti* in Sarma, *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 88-93.

⁵⁴ Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 3-34.

restored as the war was waning.⁵⁵ Then again, the concerns about securing funds for the Samiti's collection and exploration activities seems to have lessened by the end of the 1920s in view of the progress made. Bhuyan reports that there was a flow of increased funds that facilitated a heightened collection activity. In addition, there would be two important fund disbursements:⁵⁶

The role and contribution of Sarbeswar Kataki, an employee of the Assam government during this period, in the KAS's increased collection and excavation activities is worth highlighting. Bhuyan, then Honorary Secretary of the KAS proposed the appointment of one of its members towards the collection of relics from sites across the province over a specific span of time. The proposal was made at the KAS Executive Committee meeting held in 1929.⁵⁷ Several correspondences were exchanged between the Government of Assam, Director of Public Instruction and the Inspector of Schools. Following this, a leave of six weeks was sanctioned for this purpose to Sarbeswar Kataki. Further, an allocation of Rupees 265 would be made to cover the expenses of Kataki's survey. One of the excursions connected to this was at *Hatimura Devalaya*, Nowgong. Sarbeswar Kataki deputed by the Commissioner, AVD prepared a detailed report on the temple site, entailing its plan of preserving the temple. The report so prepared and forwarded to the Commissioner would eventually be published in the *Times of Assam* and Assamese magazine *Abahan*.⁵⁸ Other important surveys conducted at the behest of Kataki would be *Khetri* and *Hatimura Parbat*. Sarveswar Kataki and Sonaram Chowdhury would report the presence of valuable relics in places like Khetri.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 3-34.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 3-34.

⁵⁷ Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*, 223.

⁵⁸ Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 1-39.

Samiti's explorers would visit the site of Sri Surya Pahar in Goalpara, a prominent archaeological site protected by the ASI at present.⁵⁹ Findings from the site were rock carvings of Shivalingums, Vishnu and Durga belonging to Hindu tradition. There would be further rock engravings resembling Buddhist monasteries. There would be practically no epigraphic evidence supporting a clear indication of the latter at that time. This would be a crucial discovery by the Samiti, especially in consideration of the cultural significance of the site in Assam.⁶⁰ For this same season, *Deopani Ruins*, the debris of a small brick temple belonging to the 12th century, would also be surveyed by the KAS. Deopani is situated at a distance of 8 miles from Sadiya, the terrain would be a thickly covered jungle. The remains yielded at the site were a large tank, stone structures scattered across the site and an edict written on an octagonal stone pillar measuring 10 feet. An inscription in Ahom characters would be issued by Dihingia Bar Gohain with an official order for the Mishmis to dwell on the hills near the Dibang River and further four basketfuls of poison along with other tributes to the king.⁶¹ Later, the ASI would also explore these sites but the survey conducted this season by KAS would be far more extensive.

The strenuous physical labour, treacherous terrains, and bureaucratic barriers encountered – and often overcome – by the KAS illustrate that archaeology was not merely a scientific pursuit but also a political and cultural practice. The search for sites like Rakshyasini Hill, the interpretation of inscriptions like the Kanai Barasi rock edict, and the recovery of local relics (often without ASI support) point to a grassroots archaeology animated by regional pride and

⁵⁹ For a recent surface survey of the site, Barman, Bratatee. 2017. "Early Medieval Archaeological Landscape of Assam (AD 600–AD 1200): Preliminary Survey in Western Assam, District Goalpara." *Ancient Asia* 8 (4): 1-11; ASI Handout of Sri Surya Pahar Site, Goalpara.

⁶⁰ "Annual Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1928-29-30" in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 13-22.

⁶¹ Ibid.

the will to historicize the landscape from within. This localized archaeology challenged the orientalist impulse to frame Assam as marginal or peripheral. It also created an embodied, materially grounded method of uncovering Assam's heterodox early pasts – moving beyond colonial caricatures of the region as 'wild,' 'primitive,' or 'ahistorical.'

Soon the Samiti would be commissioned to prepare a list of articles that it had collected from all its years of surveys and explorations.⁶² The result of all of Samiti's acquisitions made through these explorations would be organized, and a list compiled by Kataki would be published before transferring these objects to the Provincial Museum. The compilation of a complete list of antiquities for transfer to the Provincial Museum marks a moment of institutional consolidation of regional heritage. By organizing and preserving these materials, the KAS was archiving Assam into history, giving permanence to its historical identity. This act of collecting and cataloguing may be read as an act of regional archiving as a form of sovereignty. The list compiled by Kataki and others marks a transition from scattered relics to a curated historical narrative – an indigenous move towards heritage-making and museumization.

The society also became the official acquirer of *Puthis*, collected by the Government of Assam from all across the province. However, the society's main intervention came in the field of material culture of the region, while its institutional coeval, the DHAS, produced systematically edited compilations of the former, i.e. the *Buranji puthi*.⁶³ The KAS's work occurred within – and against – a backdrop of colonial anthropology and orientalism, which treated Assam as a liminal space between 'civilization' and 'tribal primitivism.' The KAS's

⁶² Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*, 220-270.

⁶³ For a detailed treatment of DHAS, spearheaded by Dr. Bhuyan, and its role in editing some of the most celebrated *Assam Buranjis* vide Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2008. "History, buranjis and nation: Suryya Kumar Buuyan's histories in twentieth century Assam." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 45 (4): 473-507.

own collection of Buddhist, Shaivite, and Shakta relics, its foundational intervention in local puthis and inscriptions, and its conscious presentation of sites like Pragjyotishpur as ancient towns of civilizational significance, disrupted orientalist binaries. By locating Assam within broader subcontinental histories, rather than as a cultural outlier, the KAS scholars were reinscribing Assam into the Indian civilizational imaginary, but on their own terms. This was both a counter-orientalist and regionally self-assertive move. The Samiti was not merely recovering the past – it was producing a past that affirmed Assamese identity, intellectual autonomy, and cultural dignity. It is through these local acts of recovery, negotiation, and institutional labor that the modern historical consciousness of Assam was forged – outside the privileged centers of the metropolises or colony’s presidencies, and often in spite of the colonial gaze.

The Birth of a Trilingual Journal: *The Journal of the Assam Research Society*

Alongside the physical labor of exploration and collection, a major epistemic endeavor of the KAS was dissemination – an act central to the making of ancient Kamarupa. The publication of the *Journal of the Assam Research Society* (JARS) in 1933, two decades after the Society’s foundation, marked a significant intellectual leap. It may be worth delving into whether or not these were part of, what historians of colonial archives, Mia Carter and Barbara Harlow have called, ‘Jonesian Orientalism’ or its opponent, the pre-independence nationalism.⁶⁴ As a quarterly journal, JARS served not merely as a vehicle of communication but as what might

⁶⁴ Carter, Mia, and Barbara Harlow. 2003. *Archives of Empire: From the East India Company to the Suez Canal*. Vol. 1. London: Duke University Press. 22

be called an ‘epistemic device’ – a medium through which a distinct historical consciousness about Assam’s antiquity was crafted, circulated, and legitimized.⁶⁵

The launch of the JARS pronounced a significant turning point in Assam’s intellectual and cultural life. The journal emerged not merely as a documentation tool, but as an epistemic device for negotiating Assamese antiquity within a national and colonial framework. The *Journal* became both an archive and an articulation of an autonomous historical imagination. The founding editor Kanak Lal Barua made a grant of Rupees 300 to meet the cost of the publication.⁶⁶ This move from field surveys to print intervention mirrors a broader shift across colonial India, where vernacular knowledge societies sought to institutionalize regional pasts. The Journal positioned itself, much like its counterparts, such as the magazines and journals of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Varendra Anusandhan Samiti, as a site for reclaiming antiquity, but with uniquely local concerns. It was the first of its kind in the region, in terms of the subject of enquiry.⁶⁷ Bhuyan was the editor of the journal. Before the publication of the JARS began, the Society used to meet regularly and the members would present papers based on the works accomplished annually. These would be published regularly in its annual and other reports, as indicated above. While the early reports focus on works

⁶⁵Dodson, Michael S. 2010. “Contesting Translations: Orientalism and the Interpretation of the Vedas.” In *An Intellectual History for India*, edited by Shruti Kapila, 35-51. Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

⁶⁶ “Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for the year 1932, 1933 & 1934” in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*, 230-237.

⁶⁷ Before JARS, released in 1933, there were numbers of magazines that had been circulating in the region. The first Assamese language magazine was the well-known Arunodoi, published first in 1846 from Sibsagar by American Baptist Missionaries. But these would be, without exception, literary magazines containing miscellaneous articles on different aspects of the society, politics, literature and so on. JARS would be the first Journal, as compared to the format of magazine, dealing with historical but more importantly archaeological topics.

accomplished, meetings, and budgets of the KAS, the JARS presents a rich archive and a scholarly trove of the region.

While the society began with the search for archaeological relics, its next step was effective dissemination of these researches. The objective of the JARS stated, “Research proper and collection and preservation of records and relics are however the legitimate functions of the Society of which the Journal is the organ.”⁶⁸

Yet it was not a passive record-keeper. It was an active producer of history, theorizing the past with conceptual and evidentiary rigor. The JARS opened with an appeal to the public, reflecting a conscious desire to root its intellectual purpose within a regional moral community,⁶⁹

“In a small province like Assam where men taking interest in research work of this nature are not yet in considerable numbers, a journal like this cannot prosper without the sympathy and support of the general public.”⁷⁰

This formulation aligns with Dodson’s idea of a counter-colonial, nationalist modernity – the domain of culture, values, and self-definition, elsewhere also formulated by Partha Chatterjee.⁷¹ S. K. Bhuyan and Kanak Lal Barua, envisaged the journal as a vernacular

⁶⁸ Barua, “Introductory”, 2

⁶⁹ Ibid, 1-2.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 2.

⁷¹ Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Dodson, Michael S. 2010. “Contesting Translations: Orientalism and the Interpretation of the Vedas.” In *An Intellectual History for India*, edited by Shruti Kapila, 35-51. Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

intellectual sphere inviting ‘young men of light and learning’ to shape the region’s historiographical future,

“The field of research in Assam is vast and it is hoped that young men of light and learning will join this association and enrich the history of their motherland. It will be a matter of extreme regret if they do not avail themselves of the opportunity which this Samiti affords.”⁷²

It was, in short, a counter-orientalist intervention. But at the same time, the journal was not uncritical of Orientalist methods. The first volume of the Journal featured the widely discussed and cited article by James Phillip Mills, then Director of Ethnography, Assam. Here, Mills emphasized the need for ‘written records,’ ‘objective standpoint,’ and ‘high civilization,’ echoing colonial epistemologies rooted in textuality, empiricism, and civilizational hierarchy.⁷³ But Mills’ recommendations – such as preservation of intangible traditions and the use of drawings and photographs – were selectively internalized by the KAS. In some cases, as this chapter shows, the Samiti’s methods deviated from the colonial preference for textual proof, embracing vernacular modes of knowing. Mills’ concern with ‘looting’ of archaeological objects, too, reveals tensions between colonial archaeological practice and indigenous antiquarian labor.⁷⁴

⁷² Two factors are worth pointing out, especially as this thesis is being written in a particular intellectual and cultural climate. The problematic gendered reference to ‘motherland’ while maintaining an exclusive undertone of welcoming only male researchers within the scope of the Samiti. Ibid, 2.

⁷³ Mills, J. P. 1933. “Assam as a field for research.” *Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) 1 (1): 4-10.

⁷⁴ Among others Singh (2004) provides an all-embracing view of a commonplace ‘looting’ tendency in archaeological contexts, that would not only involve uninitiated and unlettered local workers mostly but the likes of Alexander Cunningham or John Marshall, Colin Mackenzie would be equally guilty. Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*. Another useful reference in this regard is Lahiri, Nayanjyot. 2018. *Marshalling the Past: Ancient India and Its Modern Histories*. New Delhi: The Orient Blackswan.

Among the most significant intellectual figures of the journal was Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode. He played a visionary role in recognizing the need for a regionally anchored, culturally conscious institution dedicated to the search for Assam's ancient past, at a time when such intellectual endeavours were still peripheral to mainstream colonial or nationalist priorities. His insight into the importance of studying local inscriptions, manuscripts, oral traditions, and archaeological remains within a critical historical framework anticipated many of the later developments in regional historiography. His contributions to the JARS extended beyond descriptive antiquarianism to methodological and conceptual innovation. His study of the Anji symbol in pre-Ahom copperplates involved comparative epigraphy, refuting earlier Orientalist readings.⁷⁵ The sign, a standard opening salutation in Kamarupa inscriptions was found also in Nowgong plates of Balavarman as well as the seals attached to his other inscriptions, Guwahati plates of Indrapala, and Sualkuchi plates of Ratnapala (deciphered by Hoernle). Aside Kamarupa inscriptions, Pala inscriptions of Nyayapala and Gopala of Bengal also contained the sign termed by Padmanath as *Anji*. His meticulous work on the Nidhanpur plates – founded on field visits and cross-verification of boundary descriptions in both inscriptions and sacred texts – exemplifies an 'epistemology of presence'.⁷⁶ Padmanath visited the location of the said plates in Nidhanpur, Panchakhanda, Sylhet in the second phases of its recovery in April 1926.⁷⁷ Unlike other scholars of his time such as Nalinikanta Bhattachali, Padmanath's assertions would be based on direct observation, and the author would repeatedly

⁷⁵ Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1933. "The Sign in Ancient Copperplate Inscriptions of Kamarupa" *Journal of Assam Research Society*, 1(1), 9-12. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti

⁷⁶ Dillon, Patrick and Tony Howe. 2007. "An Epistemology of Presence and Reconceptualization in Design Education" *Interchange*, 38, 69-88.

⁷⁷ Vidyavinode, M. M. P. Padmanatha Bhattacharyya. 1927-28. "A Third Lost Plate of the Nidhanpur Plates of Bhaskarvarman." *Epigraphia Indica* (Archaeological Survey of India) 19: 245-250.

critique any indirect studies such as Bhattashali's.⁷⁸ This is a notable aspect of the JARS as an organ of the KAS. Unlike metropolitan or armchair scholars, Padmanath insisted on on-site validation and embodied engagement with artefacts. His description of Laur ruins, grounded in both local Vaishnava traditions and epigraphic evidence, reflects vernacular historiography – produced by local scholars, using hybrid sources, and engaging with sacred geography as much as political history. What placed scholars such as Padmanath at par with European scholars of the Asiatic Society and other leading names in the early days of archaeology in India, is their scholarly precision. Padmanath envisaged the distinctive nature of the geography of Kamarupa as political, on the one hand and sacred on the other. Padmanath believed Sylhet featured in the sacred aspect of the Kamarupa geography. Padmanath provided an early and unprejudiced reading of the names of the region's historical sites. In doing so, he closely read the boundary specifications of a region mentioned in the inscriptions and collated it with references from the sacred texts or the classics.⁷⁹ This aspect of boundary specifications as a key feature of Kamarupa inscriptions has been dealt in detail by Brajadulal Chattopadhyay.⁸⁰

Padmanath's studies are replete with crucial historical information and observations on the region. With reference to this fundamental discovery of Kamarupa, the historian informed us about two *gotra(s)* (lineage group) of *Brahmins* in charge of the composition of copper plate inscriptions. The official designation of these Brahmin masters of copper plates would be *Pattaka-patti* and the ones associated with the issuance of Nidhanpur plates would be

⁷⁸ Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1936. "Location of the Nidhanpur Grant of Bhaskara-Varman of Kamarupa." *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) 4 (3): 58-66.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 58-66.

⁸⁰ Chattopadhyay, Brajadulal. 1985. *Aspects of Ruralhattp Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India*. Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences.

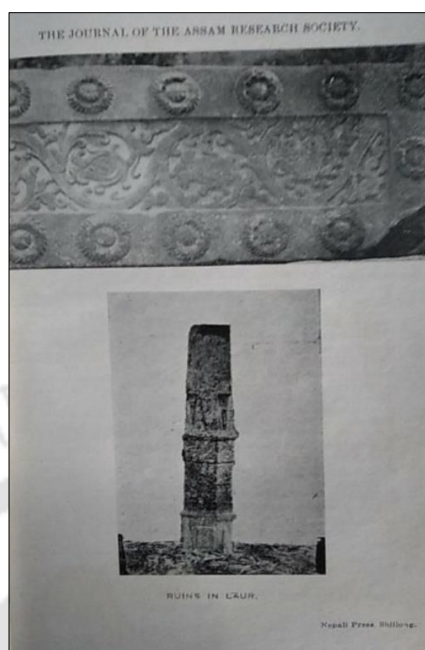
Sadharana Swamin of Prachetasa *gotra* and Monoratha Swamin of Katyayana *gotra*.⁸¹ While the lineage of the former in Sylhet would not continue, in its absence the latter would become the sole inheritor of the seminal plates. The very findspot Panchakhanda pargana, Sylhet was based on the importation of Brahmins of five specific *gotra(s)* to the land. The five groups of Brahmins invited further five groups, who, as Padmanath put forward, brought the Nidhanpur plates to this land.

Padmanath's account of a previously unrecorded ruins of a fortified palace in Laur was an important early contribution to the antiquarian studies. Compared to the descriptions of archaeological remains in Assam, provided earlier by the colonial officials, who set the tone of an antiquarian discourse of the region, Padmanath's appeared distinctive. It is worth quoting here that a part of his tour included a religious ablution. "In March last, I went to Laur to bathe in the Panatirtha which commemorate the piety of Adwaita."⁸² A crucial outcome of an exploration by the learned Pandit was a proposal to the Superintendent of Archaeology, Eastern Circle for the preservation of the ruins under Ancient Monuments Preservation Act.

⁸¹ Ibid, 58-66.

⁸² Vidyavinode, Pandit Padmanath Bhattacharya. 1936. "Ruins in Laur." *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) 4 (1): 24-27.

Figure 8: Photograph accompanying Padmanath's account



Source: Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1936. "Ruins in Laur." *Journal of the Assam Research Society*, 4 (1): 24-27.

In many ways, Padmanath's essays fulfill the intellectual trajectory sketched by Dodson, who highlights the role of Indian Sanskritists in the making of colonial knowledge, forging a vision of counter-colonial modernity through critical engagement with orientalist translations and interpretations. Rather than reproducing orientalist objectivity, scholars like Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath shaped an alternative knowledge practice that was rigorous, regionally rooted, and conceptually dynamic. While Padmanath was and is still often criticized for orthodoxy, this thesis argues against this view. Recognizing Kamarupa from the perspective of sacred geography, which covered and corrected many myths about the valley was pioneering. Padmanath's readings of Brahmanical lineages, his formulation of copperplate scribes (pattaka-pattis), and his attention to ritual practices (such as ablutions at Panatirtha) together offered a textured and embodied sense of the past. His epigraphic method, anchored in both local knowledge and philological skill, marked a profound epistemic intervention. Thus, Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinode must be seen not only as a founding

figure associated with the KAS, but as a methodological innovator and foremost cultural thinker, whose intellectual labour and foresight laid the groundwork for the vernacularization of antiquarian scholarship in Assam. His contribution deserves a more central place in both the history of the KAS and the broader story of Assam's modern historical imagination.

The first editor of the journal Kanaklal Barua is another key contributor of note who brought to the journal a different but equally impactful voice. Associated with all orientalist research institutes of the time in Assam, Bengal as well as in the metropole, Barua was a leading scholar of the 20th century oriental and Indological practices in the Valley.⁸³ Simultaneously being a leading scholar-bureaucrat of the region, Kanaklal was also a noted institution builder. Aside from his contributions to the foundation of a number of local bodies of social and civil importance such as Assam Club, Earle Sanitarium and a hospital, his intellectual participation is of greater significance. A prominent figure of the Assamese Renaissance movement known as *Jonaki*, Barua was also a leading personality in the historiographical movement in the Valley.⁸⁴ Some of his greatest contributions are to be found in the pages of the JARS. Kanaklal's contributions in the JARS reflected concerns that emerged within the Antiquarian discourses of the 19th and turn of the 20th centuries. For example, the central issue of Kamarupa genealogy, relevant to this day, was tackled by Kanaklal based on epigraphic sources.⁸⁵ The author of *EHK*, noted three main seats of power in the pre-Ahom time, i.e. Pragjyotisha, Durjayanagari and Harupesvara, corresponding respectively to modern-day Guwahati and roughly modern-day Tezpur. He identified Naraka as the fountainhead of three major dynasties, namely Bhauma Varman, Mlechhas and the Bhauma Palas in the early period on

⁸³ Das, Murari Charan. 1959. "Rai Bahadur K. L. Barua." *Journal of the Assam Research Society* XIII: 2-6.

⁸⁴ Barua, Kanaklal. 1973. *Studies in the Early History of Assam*. Edited by Maheswar Neog. Jorhat-Gauhati, Assam: Asam Sahitya Sabha.

⁸⁵ Barua, Kanak Lal. 1938. "Genealogical List of Pragjyotisha Dynasties." *Journal of Assam Research Society* 6 (1): 12-17.

the valley corresponding roughly till the 10th century CE. Dominant as it might be, this potentially partial and Indological assumption showed a rather simple political structure with an unbroken and almost uncontested continuity of the Bhauma rulers for close to nine centuries. Kanaklal's take on genealogy was rather speculative than definitive and he made useful remarks on the periodization of Kamarupa rulers. Similarly, another of his noted essays exalted the valor of the Assamese rulers.⁸⁶ It had the 20th century nationalist undertone that emphasized how in the face of Mughal military and strategic superiority, Ahoms and the early medieval rulers of Kamarupa succeeded in stemming the tide of Muslim invasions for nearly half a millennium. Woven around a chronological detail of Muslim invasions in the region, the text built on medieval Persian chronicles most importantly *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, *Tarikh-Fateh-i-Assam*, *Tabaquat-i-Nassiri* as well as medieval and early period inscriptions.

At times, Kanaklal's entries to the JARS can be observed to be predominantly speculative in nature in establishing, for example, the origins of trans-Eurasian civilization and its parallel or correspondence with that of Assam.⁸⁷ Such writings of Kanaklal are much in keeping with a general Indological leaning of the time, i.e. a preoccupation with the origin myth. In establishing his quasi-diffusionist data Kanaklal based this essay on anthropologist, Dr. Hutton's findings. Another speculative extract in the same year collected statements from third century Chinese account by I-Tsing and Buddhist treatise Manjusri Mulakalpa that divulged the presence of Indian rulers in East Asian countries such as Burma, Indochina as well as far as Yunnan.⁸⁸ As was the case with a lot of similar kind of writings even in pages of the JASB,

⁸⁶ Barua, Kanak Lal. 1935. "Stemming of the Tide of Muslim Conquest in Eastern India." *Journal of the Assam Research Society* III (2): 47-59.

⁸⁷ Barua, Kanak Lal. 1939. "Prehistoric Cultures in Assam." *Journal of Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti) VII (2): 35-40.

⁸⁸ Barua, Kanaklal. 1939. "Were There Indian Colonists from Assam in Indo-china?" *Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti) VII (2): 57-63.

these would be hypothetical and precarious in nature, often not adhering to the empiricist or objective demands of historical scholarship of the time. Kanaklal's thoughts might be an extension of west-centric Indological bent of thinking. Some of these quintessentially Indological essays were directed at establishing cultural superiority and lifting the 'benighted province' from the darkness of marginality.⁸⁹ However, he would make numerous other contributions to the JARS. For example, the acquisition of the Amherst Collection of coins along with H. H. Wilson's note, by the founding editor presented a valuable orientalist document of the time.⁹⁰ Barua's scholarship was part of a larger project of dignifying Assam's history in the face of colonial marginalization. As the author of *Early History of Kamarupa*, his imprint on the region's intellectual self-fashioning is undeniable.

What deserves equal attention is the editorial labor Kanaklal undertook. While S. K. Bhuyan's work with the DHAS is well-recognized, Barua's quiet stewardship of the JARS helped sustain and shape a unique knowledge infrastructure for Assam's precolonial past. His editorial method – grounded in interdisciplinary openness and a desire for public engagement – allowed the journal to accommodate a range of voices, from Sanskritists to amateur archaeologists.

One such figure was Sarbeswar Kataki. His extensive tours across the valley and documentation both under the KAS and the DHAS form an informative body of work on the early 20th century archaeology of the valley.⁹¹ He was appointed by the Executive Committee

⁸⁹ This term is frequently deployed by Surya Kuma Bhuyan in many of his writings to describe Assam valley. Similar such terms employed in colonial scholarship to describe the Northeastern frontier provinces of British Indian are problematized in the next chapter.

⁹⁰ Barua, Kanaklal. 1938. "Amherst Collection of Assam Coins." *Journal of the Assam Research Society* 3 (4): 128-29.

⁹¹ Kataki, S. 1933. *Historical and Antiquarian Survey: Report on Goalpara*, Transcript (No. 302, Serial No. 10), [DHAS], Unpublished.

of the KAS following resolution in 1929, for collecting materials of historical importance from all across the province.⁹² One of his visits included ancient remains at Singri Tea Estate in Darrang. Kataki's descriptive approach and stylistic assessment of the architecture ascribed the period of its construction to the 9th century CE. The scholar further ascribed the temple to be dedicated to the worship of goddess Durga, based on an iconographic rule developed by noted archaeologist R. D. Banerji. The findings recovered from the site of the ruin that was spread across a *katha* (a local unit of measurement) of land covered with thick vegetation, were – images of *Gandharba*, a door frame with *Kirtimukha* engraving, stone with lotus decoration in high relief, pillars with lotus decorated brackets and a number of chiselled stones.⁹³

His writings in the JARS suggested the existence of a 'Kamarupa School of Art' – a category drawn from iconographic comparisons, stylistic analysis, and close material observation.⁹⁴ Though this theory remained underdeveloped, it signals an early effort to theorize Assam's aesthetic past in terms comparable to other Indian art traditions. What it also suggested was emergence in the early centuries in Kamarupa professional group of artists conversant with the art and architectural landscape of the subcontinent. However, the cursory nature of the observations and the unavailability of the further notes in JARS, might lead to suggest that this formulation did not get enough substantiation. Another study by Kataki could be cited in support. In the very next year, Kataki was commissioned to examine a chance-find at the site of railway station near Uzanbajar. The site yielded three stone images of what the author

⁹² Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 39.

⁹³ Kataki, Sarbeswar. 1937. "Ancient Remains at Singri in Darrang." *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* 4 (4): 93-95.

⁹⁴ Kataki, Sarbeswar. 1941. "The Kamarupa School of Sculpture." *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) 8 (2): 38-43.

described as ‘excellent carvings’, of a moderate dimension of 2 ft. by 1 ft. The images were uncovered on June 7, 1942 at a depth of 4.5 ft. of a slit trench.⁹⁵ Interestingly, Kataki’s finding presented description of the images aimed at iconographic identification. Whether or not these presented particular features of Kamarupa sculpture or any follow-up on his formulation regarding the Kamarupa School of Sculpture was altogether absent. Nonetheless, two of the three images recovered, namely a black stone carving of a certain identification of Brahma in relief and three-dimension, and the other was of doubtfully identified with either Mahesvara or Indra. While the third sculpture was found in mutilated state, the other two just mentioned were in sound state of preservation. The stylistic features of the sculptures in brief were both highly embellished and the settings were crowded with accompanying figures. Kataki’s studies are noted for the value of direct and intensive physical explorations.

Rajmohan Nath, an engineer and autodidact, contributed critical findings on early Vaishnavism in Davaka, the cultic conflict with Kamakhya, and a series of inscriptions in hybrid scripts. Nath, among other things, was an expert epigraphist without receiving any formal training. One of his notable contributions was the discovery of archaeological and epigraphic remains in the Kapili-Jumna Valley while in service in Nagaon district. A versatile scholar Rajmohan Nath was also an exponent of the Nath-Yogi cult.⁹⁶

One of his extensive findings from Nagaon betrayed early traces of Vaishnavism in Kamarupa. R. M. Nath operated extensively in the Davaka region of the district, and in this

⁹⁵ Kataki, Sarbeswar. 1942. "The Discovery of Three Stone Images at Gauhati." *The Journal of Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) IX (3-4): 159-161.

⁹⁶ Sharma, Kanak Chandra. 2013. "Raj Mohan Nath (1899-1965), a Scholar Extra-Ordinary: Engineer turned Scholar-historian." In *Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti Through the Decades*, edited by Kanak Chandra Sharma, Banikanta Sarma and Dharmeswar Chutia, 535-539. Guwahati: The Centenary Celebration Committee, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

particular instance, he unearthed nine images of Vasudeva and Narayana bearing affinity with the Pala sculptures. These were considered by the antiquarian as indicative of the prevalence of Vasudeva cult before Sankaradeva propagated Vaishnavism in Assam. These findings are dated by the scholar to the reign of Pala king Dharmapala (1090 - 1115 CE).⁹⁷ This finding supplied crucial early evidence of conflict between the worship of the cult of Devi, i.e. Kamakhya and that of Vishnu. In fact, according to the author the ruler Dharmapala became a Vaishnava and in an indirect context invited the displeasure of Goddess Kamakhya.

Another of R. M. Nath's accounts, deal with the finding of two sets of plates from the house of a Mikir, a hill-tribesmen of the valley, near Digaroo railway station in the Assam Bengal Railway, Kamrup District. The first set comprising six brass plates and the second set comprising three, supplied details on the history of ancient Assam. The plates contained 12-15 lines of inscriptions on each side, and showed a distinct peculiarity of having a mixture of Sanskrit, Brahmi, modern Bengali and Assamese alphabets. This gestured to the palimpsestic nature of Assam's epigraphic archive. For decipherment, he sent it to Padmanath, who couldn't decipher it – reflecting scholarly humility and collaborative ethos.⁹⁸

The above personalities are presented to provide a glimpse of the kind of debates spurred in the pages of the JARS and by the activities of the KAS. Aside from the contributors discussed above, there were others, who were inextricable to the making of ancient Kamarupa. P. D. Chaudhury was one such scholar. The founding curator of the Provincial Museum and the person in charge of the archaeological collection of the KAS prior to that, Chaudhury

⁹⁷ Nath, Raj Mohan. 1938. "Early Vaishnavism in Kamarupa." *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* 6 (1): 23-25.

⁹⁸ Nath, Raj Mohan. 1936. "Digaroo Plates." Edited by Rai K. L. Barua Bahadur. *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* 4 (1): 22-23.

contributed to the JARS significantly. His decipherment of inscriptions such as Khonamukh, Doobi and Umachal inscriptions were central to an indigenous discourse of Kamarupa.⁹⁹ Other founding members of the KAS such as Shibnath Smrititirtha, Uttam Chandra Barua, Taranath Kavyavinode, whose active involvements in instituting the organization were widely acclaimed.¹⁰⁰ But, what set these scholars apart, as discussed above was their intensive intellectual labour, through intrepid travel and comprehensive documentation of relics across the valley.

These figures collectively demonstrate that the JARS was not a mere publication – it was a site of knowledge production embedded in fieldwork, community memory, and nationalist aspiration. Its pages served as a stage where claims about Assam's antiquity were debated, refined, and asserted. The journal was not always methodologically homogeneous; it contained speculative as well as rigorous contributions. But it was precisely this capaciousness that enabled a plural epistemic space – where sacred geography, empirical archaeology, epigraphy, and historical narrative coexisted. In this sense, the JARS functioned as both a repository and a workshop. It presented Assam's material culture as worthy of scholarly attention and national pride, long before it received institutional validation from bodies like the ASI. In the intellectual history of South Asia, its contribution remains underexplored. As

⁹⁹ Chaudhury, Premadhar. 1941. "The Khonamukh Copper Plate Grant of Dharmapala of Pragijyotisha." *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) VIII (4): 116-26.; Chaudhury, Premadhar. 1942. "Copper-Plate Grant of the Kamarupa Kings." *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) IX (1&2): 41-51.; Chaudhury, Premadhar. 1944. "A New Set of Copper-Plate Inscription of Bhaskarvarman - A General Note." *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) XI (3&4): 33-38.

¹⁰⁰ These executive committee members at the foundation of the Samiti were, alongside dozen others including Dhireswaracharya and Padmanath, behind the ideation of the Samiti since the days Uttar Banga Sahitya Sammelan or the North Bengal Literary Convention in April 1912. These were the main figures mooted the proposal of the Assam Research Society at the said Convention. Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhana Samiti*, 1-27.

Jayeeta Sharma has shown, Assamese literary and public culture has been well studied in the context of early modern nationalism.¹⁰¹ But the historical imagination nurtured in the pages of JARS – rooted in material remains and rigorous inquiry – deserves a place in the broader history of vernacular knowledge production in colonial India.

The journal did not conform to the colonial state's epistemological standards or serve its political imperatives. Its authors, working with limited resources and institutional marginality, created a body of scholarship that laid the foundation for modern archaeology and history-writing in Assam. The JARS, in short, was not only the voice of the KAS. It was the voice of a region reclaiming its past, on its own terms.

In Dialogue with Eastern India: Locating the KAS in the Archaeological Map of India

Assam's inclusion in the Bengal Presidency from 1826 to 1874 situates it squarely within the eastern Indian world of early modern museology, historiography, and antiquarianism. Yet, this historical contiguity is rarely emphasized in broader narratives of Eastern Indian archaeology. In his important study, Sraman Mukherjee expands the Bengal-centric focus of Indian antiquarianism to include Orissa and Bihar.¹⁰² However, the Brahmaputra Valley remains largely outside this frame. This thesis addresses that gap by situating the KAS and its journal, the JARS, as key intellectual and epistemological interventions in the making of regional history and heritage in early 20th century India.

¹⁰¹ Sharma, Jayeeta. 2011. *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

¹⁰² Mukherjee, Sraman. 2009. "Unearthing the Pasts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa: Archaeology, Museums and History Writing in the Making of Ancient Eastern India, 1862-1936." PhD Thesis, University of Calcutta, Kolkata.

The KAS did not emerge in a vacuum. As Tarun Chandra Bhagabati has shown, the inspiration for such regional scholarly bodies lay in institutions like the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (1894), which sought to recover the past through the collection of inscriptions, artefacts, and manuscripts.¹⁰³ Bhagabati traces how this movement, initially centered in Bengal, expanded through district societies like the Varendra Anusandhan Samiti, Rajshahi (1910), and reached Assam with the formation of the Bangiya Sahityanushilani Sabha in 1908, a precursor to the KAS. Within Bengal itself number of district-based research institutes came up such as in Birbhum and the north Bengal-centric Varendra Anusandhan Samiti. The latter, spearheaded by noted scholar Akshay Kumar Maitreya, became particularly crucial especially in terms of collaboration between scholars as well as scholarly exchanges with Assam Research Society. Further, the Rangpur chapter of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, concerned with the archaeological discoveries of North Bengal and Assam.¹⁰⁴ These institutions collectively represented a regionalist response to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, whose sweeping mandate across the sciences and orientalist Asiatic studies left little space for local historical imaginations. In contrast, the KAS and Varendra Anusandhan Samiti focused their efforts on field exploration, epigraphic research, and the protection of heritage in their respective regions.

Such initiatives are often viewed in terms of one-way inspiration derived from Renaissance impacted Bengal.¹⁰⁵ But that it also contributed to a broader archaeological vision and a

¹⁰³ Bhagabati, *The Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*, 1-64.

¹⁰⁴ Brought about in 1915, Bihar and Orissa Research Society too made fleeting references to discoveries in Kamarupa but an active scholarly exchange between the learned societies and activities in Bihar and that in Assam was in want. *Proceedings of Inaugural Meeting of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Held at Government House, Bankipore, 20th January 1915 in the *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol. 1 (1), 133-141.

¹⁰⁵ The most widely read examples of Bengal Renaissance in relation to Assam would be: Guha, Amalendu. 1991. "The Impact of Bengal Renaissance" In *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, by Amalendu Guha, 249-263 Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta; Misra, Tilottama. 1985. "Social Criticism in

competing vernacular modernity in the colonies – a concept this thesis argues is embodied by the work of the KAS – is rarely, if ever, highlighted. Unlike colonial knowledge practices centered in Calcutta or the metropole, the KAS, and it holds true also for the Varendra Anusandhan Samiti, enacted a mode of knowledge rooted in travel, observation, embodied experience, and deep regional immersion.¹⁰⁶ This was visible in the archaeological surveys of Hemchandra Goswami and Sarbeswar Kataki, the epigraphic insights of Padmanath Bhattacharya, and the material culture documentation later transferred to the Provincial Museum.

Crucially, the Samiti's objective was not to insert Assam into the national imagination in the abstract, but to answer urgent regional imperatives – to free the region's past from colonial distortions, to protect its heritage, and to ground its identity in local cultural memory.¹⁰⁷ In this, the KAS differed from the 19th century nationalist historians described by scholars like Jae-Eun Shin and Bodhisattva Kar, who often sought to align Assam with the 'mainstream' of Indian civilization.¹⁰⁸ Instead, the KAS's output, as preserved in the JARS and early

Nineteenth Century Assamese Writing: The Orunodoi." *Economic and Political Weekly* (Economic and Political Weekly) 20 (37): 1558-1566.

¹⁰⁶ Maitreya, Akshay Kumar. 1985. *Uttarbanger Puratattva Samgraha*. Kolkata: Pratiti Prakashani.

¹⁰⁷ While this may be understood simply as regional history but in academic parlance there is a distinction between regional history and history of the region. The former has an affective, nay nationalist connotation and the latter is more objective, so to speak so to. In recent decades the assumptions underlying regional history writing has been reconsidered. Some of these works include Morrison, B. M. 1980. *Political Centres and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*. New Delhi: Rawat; Sahu, B. P. 2013. *The Changing Gaze: Regions and the Constructions of Early India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Sahu, B. P. 2016. "Writing Alternative Histories: Case of Early India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 51 (18): 30-36.

¹⁰⁸ Shin, Jae-Eun. 2018. "Region Formed and Imagined: Reconsidering temporal, spatial and social context of Kamariipa." In *Modern Practices in Northeast India: History, Culture, Representation*, edited by Lipokmar Dzuwachu and Manjeet Baruah, 23-55. London and New York: Routledge; Kar, Bodhisattva. 2007. "Framing Assam: Plantation Capital, Metropolitan Knowledge and a Regime of Identities 1790s-1930s". Doctoral Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

publications in Bengali and Assamese, suggests a more situated, regionally grounded, and archaeologically-driven engagement with the past.

Regional Societies, Vernacular Epistemologies: Towards an Eastern Indian Archaeology

The career of Rakhal Das Bandopadhyay, best known for his discovery of Mohenjo Daro, adds another important dimension to this Eastern Indian discourse. As Brajadulal Chattopadhyay notes, Rakhal Das's work extended far beyond the Indus Valley.¹⁰⁹ His writings – both scholarly and fictional – constructed a vivid and critical historical imagination of Eastern India. In his novella on Gauda king Shashanka, also potentially the finest example of dramatized history to this day, Kamarupa is described as an already independent polity in post-Gupta times, hinting at the region's antiquity and political distinctiveness.¹¹⁰

“আর্যাবর্তে মৌখরী রাজগণ একাধিপত্য স্থাপন করিয়াছিলেন, ব্রহ্মাবর্তে ও পঞ্চনদে স্থানীশ্বরের বৈশ্য
রাজবংশ ধীরে ধীরে অধিকার বিস্তার করিতেছিল, কামরূপ বহুকাল পূর্বে স্বাধীনতা লাভ
করিয়াছিল।”¹¹¹

Moukhari kings had established a monopoly in Aryavarta, the Vaishya
dynasty of Sthanishvara was gradually expanding its power in the

¹⁰⁹ Bandyopadhyay, Rakhal Das. 2018. *Bangalar Itihash*. Sixth. Kolkata: Dey's.

¹¹⁰ Bandyopadhyay's dramatised history writing deserves careful attention and study. For example, while the topic of Shashanka forms a major part of undergraduate syllabus in West Bengal, students are rarely, if ever, referred Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyay. This shows the regressive practice in Indian academy of textbook approach to history, not inspiring students to think.

¹¹¹ Bandyopadhyay, Rakhal Das. 2001. *Shashanka*. Edited by Second. Calcutta: West Bengal State Book Board, 5.

Brahmavarta and Panchanda, Kamarupa had gained independence long ago.

(Translation, self)

In describing the rise of Shashanka, Rakhal Das provides a holistic picture of eastern Indian vassals during the post-Gupta era. What is particularly notable is how he reads history into extant architectural and antiquarian remains.¹¹² A chapter is named *Pratnakatha*, literally meaning ancient story. He however applies the term 'Pratna' in an archaeological sense or more accurately in the early 20th century context, to mean antiquarianism. As the Superintending Archaeologist of ASI, Western Circle he had ample opportunity to explore the historical structures across India. In a unique contribution in *Pratnakatha* the author provides literary narrative of architectural remains belonging to the Gupta era in Magadha.¹¹³ Historian B. D. Chattopadhyay aptly remarks that it is not easy to determine Rakhal Das Banerjee's place as a historian of Bengal, since he is still relatively unpopular within professional circles of the discipline of history¹¹⁴

The lack of appreciation of Rakhal Das applies not only to the history and archeology of Bengal but entire Eastern India. Rakhal Das operated in a period when history and archaeology, as modern disciplinary branches or definition were yet to crystallize although they had started to gain some academic and institutional footing. Rakhal Das' archaeological pursuits and occupation is particularly constructive in terms of the divergent contributions he made in different modern areas of the said disciplines. In fact, the period of Rakhal Das' extensive

¹¹² Ibid, 1-267.

¹¹³ Bandyopadhyay, Rakhal Das. 1914. "Pratnakatha." In *Shashanka*, by Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyay. Calcutta.

¹¹⁴ "It is not easy to determine Rakhal Das Banerjee's place as a historian of Bengal - not easy because in professional circles of historical study he is still relatively unpopular." Bandyopadhyay, *Bangalar Itihash*, Prelude.

archaeological activity is marked by the idea of ‘discovery’. While this idea is a result of official surveys of the colonial rule most predominantly in the 19th century, its 20th century succession is, what is often couched, a ‘nationalist’ response. While the likes of Rakhaldas and to speak in the context of Assam, Padmanath, Dhireshwaracharya and the intellectuals associated with the KAS, are to be identified within this category, the thesis argues that they present a distinctive hallmark.

As the Superintendent of the Eastern Circle of the ASI, Banerji would conduct extensive survey of Kamarupa or the Brahmaputra Valley between 1924 and 1926.¹¹⁵ Banerji was clearly disappointed by the status of history in the region. According to the leading Indian archaeologist, both history and material heritage of the region necessitated immediate attention and organization. Banerji was saddened that despite numerous architectural remains and specimens of plastic art, the region’s history was in an oblivious state. This state of inertia among the people about the region’s history reflected in their everyday affairs.

Archaeologically opulent regions such as Kamrup and Tezpur regularly yielded relics. Often a large part of these relics would be removed indiscriminately from its context to decorate private offices, parks and markets. As a preventive measure, the suggestion for in-situ preservation came up in Banerji’s *Annual Reports*. Banerji was of the opinion that the region largely lacked more systematic exploration, excavations and preservation efforts.¹¹⁶ The archaeologist identified and described several archaeological remains in Tezpur, most notable of which were Dah Parbatiya, and Bamuni Hills – both important pre-Ahom architectures.

¹¹⁵ Banerji, R. D. 1927-1928. Eastern Circle. In J. F. Blakiston (Ed.), *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1924-25 and 1925-26*. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 94-102.

Other sites surveyed by Banerji this season would be Kamakhya and Umananda in Guwahati, Ahom palace in Ghargaon, Sibsagar and archaeological remains in Sadiya dist. The terracotta plaques recovered from some of these sites fascinated the archaeologist as it bore affinity to medieval art of Bengal. Banerji's survey also notably yielded copperplates of Indrapala that would be obtained by Hemchandra Goswami.

The thesis argues that the KAS's work both anticipated and supplemented the ASI's interventions in Assam. Unlike the ASI, whose belated entry and focus on cataloging than community engagement stood in sharp contrast to the KAS, who mobilized local scholars, collectors, and vernacular networks to conduct fieldwork, interpret findings, and preserve memory. In this way, the KAS's efforts prefigured a vision of decentralized, participatory archaeology.

It is important to note, however, that this regionalist, vernacular approach came at a cost. Pioneering figures like Padmanath Bhattacharya and Rakhal Das Bandopadhyay faced professional marginalization within both colonial and nationalist circuits of authority. Their contributions were either sidelined or treated as amateurish, despite their deep expertise. The modern discipline of history has yet to fully acknowledge the plural origins of historical knowledge in India – particularly the contributions from institutions like the KAS that operated outside the metropolitan or colonial university systems.

Finally, this thesis proposes that the history of the KAS offers a distinct regional epistemology of antiquity. While colonial archaeology often relied on universalizing claims and imperial taxonomies, the KAS grounded its work in a lived and pluralistic understanding of time and memory. This is why the KAS's recovery of Kamarupa – not as a fixed territorial entity but as a layered, sacred, and historical geography – resists easy assimilation into either orientalist mythmaking or homogenizing nationalism.

By situating the KAS within the broader cartography of Eastern Indian archaeology, and in dialogue with figures like Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay, this thesis attempts to reframe Assam's place in the historical imagination – not as a periphery of Bengal or Delhi, but as a distinct center of epistemic creativity, archival labor, and antiquarian scholarship in its own right.

Chapter Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in this chapter, historian Michael Dodson's thesis on the key concept of the translation of the Vedas within the 19th century orientalist discourses, applies directly to the workings of the KAS. The main point from Dodson's thesis applied in this chapter is the confrontation of European orientalist undertakings by the traditional guardians of Sanskrit based knowledge. These findings made by Dodson apply in the context of Kamarupa, and especially with regard to the KAS. The body of work produced by the KAS provided parallel grounds of authority to the regional scholars over its own past, independent of the official influence of the British government. Such endeavours by the KAS and its scholars met with little government support, both financially and officially. But as Upinder Singh reminds us regarding antiquarianism in the pan-Indian context, such biases against a more enlightened form of regional consciousness and nationalist response characterized the political climate of the 19th century.¹¹⁷

The KAS' primary aim of introducing modern historical and archaeological study in the region that was at par with the Western academy and the wide-scale dissemination of the results through publication of the journals as well as public sphere engagements such as annual meetings, are found to be an underexplored but very significant subject. This earliest non-

¹¹⁷ Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 1-134.

profit archaeological society of the region would be in the vanguard of historical imagination and heritage discourse in modern Assam. Regardless, its designation remains that of a marginalized antiquarian society.¹¹⁸ The KAS intended to create an intellectual sphere open to public participation. The KAS's distinctive response to the colonial state's love of textual Ahom history presents a unique example. If compared to most other regional societies in the eastern circle, the KAS operated with several constrictions, most hindering of which was the finances. Despite the fact, the institutional resilience and endurance displayed by the KAS in generating the earliest public knowledge about the ancient past of the region deserves renewed discussion. The selection of ethno-archaeological and socio-cultural subjects of concern in the regional context, the impact of traditions on ancient material culture, to name a few, its journal gave further impetus to the project of the discovery, or more appropriately a recovery and reconstruction of Kamarupa. Finally, its distinct epistemological approach in exploration, collection and dissemination of historical objects presented the region with an independent and autonomus historic identity of Kamarupa.

¹¹⁸ Recent discussions on the Archaeology of Gauhati region, by M. K. Dhavalikar and more recently Manjil Hazarika begins with reference to the first issue of the Journal. Dhavalikar, M. K. 1970-71/71-72. "Archaeology of Gauhati." *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute* 31/32 (1/2): 137-149; Hazarika, Manjil. 2008. "Archaeological Research in North-East India: A Critical Review." *Journal of Historical Research: An Annual Publication of the Department of History Dibrugarh University* XVI: 1-14.

Chapter 4

The Rise of Archaeological Explorations in the Brahmaputra Valley (1900s–1930s)

Conducting an exploration in the city of Gauhati (now, Guwahati) in the 1970s to establish the cultural sequence of the Brahmaputra valley, noted Indian archaeologist M. K. Dhavalikar complained about a lack of intensive excavation across the region.¹ The genesis of this thought can be traced back to J. P. Mills' (in)famous statement about the archaeology of the Northeastern regions, as it first appeared in the pages of the Journal of Assam Research Society. Mills remarked that the chief tool of an archaeologist, the spade had never been used in research in Assam. It is worth thinking about how to view such usage or even the lack of it. This chapter will locate the basis of such assumptions.

A lot has been written about the prehistoric antiquity of the region. The living tradition of megaliths, still observed among Khasi-speaking communities, and the distinct Neolithic cultures of the region form a crucial body of knowledge in Indian archaeology. However, the period of concern for this chapter will be the succeeding historical Kamarupa. The historians of Kamarupa, however, had a very different view of the prehistory of the region. The search for this Kamarupa as envisaged principally by the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti (hereafter, KAS), seldom finds a place in South Asian historical, or even for that matter, archaeological scholarship. The current chapter will delve into this aspect of the material culture of ancient Assam, as it was unraveled in the later 19th and early 20th centuries.

¹ Dhavalikar, M. K. 1970-71-1971-72. "Archaeology of Gauhati." *Bulletin of Deccan College Post-graduate and Research Institute*, 31/32 (1/2): 137-149.

The sole focus of this chapter is the pre-Independence archaeology of Assam. But a brief note on Ambari, has also been included here. The archaeological importance of Ambari, a site that has been supposedly occupied from the 2nd century BCE, came to light in the 1960s and it proves indispensable when it comes to discussing ancient Kamarupa. In doing so, this chapter will question many maxims about the archaeology of the Brahmaputra valley. For example, the idea of a golden period under the rule of Bhaskarvarman (7th century CE) by M. K. Dhavalikar is one of them.² Further, the territorial marginality of the region, perceived on a pan-Indian scale, spills over also in terms of archaeological research in the region.

The Early Days of Archaeology in Assam

Before delineating the early days of archaeology in British Assam, a few more words on the role of the KAS will be necessary. The concerns of archaeology in the Brahmaputra Valley would be very different from the flattened category of 'oriental' societies in other parts of the world. An intriguing example in the postwar world is that of Israel. Nadia Abu El-Haj has persuasively and at times to her own dismay, controversially shown the complicity of archaeology in legitimizing settler-colonialism and Zionist territorial assertion based on ideologically driven excavations that aim to create irreversible biblical facts.³ But even when it is not as explicitly assertive as in 21st century Israel, archaeology is never neutral. Archaeology as a distinctive discourse in Assam goes far back to the later decades of the 19th century. It was part of the search for the valley's history, excavating, often at times rather

² According to Dhavalikar 'the ambari ruins show that the reign of Bhaskarvarman is truly a golden period of Gauhati'. Dhavalikar, "Archaeology of Gauhati." p. 143

³ El-Haj, Nadia Abu. 2001. *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self- Fashioning in Israeli Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago.

talking anew, what was already there and known, collecting all possible sources – written, spoken, tangible and intangible. While the ‘discovery’ of an ancient Kamarupa by the KAS is often situated within the nationalist responses of the early 20th century, the thesis argues that their aim and purpose might have followed certain distinctiveness that may not be explained away as strictly and explicitly political – especially under the homogenized rubric of fervent nationalism. KAS certainly showed an emotional ardour, but of a very refined kind that may not be defined by blind politics. The KAS was driven primarily by the necessity to method(olog)ize and retrieve the history and material culture of the region, that germinated from its own consciousness, not based on imposed standards or discourses of the authority. It sought to disseminate the knowledge among its inhabitants and those of adjacent regions. Two major reasons were – awakening historical consciousness among its people and dispelling the myths created from time to time by the British or Mughal interpretations about the region. Part of the reason for the KAS not gaining enough support from the colonial government was that their essential scholarly endeavor was dedicated to producing authentic knowledge about the region’s past, specifically the overlooked and misrepresented antiquity – that was not aligned with the colonial interest in the Valley at that point.

The earliest days of the foundation of the Samiti are marked by extensive explorations across the Brahmaputra Valley mainly by Kanaklal Barua, Padmanath Bhattacharya, Dhireswaracharya Kaviratna and Hemchandra Goswami.⁴ During the same phase, the KAS also garnered support and enthusiasm from British officials in individual capacity and visiting European scholars.⁵ Giuseppe Tucci, a professor of the religion and philosophy of India and

⁴ Goswami, D, and S Kataki. 1931. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*. Report and Conspectus, Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti.

⁵ For instance, G Tucci’s visit for inspection of the collection of the Samiti, T. N. Ramachandran, ASI Eastern Circle Superintendent for the same purpose, B. C. Allen’s visit, Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, John

the Far-East at the University of Rome, remarked following his inspection, that the useful endeavor of the KAS would build an ‘institution whose resources the world will reap with profit.’⁶ Further, in his address on 24 October, 1927, the Assam governor Lawrie Hammond noted that the collection of the KAS formed the nucleus of a prospective museum soon.⁷ An emphasis on inscriptions was clear in the Governor J. H. Kerr’s address too, as could also be discerned from the early lines of explorers, predominantly epigraphists and historians.⁸

The previous chapter has already outlined the KAS’s initiatives towards protecting the monuments of the Valley through national legislation, most notably the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904. For example, at the KAS’s behest Kannachal Hills came to be protected under the said Act by the year 1918. The KAS also moved the government to preserve the other sites it explored such as Rakhyasini hillock and Saraniya hill sites.⁹ It further informed the ASI about the archaeological promises of an unnamed ancient ruined city in the vicinity of Saraniya hills. The KAS also induced the preservation of Karmanasa rocks by means of an executive order of the Government.¹⁰ Other than these initial explorations, the KAS’s collection also expanded by chance finds from busy locations in the cities. However, the ASI’s at times neglect of KAS’s request for excavation support calls for deeper reflection. This reveals a deeper reality of hierarchy of knowledge within colonial order where state-sponsored undertakings and the ASI would be prioritized over regional initiatives. It also

Henry Kerr, Governor of Assam in 1922, J. H. Hutton, Honorary Director of Ethnography et al. Superintendents of Eastern Circle ASI such as Director General K. N. Dikshit, R. D. Banerji too visited the Samiti’s collection. Ibid, 3.

⁶ Ibid, 3

⁷ Ibid, 2-3.

⁸ Ibid, 2-3.

⁹ Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Report 1918-19, Work During the Year in Sarma, Chandra Nath. 1920. *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti* 18-27. Gauhati: Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti.

¹⁰ Ibid, 18-27.

showed the state-sponsored ASI's control over archaeological legitimacy. Notwithstanding, the resilience showed by the KAS in persisting to explore, collect and archive resisted and contested such epistemic hierarchy and bureaucratic control.

By 1927 Suryya Kumar Bhuyan averred that the KAS had gained a firm footing as an archaeological research society in India. It had amassed a significant collection of 'articles of antiquarian interest' that had been reviewed by 'distinguished officials, educationists, public leaders and by eminent representatives of Archaeological Survey of India and have all recorded their appreciation of the services of the Samiti.'¹¹ The first ever seminal discovery on ancient Kamarupa, Nidhanpur plates by Bhaskarvarman, was recovered in two phases – first in December 1912 and again in April 1926. The next round of explorations, as previously discussed, was Kannachal and Saraniya hill ruins during 1916-17. In the same year Kalicharan Sen along with other members accompanied Commissioner Gurdon to North Gauhati (now, Guwahati) to jointly inspect the Kanai Barasi inscription of 1206 CE (1127 *Saka*). It was the year when the Kamata raja of Kamarupa defeated the advancing army of Turko-Afgan leader Muhammad-Ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji.¹² These two epigraphic discoveries were crucial since they are held to demarcate the overall span of the early kingdoms of Kamarupa.

In addition to the earliest explorations along the banks of Brahmaputra, archaeological objects regularly kept surfacing at various busy locations within Guwahati, such as Curzon Hall,

¹¹ Bhuyan, S. K., ed. 1927. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti or the Assam Rsearch Society*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti, 4.

¹² Presidential Speech of the Hon'ble Colonel Gurdon, Commissioner, AVD: Assam Valley Division, Gauhati, 19 November 1917, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti in Sarma, Chandra Nath, ed. 1920. *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti* 28-35. Gauhati: Office of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti; Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1931-32. *Kamarupashasanavalee*. Calcutta: Rangpur Sahitya Parishad; Neog, Maheswar. 2021. *Prachya-Shasanavali*. Guwahati: Asom Prakashan Parishad.

Government office premises and also notably Cotton College premises. The image of a ten-armed Mahadev from the compound of the Cotton College, was mentioned to be of special importance. Further, several inscriptions and similar images were also retrieved from Commissioner Budmerson's circuit house compound.¹³ Reference is also found of donation by Archdale Earle. Then Chief Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, Earle presented to the KAS some images of the Buddha inscribed in stone and brick. It was reported from an ongoing excavation in the Behar subdivision of Patna. This was particularly deemed to be of 'great historical importance.'¹⁴ Collection of specimens was also housed in the KAS from the sites explored in other parts of the province.

As regards, the overall intellectual and cultural location of the KAS, a remark by Suryya Kumar Bhuyan appears telling,

"The present age is marked by a wide-spread enthusiasm for recreating the past, and we hope Assam will not lag behind in this universal attempt to unravel the mysteries of the foregone ages of India".¹⁵

Even before the formation of the provincial museum, the Samiti referred to the collection it housed as the 'museum of the Samiti'.¹⁶ The early collections reveal a preponderance of cannons, both inscribed and plain, aside from inscribed stone members and sculptures. Some half a dozen cannons that became part of the KAS's early collection were made in Ahom

¹³ Report of the Work during the Year 1918-19, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti in Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 18-27.

¹⁴ It is not stated in the said Report whether the gift was made due to any particular connection observed about the image with Kamarupa but it may be taken as an instance of constructive exchange and dialogue between Eastern Indian regions in terms of archaeological search in the colonial period. Report of the Year 1917-18, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, in Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 11.

¹⁵ Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti*, Compiler's Note.

¹⁶ Ibid, 4 and 82.

arsenals as well as Mughal.¹⁷ Some of these were inscribed and could offer a very valuable sidelight into the Assam-Mughal relations of the period. The cannons were coupled with chance finds of cannon balls on the bank of Brahmaputra, surfaced as a result of the bank erosion. Khargauli, literally meaning ‘a nook for gunpowder’, would be a notable site in this regard. Researchers of the KAS inferred, based on the Khargauli findings, that this place might have functioned as an Ahom arsenal. Not only military equipment, Ahom regalia presented by Mahendri Devi, wife of Ahom raja Keshava Kanta, around the year 1924, formed a separate class of antiquities in the Samiti’s collection. Some of the notable paraphernalia would include ivory sceptre, sword of Rani (a vassalage under the Ahoms), and a Dimarua (another vassalage) shield made of Rhino hides. During the similar period, a number of potteries was also reported to have been recovered during an excavation of an old tank in Uzanbazar area. K. N. Dikshit, who would be the future Director General of the ASI (1937-44), examined these potteries and opined that these were comparable to ancient potteries of the Gangetic plains. In an intriguing development, Hemchandra Goswami added some 79 coins of various descriptions bearing Assamese and Persian legends, to the coin cabinet of the KAS.¹⁸ Illustrated manuscripts formed a significant aspect of the KAS’s collection too. Additionally, various tea estates yielded relics from time to time. In addition to finds from Kaliabar Tea Estate, another tea plantation named Makrang, in Sibsagar too yielded images of Brahmanical deities. This was, interestingly, recovered by Hem Chandra Goswami’s brother Jagat Chandra Goswami and presented to the KAS by the former.

¹⁷ These cannons, a notable aspect of the region’s archaeological finds, would be often made in Mughal arsenals, by Muslim artisans and captured by the Ahoms during conflict with the Mughal emperors of Delhi. Canons would also be made locally by gun-makers of the region. Ibid, 6-7.

¹⁸ Ibid, 10.

By this time, i.e. the later 20s, the KAS's work came to be significantly diversified. All the annual reports presented details of acquisitions of material relics as well as paintings and manuscripts that were regularly being collected by the KAS. A look into the dossiers of the KAS reveals that the collection was expanding every year and consequently, its management and dissemination became an increasingly complex affair. The Assam government sanctioned a small grant towards the construction of a strong room during 1926-27.¹⁹ However, the proposal for building a strong room separately to house the expansive collection shows the public-oriented purpose. The proposal of the strong room stated as its objective,

“The Strong Room, when completed, will give additional assurance to owners of historical relics that their articles, whether presented, sold, or lent to the Samiti will be kept in safe custody, free from all dangers as far as human eyes can foresee”.²⁰

The sanction for the strong room resolved a long-felt necessity of the KAS and it promptly expressed gratitude to the government of Assam for the construction to be possible.²¹ The report further added information about the extension of the KAS's premises to accommodate its ever-expansive historical collections. A representative list presented by the KAS is delineated below.²²

¹⁹ Work during 1926-27 in Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti*, 19-33.

²⁰ Ibid, 26.

²¹ Ibid, 25-26.

²² Representative list prepared based on Annual Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, for 1927-28, 1928-29-30 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 1-22; and Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for the year 1932, 1933 & 1934 in Goswami, D., and S. Kataki. 1937. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

Table 1: Donations to the KAS's collection (1927-37)

Sl. No.	Object Details	Donor
1	Broken parts of copper plates	Recovered by Deputy Commissioner Kamrup
2	Basalt images	Presented by SDO Tezpur
3	Celt implements	Presented by British officials
4	Stone Gargoyles	Presented by Lalit Mohan Lahiri
5	Old stone implements such as spade, knife, rings	Recovered from Chardwar by local gentleman Dwarikanath Das
6	Fragments of basalt image recovered from the Bamuni hills near Tezpur	Presented to the Samiti by the subdivisional officer, PWD, Tezpur
7	Ethnographic and historical articles from Naga hills	Presented to the Samiti by J. H. Hutton
8	Bricks from Darrang, Lakhimpur and Suryapahar in Goalpara	Presented by Sarat Chandra Goswami
9	Terracotta image of Budhha, an important specimen for determining the presence of Buddhism in the valley	Recovered during construction of residential building of Durganath Barua in Uzanbajar, Gauhati
10	Pre-Ahom, decorated tiles found from the excavation in Sibsagar town	Presented by the K. L. Barua, then President of the KAS
11	Neolithic implements	Received from J. P. Mills through DHAS

12	An ancient copper-piece	Presented by Durganath Barua of Uzanbazar, Gauhati
13	Old bricks from Mikir hills	Presented by Sarbeswar Kataki to the museum of Samiti for preservation and exhibit

Source: Goswami, D., and S. Kataki. 1937. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*. Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, 222-270.

These are some representative collections received from various local individuals or officials, for a decade or two, as a result mostly of chance finds. A great deal of objects kept pouring into the KAS's collection that was received regularly outside any exploration activities. These donated items included household articles, regalia, religious, architectural, cultural artefacts and so on. In view of the growing collection, need was soon felt for preparing its catalogue of exhibits. Hemchandra Goswami would prepare the catalogue and it would entail a list of objects in the KAS' collection, accompanied by a brief description of these articles.²³ While many might argue that these collection initiatives, institution building and efforts to catalogue, closely followed a colonial bureaucratic logic. However, the thesis aims to differ and foreground KAS's practices in terms of regional archaeological archiving and allied aspirations. In cataloguing and collecting material artefacts of Assam's antique past it did not always subscribe to an orientalist, classificatory template but achieved it through an indigenized curatorial logic and historical intimacy. This may be read as subaltern practices in archaeology and museology in the colony's difficult eastern frontier.

²³ Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 27-28.

In the subsequent years, the KAS also started organizing temporary exhibitions in and around Guwahati. KAS sent exhibits for the 'Gauhati Silver Jubilee Exhibition' in May 1935 in the Exhibition ground, Guwahati.²⁴ Here it presented a considerable number of its most valuable exhibits in two stalls. This exhibition earned the KAS a certificate of high commendation by the said Silver Jubilee (Exhibition) Committee. Also, one of the earliest exhibitions that the KAS participated in was organized by the authorities of the Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition held at Sibsagar in 1929. In this exhibition, the KAS presented 'select articles of antiquarian interest' that 'became very attractive to the public.'²⁵ This was one of the first public exhibitions presented by the KAS. By the late 1930s, the KAS reported that the popularity of its activities grew and common people, as compared to the distinguished visitors, regularly visited and took interest in the collection on permanent display.²⁶

The KAS also started its library in 1918-19.²⁷ The opening collection, contained divergent literature including monographs on the hill tribes presented by the Assam Government. The library received significant public donations. In subsequent years, the KAS would effectively build the nucleus of a representative collection 'for the purpose of research in any aspect of the history of Assam.'²⁸ While the library presented the first archive on the region's material relics, some additional activities directed at public instruction or dissemination of these historical works took place regularly and in tandem. The regular meetings of the Executive Committee brought out some crucial decisions. The proposal for Provincial Museum would

²⁴ Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, for the Years 1934-35 & 1935-36 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*, 39.

²⁵ Annual Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1928-29-30 in Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 19.

²⁶ Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*, 227-228.

²⁷ Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, Compiler's Note,

²⁸ Annual Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, For 1927-28 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 7.

be constantly vetted in these meetings; further, obtaining the transcript of Dr. Wade's *Geographical Sketch of Assam* too was an outcome of similar public sphere activities.²⁹ The annual meetings, often called the Anniversary Meetings, that were stipulated to take place every year by the conventions of the KAS's Constitution, presented the works accomplished over every annual year and published its proceedings largely in the form of Annual Reports.³⁰ These reports are interpreted above to show how these activities contributed in a similar public spirit.

The organization quite soon gained recognition across the Subcontinent, however, remaining at the bottom, possibly outside, in hierarchy of state-aligned institutions. The early days of the formation of the ASI's Eastern Circle, it would correspond with the Samiti for loan of relics, among other things. This demonstrated the growing repute and standing of the KAS across India that might have become difficult to rebut. Another instance confirming KAS' growing standing was its regular participation in All India Oriental Conferences – an emergent network of Indian antiquarian and historical societies and international scholarly circuits. Delegates from KAS would comprise historians and active explorers of the Samiti such as Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, S. M. Muhibullah and Sarbeswar Kataki among others. The Samiti attended the 5th Oriental Conference in the year 1929 held in Lahore.³¹ The sixth sitting of the Oriental Conference held at Patna in December 1930 was also attended by S. K. Bhuyan and S. Kataki.

²⁹ Dr. Wade's manuscript is one of the earliest historical records on the region produced in the 18th century. Dr. Wade was the medical officer in the detachment of Capt. Welsh's expedition in 1792-94 to curb the rebellion of Bengal Barkandazes during Ahom ruler Gaurinath Singha. Source of the above information is Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 8-9.

³⁰ Constitution (as amended in 1983), first adopted in 1916, Regd. No. 85 of 1960-61, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti (Assam Research Society)

³¹ Annual Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1928-29-30 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 13-22.

A selection of the KAS's articles was exhibited in the Conference by S. Kataki.³² The 7th All India Oriental Conference, held sometime between 1931 and 33 in Baroda, was attended by a team of six delegates comprising K. L. Barua, S. K. Bhuyan, Sarbeswar Kataki, Dibakar Goswami and Haramohan Das.³³ In December 1935, again the Samiti sent its delegates to the 8th All India Oriental Conference to present lectures as well as antiquities for exhibition. Noted explorer Kataki would be a constant member of the delegates, while the 8th Conference was attended by another noted member D. Goswami. The 8th Oriental Conference presented the Samiti with a certificate of Honor for the exhibition particularly.³⁴

Despite the crucial undertakings, KAS constantly faced underfunding and a lack of infrastructural support. It underscores the politics of institutional recognition in the colonial public sphere. Further, it will be seen in the next section, the sites surveyed by the ASI in the first four decades of the 20th century, had already been surveyed, at times more extensively in the face of financial constriction, by the KAS before. The Archaeological Survey of India would frequently refer to these early explorations by the KAS. The discussion above intends to show that through the collection, display, annual meetings, reports and regular publications, the KAS acted as a forerunner in the archaeological discourse of the Brahmaputra valley, refusing to let Assam be written out of the historical imagination of India.

³² Annual Report of the KAS for 1930-31 & part of 1932 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*, 222-229

³³ Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for the year 1932, 1933, & 1934 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*, 230-237.

³⁴ Ibid, 230-237.

The ASI and the 'Discovery' of 'Relics' in Assam (1905–1937)

The Archaeological Survey of India did not officially enter the northeastern regions before the turn of the 20th century. The earliest tour conducted by the Eastern Circle Superintendent, T. Bloch would only be in 1905.³⁵ While the ASI launched its first archaeological survey in 1861 under Alexander Cunningham as its first Surveyor, the formation of the Archaeological Survey's department took place a decade later in 1871 in Delhi.³⁶ Assam came within the fold of Archaeological Survey of India's surveys only about the turn of the 20th century as a part of the Eastern circle, jointly with Bengal.³⁷ Despite mixed opinions on a pan-Indian scale, the archaeological landscape in Assam has proved abundant while also relatively less appreciated.

Historian Upinder Singh emphasizes the importance of Archaeological Survey Reports and Home Department and Revenue and Agricultural Department files in understanding the early initiatives, individuals and achievements in terms of the archaeology of the subcontinent as

³⁵ Bloch, T. 1905. *Report on an Archaeological Tour in Assam*. Archaeological Report, Archaeological Survey of India, Shillong: Assam Secretariat, 1-5.

³⁶ As stated in the *Four Reports* by Cunningham the opening concern of the archaeological survey would be conservation of monuments. The concern in the Brahmaputra Valley too would be very similar with Gait's *Report* highlighting the necessity of preservation and salvage of historical objects from the ravages of nature. As regards the first archaeological survey, Cunningham's area of investigation would be upper India, following the tracts of Xuanxang. Further areas of focus would be a list of places in NWFP and Bihar. Singh, Upinder. 2004. *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 58.

³⁷ Archaeological Survey of India was and is divided into various circles. These often correspond to the state boundaries but as it was first formed it was mainly to suit administrative convenience and academic cohesion. When Eastern circle first came into being it covered Bengal, Assam, Central Provinces and Berar. Following Montagu-Chemsford reforms in 1919 the headquarters of the Circle was moved to then Calcutta.

well as the regions.³⁸ A resolution of November 1882 first outlined the general principles for the regulation, utilization and disposal of objects of archaeological interest in India.³⁹ The main principles of the resolution entailed the subject of conservation and the museum as a repository. This resolution passed by the then Viceroy Lord Ripon, also raised the question of removing archaeological objects from its context. The Resolution usefully broached the subject of the necessity of a legal foundation for the claim of the government to objects of archaeological value, but concluded "it does not appear necessary to take any legal powers of compulsory acquisition." An implicit hint of bureaucratic hubris and colonial administrative superiority is unmistakable here. It is a hallmark of despotic rule that seeks to exercise power without formal legality, relying on local customs and compliance and informal mechanisms of control. This assertion of power without any legal framework demonstrates a form of administrative orientalism that naturalizes and depoliticizes domination by routine administrative practices.⁴⁰ The Resolution was forwarded to the local governments of Bengal, NWFP and Oudh, Punjab, Central Provinces, British Burma, Assam and Coorg. This is one of the earliest communications laying out rules for the discovery and acquisition of archaeological remains. The Resolution further urged that "All discoveries of objects of archaeological interest made by the government officers (whether belonging to the Archaeological Survey or not) should be reported by the to the head of the Local Government or Administration within which the discovery is made." Colonial archaeological activities in

³⁸ Ibid, xvii.

³⁹ Home Department, Government of India, 'Resolution: Extracts from the Proceedings of the Government of India in the Home Department, (Archaeology), Shimla, 8 June 1883 in *Utilization and Disposal of Objects of Archaeological interests in India*, General Department Proceedings, No. 3 Commissioner's Office 1883, Assam State Archives (Hereafter, ASA).

⁴⁰ Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Cohn, Bernard S. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Assam before the direct intervention of the ASI was therefore largely conducted and overseen by civil administrators, particularly the Assam Valley Division Commissioner. These efforts fell outside the domain of the fledgling Department of Ethnography in Assam.⁴¹ On the other hand the KAS is often seen to work in conjunction and receive assistance from Commissioners such as Gurdon.⁴² Surveys under Commissioner would be conducted initially in four districts, namely Nowgong, Kamrup, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. Among these districts Kamrup and Sibsagar proved particularly opulent. Kamakhya received particular attention and repair was conducted under Deputy Commissioner Gurdon and the project received a donation of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. In Sibsagar, conservation would be carried out in temples and auxiliary structures at Gaurisagar and the old palace of Ahom rajah, the Karenghar palace or as more popularly known as the Ghargaon palace.⁴³ The work at the specified sites included clearing the jungles and repairs done by the Public Works Department (henceforth, PWD). Three temples near Sibsagar tank were also cleared of jungles and materials were collected for completing the repairs to the portion of the Debidol (an 18th century brick-built temple) which were begun the previous year. Negheriting temple at Golaghat too was surveyed around

⁴¹ Deputy Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 'Archaeology' in *Archaeological Remains*, Office Proceedings, No. IX, Commissioner's Office, 1897 [ASA].

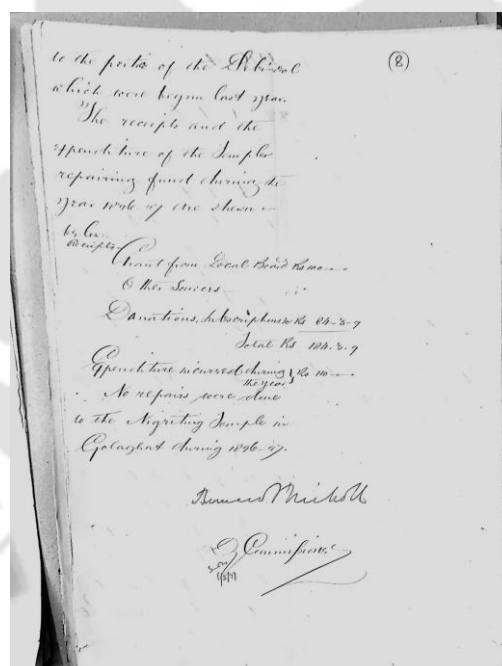
⁴² Barua K. L. 1933. *Early History of Kamarupa: From the earliest times to the end of the sixteenth century*. Shillong: Printed by Rev. Fr. Foglia S. C. at the Don Bosco Industrial School Pres; Presidential Speech of the Hon'ble Colonel Gurdon, Commissioner AVD: ASSAM VALLEY DIVISION, dated Gauhati the 19th November 1917, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

⁴³ Annual Report of the DG, Archaeology in India for the year 1918-19 presented a brief report on Assam. It reported expenditure of a small sum towards the conservation of Ahom palace Ghargaon, near Nazira. The palace was reported to be a three-storeyed structure known also as Karanghar. The palace according to the Superintendent, was devoid of any structural beauty usually seen in palaces. The structure was farther ravaged by the earthquake of 1897 and an encroaching jungle. An estimate was commissioned for minor conservative treatments to the palace, by the Commissioner, AVD: Assam Valley Division. Marshall, John. 1921. *Annual Report of the Director General of Archaeology in India 1918-19*. Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India.

this season in 1896-7, however, neither finds nor repair was reported about the site. These conservation works would incur some expenditure and a small grant of Rupees 185 in this regard would be as reported by B. V. Nicholl, then Deputy Commissioner, AVD.

Survey at Darrang around September 1897 uncovered a few carved slab stones from a site near court building. Clearance was also conducted by the Public Works Department at Bamuni hill temple, a key archaeological site. These surveys would be quite seminal and a list of archaeological remains in the province of Assam would be compiled and circulated by the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division for record, reference and

Figure 9: B. V. Nicholl's Report



Source: Deputy Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 'Archaeology' in *Archaeological Remains*, Office Proceedings, No. IX, Commissioner's Office, 1897 [ASA]

necessary action of the District Commissioners.⁴⁴ Buildings and Monuments featured in the list, were placed in Class I category. The other subsequent categories included Inscriptions other than those on buildings and monuments (Class II), Rock sculptures (Class III) and Special class, comprising the fourth category subsuming water tanks such as Dighali Pukhuri, and various roads. The colonial taxonomy prioritized architecture and textuality aligning with orientalist preferences for monumentality and script (especially Sanskrit epigraphy). While such civil administrative classification and government control of disciplinary practice like archaeology may be read variously following Cohn and Dirks, one point may be relevant to make here is that this early bureaucratic intervention and surveillance of 'relics', an ideologically loaded colonial category, conformed to the colonial classificatory logic rather than being interpretive.⁴⁵ The survey covered the districts of Cachar, Sylhet, Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Naga hills, Khasi and Jaintia hills. Subsequently, the Government of India agreed on the 'question of the systematic examination and subsequent disposal of antiquities found in the trans-frontier countries of India and Burma'.⁴⁶ H. G. Stokes, Under Secretary to the Government of India wrote,

“As it is of importance that a careful record should be kept of all these antiquities, the Government of India have decided that in future they should be dealt with by Archaeological Survey Department, which has

⁴⁴ From the Under Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam “Letter no. 701-Misc/4968-72^R, Shillong, December 1902” in *List of Archaeological Remains in Assam*, Commissioner’s Office Proceedings, No. 32(a), General and Misc., 1902 [ASA]

⁴⁵ This has come up during the archival survey, especially while reading Das, Sajani Kanta. 1960. "Foreword." In *Historical Relics Etc. in the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Museum*, by Manoranjan Gupta, 1-7. Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. 'Relics' is a specific category of orientalist description of India's culture and past to insinuate stasis and decay.

⁴⁶ To the Department of Revenue and Agriculture (Revenue), 'Letter No. 29 C., 28 February 1905' in *Archaeological Remains in India*, Commissioner’s Office Proceedings, No. 78, General and Misc., 1905 [ASA]

now been placed on an organized footing, and possesses its own specialists in every class of antiquities... and is in a position to publish in its reports information concerning them".⁴⁷

This letter further urged provincial officers collecting objects of archaeological value to report directly to the Director General of Archaeology at Simla. This was an attempt to bring the earlier sporadic surveys into greater accountability. At this point, Eastern Circle of the ASI entered Assam. This shift from civil administrative surveys to ASI's disciplinary oversight reflects an uneven arrival of archaeology in Assam. While ASI sought to centralize archaeological authority and became the official interpreter of archaeological meaning of the region, the KAS had already laid the groundwork through locally rooted knowledge production, often outpacing official surveys in discovery and documentation.

In Search of the Ancient in the Brahmaputra Valley

Before the annual survey commenced in 1906, Theodor Bloch conducted the first archaeological tour in January and February, 1905.⁴⁸ The sites covered during the said tour had been traced previously by Majors Hannay, Dalton, Butler and Godwin Austen. By the time Bloch's survey appeared, these sites would have been significantly altered. For example, when Bloch surveyed the Bhishmuknagar copper temple in Sadiya there was no trace of copper whereas Major Hannay had reported the presence of copper sheet covering and copper loops in the temple structure. Bloch's preliminary tour had a focus, particularly on the early

⁴⁷ H. G. Stokes, Under Secretary to the Government of India, 'Letter no. 242-249, 23 May 1905' in *Archaeological Remains in India*, Commissioner's Office Proceedings, No. 78, General and Misc., 1905 [ASA]

⁴⁸ Bloch, *Report on an Archaeological Tour*, 1-5

historic sites of Deopani, Dimapur and Kasomari Pathar – these sites would be more extensively surveyed by Bloch in the following year.

The First Surveys (1905-06 and 1923-24): Conservation Imperatives

The first official archaeological survey of the eastern circle in Assam revealed the exigencies of the early historic archaeology of the region. To begin with, Bloch identified Assam as a ‘benighted province’ and a ‘dark continent’ due to a delayed entry of Brahminic or Aryan civilization in its eastward progress. The legend of Naraka associated with the province signified for the surveyor a contemptible, diminutive political status. However, the modern civil stations of Gauhati (now Guwahati) and Tezpur, identified historically as Pragjyotishpur and Harupesvara were considered the first Aryan settlements of the northeastern provinces and the explorations ensued thereof. Bloch opined that Assam suffered from a relative paucity of historic structures. But, F. J. Monahan, a contemporary Indologist noted that periodic excavations and chance finds often surfaced at construction sites in the said districts.⁴⁹ While a lot of ancient structures were lost to modern building operations, many others laid buried underneath the artificial plateau raised by debris of ancient settlements. The conservation work of antiquities was directed at the early historic and early medieval structures that formed ‘a separate group of antiquities, almost original in every respect and distinguished from anything seen in other provinces of India’.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Letter to T. Bloch from F. J. Monahan, 18 January 1906, included in Bloch, T. (Archaeological Surveyor) 1906-07. *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey, Eastern Circle*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press

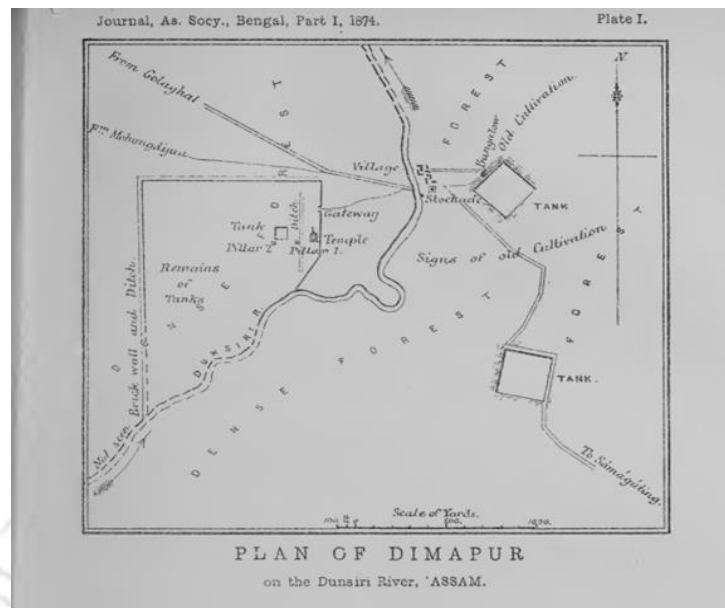
⁵⁰ Ibid, 17-28.

Construction work at the Deputy Commissioner's office in Tezpur exposed to view elaborately sculpted cornices, bases and capitals of columns. Similar remains abounded nearby Tezpur Maidan site. The architectural remains at Bamuni hill, four miles away, formed a cluster of corresponding architecture dating back to the pre-Ahom period of considerable religious and political significance.

Bloch pointed out how the advent of rail connectivity opened up the archaeological sites to interested visitors. While railway construction at various sites across India is recalled for causing vandalism of archaeological remains, Bloch credited railway in the northeast for revealing early relics as well as for connecting and opening up sites that would have been inaccessible earlier. The next group of remains namely Dimapur and Kasomari Pathar in Dhunsiri-Doiyang valley were made accessible by the Assam-Bengal railway. The former site, earlier surveyed by Major Godwin-Austen was earmarked for the conservation of its distinctive pillars.⁵¹

⁵¹ Godwin-Austen, H. H. 1874. "On the Ruins at Dimapur on the Dunsiri River, Asam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Baptist Mission Press) XLIII (Pt. 1) (I-IV): 1-6.

Figure 10: Plan of the Site prepared by the Major Godwin-Austen

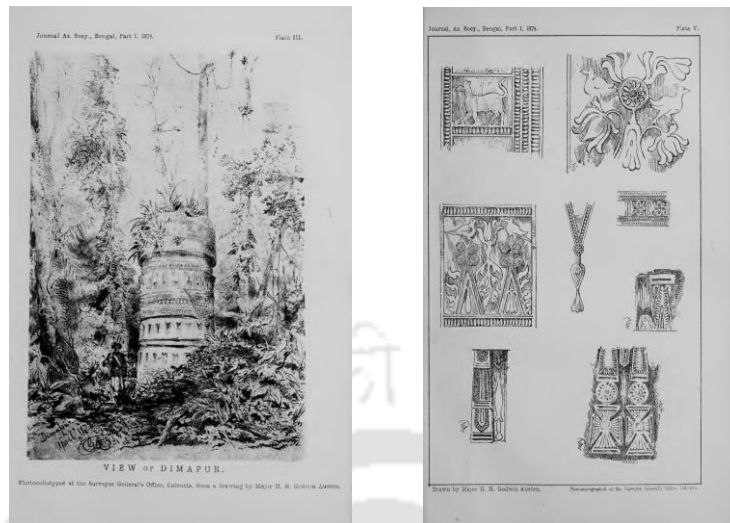


Source: Godwin-Austen, H. H. 1874. "On the Ruins at Dimapur on the Dunsiri River, Asam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* XLIII (Pt. 1) (I-IV): 1-6.

Based on his survey of Dimapur, Major Godwin-Austen coined the term chessman figures for a specific type of pillar.⁵² These pillars were carved with geometric, floral, faunal and some common architectural designs.

⁵² Ibid, 4.

Figure 11: Godwin-Austen's gigantic Chessman Pillar and associated patterns



Source: Godwin-Austen, H. H. 1874. "On the Ruins at Dimapur on the Dunsiri River, Asam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* XLIII (Pt. 1) (I-IV): 1-6.

Figure 12: Another example of Godwin-Austen's architectural coinage, viz., the ornate 'V-Columns'



Source: Godwin-Austen, H. H. 1874. "On the Ruins at Dimapur on the Dunsiri River, Asam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* XLIII (Pt. 1) (I-IV): 1-6.

Bloch's description of these monumental structures are replete with the use of prejudiced adjectives such as 'strange', 'curious', based on his survey is noteworthy. Further, the inordinately imaginative descriptions of the decorative motifs would also be a common feature

of European writings of the time.⁵³ Based on the ‘marked un-Indian appearance’ of the decorative motifs of the ruins at Dimapur and Kasomari Pahar, Bloch surmised the probability of a ‘foreign, non-Aryan stock’ of people being the architects of these sites.⁵⁴ However, at Bhishmuknagar site he observed a number of carvings to be ‘certainly Indian’, common especially in medieval Indian art with depiction of figures peculiar to Assam. It has to be noted, that the plates referred to by Bloch do not always correspond to his stylistic, or iconographic description. Bloch’s ambivalent description is telling here. It is symptomatic of colonial-orientalist anxieties about either scholarly limitations of their own or maybe deeper tensions, contradictions and uncertainties that characterized the ways of knowing during colonial rule. In terms of the date of the findings, Tezpur contained remains of several periods including the early centuries, Dimapur was estimated to date to the period of transition from

⁵³ Statements such as ‘The design is purely conventional and, to add to its *strange* appearance, the sculpture in some cases provided it with horns, as on the stone shown in Plate VI (a) (refer to figs 3 and 4 above, for a reproduction of the plate), almost as if he had thought of *fabulous monsters, such as the unicorn*, of which, of course we can hardly expect him to have had any knowledge’; ‘Any illustration, accordingly, can only give an approximate idea of the original shape of these *curious* monuments’ [emphases added]. Further, an important note may be added here. These Indological tracts in JASB, even when dominated by faithful description, would have elements of the author’s imagination not corresponding to actual appearance or the material. For example, figures clearly resembling an everyday four-legged would be described as unicorn. Which squarely means these reports need not any longer be accepted conventionally and uncritically. Bloch, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey*, 17-28.

⁵⁴ Following Benedict Anderson, many recent scholars have dwelled on the idea that the builders of the ancient monuments and the inhabitants of colonial provinces would be of different descent. This would place these two in a certain hierarchy of achievements of the ancient immigrants and the decadence and impoverishment of the indigenous inhabitants. This colonialist interpretative strategy frequently appears in descriptions of ancient monuments of the colonies, as is found in this report too. Bloch, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey*, 23; Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso. For a reference to Anderson’s said perspective in terms of Eastern monuments, see Mukherjee, Sraman. 2009. "Unearthing the Past of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa: Archaeology, Museums and History Writing in the Making of Ancient Eastern India, 1862-1936." Doctoral Dissertation, Faculty of History, University of Calcutta, Kolkata.

Kachari to the Ahoms, while Bhishmuknagar was conjectured by Bloch to have been a frontier province of the kingdom of Pragjyotisha.

The subject of wild topography was a major concern in terms of accessibility or interest of the general population after resources were expended on the conservation of these sites. Bloch recommended against the preservation of sites situated too much into the wild terrains. On the contrary, intervention by the KAS into such terrains would result in the active pursuit for the protection of such sites by bringing them under the purview of the legislative acts. Here Bloch's utilitarian, cost-driven mindset is in sharp contrast to KAS's approach to its heritage rooted in understanding based on cultural significance, historical antiquity and artistic merit. Bloch also curiously correlated the worship of mother goddess Kamakhya with the presence of wild terrains. According to the surveyor the 'mild religion of Buddha' did not have much effect on the minds of indigenous population of this inhospitable region.⁵⁵ These deeply racialized and gendered perception of history and landscape provides a textbook example of orientalist anthropology.

Survey of Assam was noticed to be irregular in the early decades, however, minor scale conservation or exploration works continued to take place. For example, the survey following Bloch's would not take place before 1923 but minor works continued to be carried out in the intervening years. During 1912-13, conservation works were carried out in Negrating Shiva temple and Vishnu temple in Sibsagar, both protected under Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904. In Dimapur, restorative treatment would be provided to the previously reported

⁵⁵ Bloch, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey*, 18

Chessman figures and V-Columns.⁵⁶ In the Marshall years, progress in Archaeological Survey activities in the Eastern Circle stressed that the conservation of monuments should be ‘always the most important function of the Archaeological Department’.⁵⁷ The early reports are replete with news of financial downturn in carrying out necessary conservation activities. John Marshall observed this situation as a double whammy. Natural causes of the ravage of archaeological relics were a major factor driving documentation and conservation efforts of the Eastern Circle. In addition to this, the financial constriction, owing to WWI would exacerbate the Circle’s initiatives. During this period of war, the Survey had to confine its undertakings to bare maintenance of the monuments in the Survey’s charge. Marshall had presented details of expenditure in the Eastern Circle comprising Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa and the Central Provinces. A total of Rupees 33,500 was spent and the fund allocated went largely in works at Central Provinces and Sassaram. The next year’s report, i.e., of 1916-17, refers to the uncertainties in the provincial expenditure. Yet a considerable amount was spent in restoring early medieval structures in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. In Assam, a small-scale work would be carried out at Shibdoule (Shiva temple) in Gaurisagar.⁵⁸ Colonial archaeology not only surveyed landscape physically but codified them ideologically and hierarchically.

⁵⁶ Marshall, John. 1915. *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, pt. 1 (1912-13)*. Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India.

⁵⁷ Marshall, John. 1917. *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, pt. 1 (1915-16)*. Archaeological Survey, Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing.

⁵⁸ Marshall, John. 1918. *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, pt. 1 (1916-17)*. Archaeological Survey, Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India.

After the foregoing, the next round of full-scale survey in the region at the ASI's behest occurred in 1923-24.⁵⁹ By the time the second survey was conducted, the Office of the Eastern Circle was assumed by the future and one of the first Indian director generals of ASI, K. N. Dikshit.⁶⁰ This shift in charge was both politically and epistemologically significant. With the assumption of an Indian archaeologist in charge of ASI's Eastern Circle, colonial disinterest shifted to integration of Assam's antiquity within the broader archaeological map of India. The Survey included explorations of temples in and near Guwahati, namely Pandu, Kamakhya and Hajo. Dikshit also explored Deopani and informed about the inscribed Vishnu images recovered from this site that adorned the museum of the KAS. This was a particularly noteworthy specimen inasmuch as it contained inscriptions styled after Harjjaravarman's Tezpur Rock Inscription. The countenance of the image betrayed characteristics of the Gupta sculptures. The inscription engraved on the right side of the image contained four lines in very corrupt Sanskrit verse. Dikshit would also mention on this survey the acquisition of a bronze image of Vishnu from an ancient temple in Dibrugarh, by the KAS.⁶¹ The survey also briefly reported the recovery of a brass image of the ten-armed Durga from Upper Assam that was to be acquired under the Treasure Trove Act, 1878.⁶²

⁵⁹ While war was a restricting factor in Archaeological Surveys in the years intervening following Bloch's survey of the province, a hiatus in the activities of KAS too was observed during a period of few years between 1920-25. In 1920 Chandra Nath Sarma published a consolidated volume of all activities of Samiti till that time. The next report on the works of KAS viz. the Conspectus, would not come out till 1927.

⁶⁰ Daya Ram Sahni, a noted Sanskrit Scholar and a prominent Indian archaeologist in the colonial period, became the first Indian Director General of ASI in 1931. Sahni is associated with the discovery of Indus Valley Civilization. Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. 2004. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁶¹ This image closely resembles a sculpture considered to be a masterpiece of Assamese art and is displayed in the metal sculptures gallery of Assam State Museum. Vide Chapter 5 of the thesis, fig. 19

⁶² Dikshit, K. N. (1926). Annual Report of the Eastern Circle. In J. Marshall (Ed.), *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1923-24*. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch

The exploration work of the Eastern Circle covered, among others, Pandughat in Guwahati. It was noted for being a prominent seat of Brahmanical religion. Its mistaken appellation, referring to the Pandavas of the Mahabharata, would be identified as a colloquial distortion. The rock-cut images at the transshipment station featured *Ganesha*, *Durga*, *Surya* and *Indra*. Rock-cut images were also reported from Kamakhya, a cardinal site in Guwahati. The surveyor would describe Kamakhya as representing the artistic zenith of Kamarupa. The Indian archaeologist reported further explorations at the temple clusters at Hajo, an ancient pilgrimage. All these sites would be previously surveyed by military officials of the EIC, in the 1840s and 50s.⁶³ These prominent heritage sites are still in use, i.e. worship at Kamakhya and Hajo, managed by private entities, is still in practice and Pandu is an active transshipment station. These lived context of Assam's culture would not be lost on the perceptive archaeologist. These explorations demonstrated a focus on an iconographic survey of the temple sculptures and a survey of other architectural features, thereby reflecting a larger shift from colonial classificatory approach to heritage to a historicist impulse to connect Assam to a classical Indian past.

The conservation activities continued at two sites in Sibsagar district namely Kasomari Pathar in Doiyang valley and Negriting Shiva temple. By this time Bloch's 'chessman', as also seen mentioned the 'V-columns' in Marshall's reports, had already taken root in the archaeological lexicon of the region as an architectural type, more specifically a column, predominant in Dimapur. 'Chessman' type came to be associated now with 'sword-blade' columns as a

⁶³ A detailed discussion on these early discoveries is provided in the Introduction to the thesis. Additionally, vide Westmacott, Captain G. E. 1835. "Description of Ancient Temples and Ruins at Chardwar in Assam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 185-195.; Hannay, Major S. F. 1848. "Notes on Ancient Temples and other remains in the vicinity of Suddyah, Upper Assam". *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, XVII(Part I), 459-76; and Dalton, Capt. E. Taite. 1855. "Notes on Assam Temple Ruins." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* XXIV (1): 1-24

specific feature of the region. Dikshit noted in the report, further about the said columns, that the lotus capital featured carvings of the traditional Naga dagger, thereby representing an architectural specificity.

The sites, rich in a specific type of monolithic structures at various states of preservation, that is to say, some intact and others scattered across the site, were considered important to be granted protection as heritage. At Kasomari it was achieved, first, by hauling up the fallen column dressing, clearing the site, putting up a wire fence and digging a trench around the site to keep wild animals from causing any damage or destruction. This conservation measure was undertaken with the help of the Forest Department as it commanded the workforce of the region. At Negriting, minor repair works were administered with contribution from local Dolois (chief) of the temple.

R. D. Banerji in Assam (1924-26): Survey of Pre-Ahom Art and Architecture

In 1924 R. D. Banerji succeeded Dikshit as the Eastern Circle Surveyor. The archaeologist astutely observed that while the early history of the region was replete with a loosely organized assortment of dynastic details quite urgently open to debate, the archaeological knowledge was practically in disarray. He remarked that “the architecture of this period and the history of the plastic art of the country are absolutely unknown”⁶⁴

A leading archaeologist of the time, Banerji believed that the most important series of pre-Ahom vestiges were centered in Kamrup and Darrang. Here, Banerji once again referred to

⁶⁴ Banerji, R. D. (1927). Eastern Circle. In J. F. Blakiston (Ed.), *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1924-25*. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, 94.

the construction at the Deputy Commissioner's office mentioned earlier by Bloch. Interestingly, Banerji observed that "majority of the stones were transferred to the planters' club on the river Brahmaputra", the bungalow "and the public park, where many of them can still be seen".⁶⁵ Displacement of archaeological finds remained a persistent concern in 20th century colonial archaeology of South Asia at large.

In Monahan's letter of 18 June 1906, earlier mentioned by Bloch, reference to an early excavation in the region would be found in connection with construction work at the Deputy Commissioner's office premises.⁶⁶ The archaeologically prolific site of Tezpur would be of the highest priority and the tenor of the correspondences revealed an urgency for more systematic explorations, excavations and preservation of the site, rich in remains of an ancient kingdom. Follow-up activities have not been extensive, leading the crucial heritages to remain in oblivion. Addressing this blind spot in the search for Kamarupa may potentially reveal existence of parallel or tributary rulers of the three main Pragjyotisha dynasties.

Banerji reported in detail the architectural and iconographic features of the finds at the park in Tezpur. The surveyor further informed that Rai Sahib Sobharam Das, Archaeological Overseer of Assam, a local post under the ASI, notified in a detached manner about the removal of the architectural members from its original location to the planters' club. Nonetheless, documentation of the historical monuments occupied a central aspect of the survey and the prime identifiers of prospective archaeological sites would be mounds raised visibly above the ground. All these hubs of ancient vestiges, such as sites in Guwahati or Tezpur, would be buried underneath formations of such mounds.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 95.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 94-102.

The remains at the Deputy Commissioner's office premises belonged to three groups of sculptures from three distinct periods. The first group of pillars resembled pillars of the western Chalukyas, i.e. intricately embellished, containing *kirtimukhas*. These would also present door fragments depicting *Ganesha* and *Siva*. The second group contained panels depicting *Brahma*, *Surya* and *Siva*. Among the sculptures that laid scattered at the public park, were string courses containing *kirtimukha*; projecting niches containing female figures including *Sarasvati* playing lyre and *Gajalakshmi* or *Kamale-Kamini*. There were also figures of *Siva-Durga* bearing affinity to northern carvings. A characteristic aspect of these temples as mentioned by Banerji, was also noted by Westmacott was that these temples were of gigantic proportions. Some of the constant decorative motifs of these members were meandering creepers and ornamental rosettes. The third group of relics belonged to temples of the 12th century or later, once again, demonstrating colossal dimension. The only sculpture extant here was a crudely sculpted lion.

The stone door frame of Dah Parbatiya, an emblematic vestige of Assam, was first located by R. D. Banerji and announced to be the 'oldest temple in Assam'.⁶⁷ Once again, the remains were scattered on an eminence covered with rubber trees. The frame was placed in front of a block of stone that might have had a *lingum* affixed to it. The ornately carved door frame demonstrated stylistic affinity with Gupta carvings. The door jamb was particularly notable for its elaborate design. The bottoms of the shafts were carved with divine and elegant female figures in high relief. There were attending theriomorphic and anthropomorphic figures too. The doorway further comprised four vertical bands, each depicting rosettes, foliage and flowers, creepers and panels depicting human figures. The lintel too contained square pilaster

⁶⁷ Ibid, 98.

capitals. These carvings showed affinity with the classical sculptural idioms of Pataliputra and Benares in the 5th and the 6th centuries. This inference was drawn by Banerji based on the “artists’ sense of proportion, the beautiful symmetry of the figures and ornamental devices and the excellence of execution.”⁶⁸

Another prominent early historical site located on Bamuni hill was identified by Banerji following Bloch’s survey of the site in 1903. According to Banerji, the site would be comparable to Dah Parbatiya in terms of importance, but at that point, it was covered in thick woods. Consequently, Banerji’s attempt to survey in October 1924 would be postponed. This colossal stone temple would be the only relict architecture from early-medieval period, in a sound state of preservation. Money was reported to be disbursed for clearing of the ancient site. The displaced remnants of the coterminous temples of Bisnath and Negriting too were documented for preservation.

Compared to Tezpur and surrounding areas, Banerji observed Kamrup to be more numerous in pre-Ahom remains. The first survey of 1924–25 in Kamrup was conducted in Kamakhya, identified to be of antiquity and built two centuries following Dah Parbatiya, sometime in c. 7th or 8th centuries. The iconic temple witnessed various successive stages of construction. Originally built purportedly during Bhaskarvarman’s reign, later additions took place during the Ahom and Koch reigns.⁶⁹ The pre-Ahom Hindu temple of Umananda too was surveyed and was noted for stone pillars, bricks and carvings as well as some rock-cut sculptures of Ganesha. Although, the nearby Urvashi islet and the Ashvakranta temple in north Guwahati could not be covered, it was presumed to furnish similar sculptures.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 99.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 94-102.

Survey at the northeastern frontier post of Sadiya, during this season, yielded the 'swivel type' guns of the Mughal artillery. There were distinctive inscribed guns too that belonged to the artillery of Sher Shah.⁷⁰ H. E. A. Stapleton deciphered the inscriptions engraved on these guns. This was a particularly crucial finding during the survey and combined with a stone boundary pillar of the Ahom kings which was found near Sadiya, it would be added to the list of protected monuments. At the same time, Hayagriva Mahadeva temple was removed from the list owing to the refusal of the owners to enter into an agreement with the government. This was reported by Dikshit during his survey of the preceding season.⁷¹ Banerji's survey is also distinguished by some of the earliest findings of prehistoric remains, New Stone Age implements to be specific. Recovered by O'Callaghan at the request of Rakhaldas Banerji, the stone adze was asserted to be of the Abor type described by Dr. J. Coggin Brown of Geological Survey of India. These implements were also noted for its particular cultural value. The Abor community attached a mythical tale to these prehistoric tools and regarded these geological specimens with veneration.

Banerji, as well as other surveyors unanimously noted that the distinguishing facet of pre-Ahom architecture was its gigantic proportions and elaborate carvings. This had led many European scholars to view this early civilization as a distinct entity, unrelated to the present inhabitants of the valley. However, scholars in recent decades have viewed it as an imperialist perspective distancing the present population from its rich heritage.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 101.

⁷¹ Ibid, 94-102; Dikshit, "Annual Report of the Eastern Circle", 80-81.

Banerji continued his survey in the next season too, i.e. 1925-26. At Dah Parbatiya, identified as a crucial early historic site, conservation and minor excavation works were carried out. Alongside the earlier finding of the stone doorframe that stood in its original position, were discovered several terracotta plaques, stone drains and some additional stone pillars. It can be assumed and Banerji also mentions it in so many words, that land was acquired to determine the extent of the site and conservation thereafter.

Following the conservation measures implemented at Dah Parbatiya, exploration ensued under the charge of Sub-divisional Officer, PWD. Among notable items recovered was a number of terracotta plaques, although none intact, betraying a close affinity between the

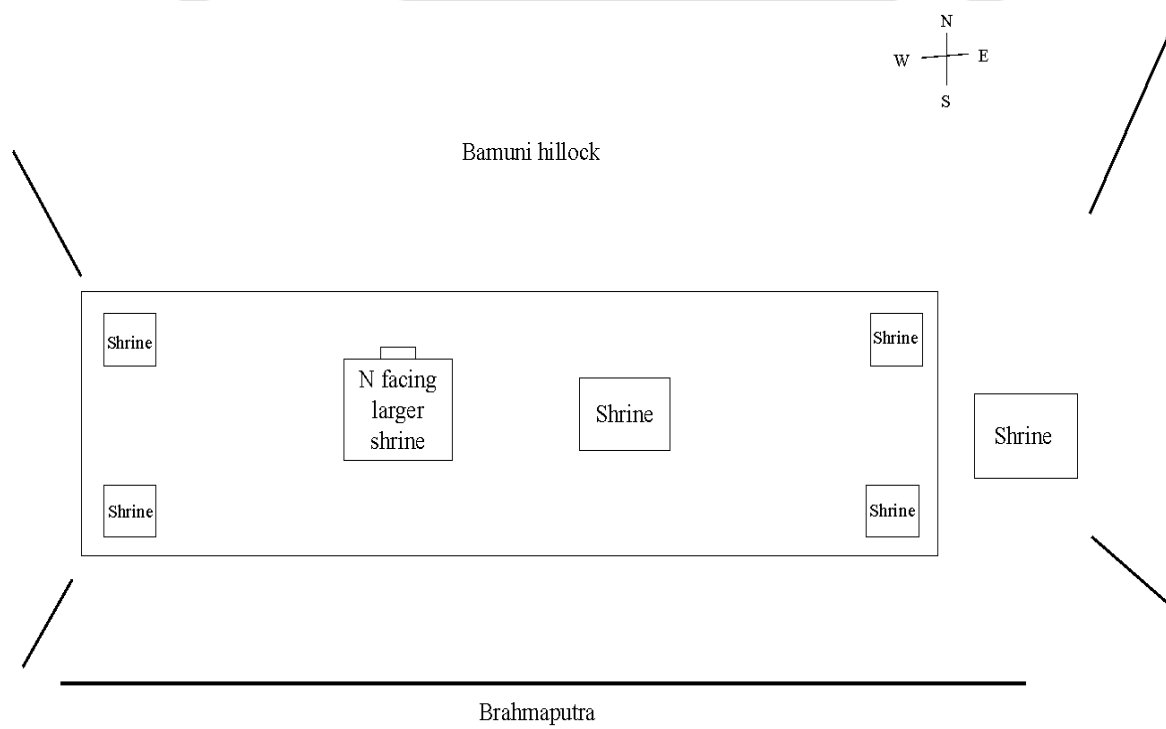
Table 2: Conservation carried out during 1925-26

Description of Conservation Treatment	Details of Expenditure (in Rupees)
Acquisition of land for conservation and restoration of Gupta temple at Dah Parbatiya in Darrang.	Following an initial cost/ estimation of 596 the actual cost stood at 976
Clearance of Bamuni hills and commencement of the inspection of the colossal temple	2217
Repair at the Natmandir attached to the Sibdoul in Sibsagar as well as clearance of the enclosure around the residence of the Jaitia rajas at Jaintipur, Sylhet	Seemingly a paltry 25
Provision of a platform to the local rock-sculpture of Vishnu-Janardan at Gauhati	457

Source: Banerji, R. D. (1928). Eastern Circle. In J. F. Blakiston (Ed.), *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1925-26*. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, page 41-42

medieval art of Bengal and Assam. Banerji dated these to circa 6th century. The significance of the plaque was that it helped in determining the Kamarupa art and its possible relations to major subcontinental art traditions in the early period. A particular motif termed ‘acanthus’, associated most notably with prominent temples of the Gupta period such as Bhumara, Nachna Kuthara and Deogarh, presented its modified form in these Kamarupa plaques. This finding was given special mention as a primary indicator of the fact that not only more important remains were to be expected from the Parbatiya site but also it was one of the most significant sites belonging to the Kamarupa era, urgently necessitating conservation and further survey. This season’s exploration led to the inclusion of the site in the list of Protected Monuments. Exploration at Bamuni hills too started as another key site comparable in importance to the foregoing Parbatiya. Seven shrines were revealed following the clearance work.

Figure 13: Plan of the Panchayatana Temple Cluster at Bamuni Hill



Source: Compiled by self, based on description provided in Banerji, R. D. (1928). Eastern Circle. In J. F. Blakiston (Ed.), *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1925-26*. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch.

The shrines as mentioned by Banerji comprised of Garbhagriha, Antarala and Mandapa corresponding roughly to sanctum, doorway and porch. These chambers would be connected by ornate door jambs and lintels with most prominent decorative motif being *Kirttimukha*. The major deities housed and found in and around these shrines would be incarnations of *Vishnu* and a figurine of *Nataraja*. These main deities in three dimensions or relief would be depicted with attendants.

Aside from clearance and documentation of these two major sites in Tezpur, R. D. Banerji discovered two inscriptions. First is the copper-plate of Indrapala found in Assam which was obtained by Hemchandra Goswami, while the other was a Buddhist votive inscription. The inscription dated to the fifth regnal year of Gurjara-Pratihara king Mahendrapala, excavated by Banerji himself in course of the season's exploration of a temple-mound of Paharpur in the Rajshahi dist. of Bengal. The surveys in the post-Bloch period and marked by the participation of Indian archaeologists, show an evolving model of heritage preservation involving local custodianship such as the temple chiefs as well as collaboration with the KAS.

Surveys of the 1930s: The Central and Eastern Parts of Assam

The next survey, following Banerji's two consecutive surveys, would take place a decade later in 1935-6 by Superintendent N. G. Majumdar.⁷² The work during this season comprised restoration and conservation in continuance of previous surveys, such as at Ghargaon palace, Debidoul, Sibdoul and Bishnudoul in Gaurisagar and adjacent areas. A few more places such as Khaspur palace and a group of monoliths in north Cachar hills were provided with fencing.

⁷² Majumdar, N. G. (1938). Assam. In J. F. Blakiston (Ed.), *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India*. Delhi: Manager of Publications.

Superintendent T. N. Ramachandran would conduct the next survey from 1936-7 with Nowgong entering the purview of the survey for the first time since the onset of formal archaeological surveys in the province. At Nowgong and Sibsagar surface surveys were reported to ‘yield good results’ and brought to the fore the necessity for excavation.⁷³ Ruins were identified in Davaka, 24 miles apart from the Nagaon district and Numaligarh in the then Golaghat subdivision of Sibsagar dist.

The Davaka ruins were spread across four sites, namely, Gosain Juri, Akasi Ganga, Gach Tal and Mikir Ati. The first site, *Gosain Juri*, three miles away from Davaka, comprised of seven mounds of remains. Some notable architectural fragments recovered at the site were a grey soapstone pedestal of dimension 3.6 ft. x 2.9 ft., gneiss stone lintel, pillars, *Gavakshas* or circular windows, *Yavanika* design on doors and so forth. Finds other than architectural members were stones such as gneiss, quartz and some decorative floral and foliage motifs. The highest mound yielded a *Vishnu* image in *Samabhanga* posture, adorned in *Kirita-Mukuta* (headdress), *Patra-kundala* in ears, necklaces with *Kaustubha* pendant. Three of its four hands were severely damaged while the lower right hand, which was intact, clasped a lotus in *Varada* mudra posture. Further, the image sporting the iconographic *Vanamala*, represented a facial type resembling the inscribed *Vishnu* image recovered from Deopani. The *Vishnu* image at Gosain Juri appeared with two accompanying figures of *Sri* and *Saraswati* both 1’9”, standing in *Tribhanga* posture. *Sri* and *Saraswati* were adorned in *Mukuta* and *Kundala*, similar to *Vishnu* and further, in necklace, *angadas* and wristlets. Among attributes, *Sri* held a rosary while *Saraswati* indicated *Abhaya* with one hand and with the other, played a lyre fashioned

⁷³ Ramachandran, T. N. (1940). “Explorations in Assam”. In K. N. Dikshit (Ed.), *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India*. Delhi: Manager of Publications, 54

in an archaic manner. A further mound was also reported that yielded number of bricks, door lintels, sills, footprint of *Vishnu*, pedestal, and another fragmented sculpture of *Vishnu*. Despite being defaced the adornments similar to the ones mentioned above, would also be discernible in this image. The only identifiable attribute in this image would be a *Gada* or a club fashioned after Pala schools of Bengal and Bihar. The *Vishnu* featured a dentil halo and hovering *Vidyadhara* with scarf, an iconographic specificity of the region. Another smaller *Vishnu* image with lotus held by its stalk, was also recovered.

The second of the four sites was the ruins of *Akasi Ganga*, situated seven miles from Davaka. Superintendent Ramachandran described the site to be particularly scenic. Located amidst woods, the site was named after the waterfall Akasa-Ganga that formed a backdrop. The ruins were of two Saivite temples made of gneiss, sprawled over an area of about a *bigha*.⁷⁴ The architectural fragments lying scattered at this site would be pillars, capitals with and without carvings, perforated windows, *amalakas*, door lintels, sills and jambs, gargoyles, pedestals, a moulded architrave and so on. A significant part of the ruins, as described by Ramachandran, would resemble Chalukyan motifs. Further, panels depicted figures representing *Shiva-Dhyani*, *Ganas*, danseuses, and dancing *Ganesha* figure. Architectural members such as miniature temples, pieces of entablature with projecting petals, ceiling pieces with lotus designs, pillars with octagonal bases, vases with *vyalas* flanking, capitals with scrolls held by leafy motifs would also be reported from this site. These were interpreted by Ramachandran to represent a Saivite temple with a specific feature of *mandapa*. Other sculptural and monumental ruins scattered across the sites were *Nundi*, *lingam*, which continue to be worshipped to this day. A panel found particularly noteworthy would depict Shiva as *sulapani*

⁷⁴ An Indian measurement unit of land approximating 27000 sq. ft. area.

in *abhanga* pose flanked by accompanying figures – one holding *chamara* and the other offering *anjali* standing with bent knees on an elephant back.

The granite structures at the *Gachtal* site also presented traces of Siva temples. These shrines situated over a sprawling area of about an acre, each comprised a sanctum, an antechamber and a *mandapa*. The carvings found in these shrines included *Ganesha* and devotees, *Siva* images, standing and seated in yoga postures, wielding trident and rosary. Further anthropomorphic representations included the *Ganas* or multitude of attending figures beside also various faunal representations. Architectural fragments of note from this site included various forms of capitals including *amalakas*, decorative ceiling slabs, pillar bases of odd shapes and recessed edges of *Sarvatabhadra* type. Other figures were also noticed as decorations at doorways and entrances such as figures holding *Kamandulus*, *Dvarpalikas* wielding Saivite symbols *sula* and *pasa*. While the installations at the shrines betokened *Saivite* belief system, there were artistic elements too from adjacent regions. *Dvarpalas* with kettledrums, flowers, creepers with animal and bird insets and twisted serpent designs occurring on door jambs recalled Pala parallels of North Bengal. Further, motifs such as vases flanked by lions and foliage flanked by elephants evinced later Gupta influence. The remains at Gachtal were dated by Ramachandran to c. 10th to 11th centuries.

The antiquarian R. M. Nath, brought to the notice of the Survey, the ruins of *Mikir Ati* within the same regional network. Naturally, the remains at the site of Mikir Ati reported by Nath bore close stylistic affinity with Gachtal. The surface survey yielded a pedestal of grey soapstone and some stone fragments with floral and faunal motifs representing Saivite faith. The site also yielded traces of bricks.

Aside from the Davaka clusters, this season's survey also covered the site at Numaligarh. The ruins identified on a hill adjacent to the Numaligarh Tea Estate had already been surveyed by the KAS and objects from this site adorned its collection. Part of the ruins was deposited at the Siva temple situated at the foot of the hill, known locally as *Shivathan*. The superintendent observed two particular items to be exemplary local art. A sejant lion, described as *vyalas*, bore an inscription at the top, comprising four to five letters in Nagari character but was severely damaged. The inscription was observed to belong to c. 13th-14th centuries. The other sculpture was of Vishnu in *rajalila* posture perched on a pedestal – a sculptural representation found commonly in the valley. This image had four hands clasping attributes namely mace, conch and rosary while the lower right hand would be fashioned in *upadesa-mudra*. Further, the image adorned *kundala*. Vishnu's vehicle *Gaduda* appeared with an accompanying representation of an emaciated ascetic, seated with a bearing of supplication. Perforated *patra-kunadala* appeared to be worn by the vehicle as well as the ascetic. The image also contained panels depicting legends associated with *Gaduda* from Mahabharata. In the same temple, there would be two more sandstone pieces of squatting *Ganas* holding a mace and another piece depicting a decorative floral pattern. Some of these remains were transferred to the KAS's Museum. Two stray and fragmented balustrade pillars were also found surmounted on *Bali-pitha*, shaped as inverted lotus. An intriguing piece of information supplied by Ramachandran would be about a *shiva lingum* that was transferred from the Deoparbat ruins, to be discussed next, to Shivathan in Numaligarh in about 1875 for worship at the latter site. It is an intriguing instance of exchanges between sites within a specific regional network.

The Deopahar ruins presented, according to the Superintendent, a unique example of structural remains from Sibsagar Dist. The Deva temple was dedicated to the worship of Shiva and was dated by the surveyor to c. 11th to 12th centuries. The fragments of sandstone among the ruins

were also quite uncommon locally. The site presented a preponderance of a particular type of ornately carved stones smacking Gupta influence. Here too, Ramachandran, the superintendent reported an unchecked removal of valuable art and architectural relics by builders and the curio-thieves. Once again, the site seemed to have been surveyed earlier by the KAS as, Ramachandran aptly observed, that the stray remains at the site formed crucial historical sources.

The Deva temple of *Shiva* was extant in varied states of preservation. The surveyor reported that the doorway, ceiling and supporting pillars were all in rubble. The embellished carving of the ceiling bore an embossed lotus. The hovering *Vidyadharas*, a sculptural ingenuity of the Valley, too would be carved in relief in its usual variant holding with both hands an ornate drapery, often described as a scarf. However, stylistic affinities, in anatomy and decorative details, were drawn by the surveyor with Gupta and Pala sculptures of unspecified period. Further adornments of the *Vidyadharas* such as *kirita-mukuta* with frontal coronet, the usual *patra-kundalas* and an ankle-length garment clasped with a tassel would be noticed at the site.

Figure 14: A depiction of Vidyadhara iconography distinctive to the Brahmaputra Valley



Source: This image is obtained from the gallery of Assam State Museum. This may not match the exact description of the precolonial report on Deopahar remains, as the provenance of the image in Fig. 13 is Numaligarh, Golaghat, c. 9th – 10th century.

Among other finds were richly ornate door jambs with *dvarpalika* figures decorated with the usual adornments; *mukha-mandapa* in front of the shrine; large pillars with capitals shaped after *Kirtimukhas*, *Vanaspatis* or *Kala-makaras* of Javanese influence and carvings of *Nagini*. Further stray remains included architectural members such as *adhithanas*, a row of busts with hands holding lotuses, tiara, theriomorphic and anthropomorphic figures supporting the architecture, various usual ornaments as mentioned above, panels depicting episodes of the Mahabharata and so on. Among these remains *toranas* or gateway pieces scattered around the site, formed part of the KAS's collection. It is to emphasize in this regard that the Samiti was not tone-deaf to this cardinal concern of acquisition of archaeological objects and it collected historic specimens from stray remains instead of dismembering objects from its context. R. M. Nath separately reported on these ruins in the Journal of the Assam Research Society.⁷⁵ Here Nath reported the presence of bricks and stone blocks, that he seemed to indicate were being used in construction work.

The Kamakhya hill too was surveyed this season, especially the western gateway. The carvings covered in the said part reported to contain exceptional sculptural work of the province. One of these carvings was of attendants with conch installed in niches. A particular *Venugopala* representation of Krishna was found to be an excellent sculptural work. The flame-shaped head-dress in this figure, a bejeweled necklace, ankle-length garment as mentioned before, with lateral tassels recalling Gupta and Pallava influences, formed the decorative elements of the *Venugopala*. One of the reasons for its excellence was the anatomical perfection achieved in this sculpture. Other carvings reported during this season

⁷⁵ Nath, Rajmohan. 1934. "Ruins of the Siva temple at Numaligarh". *Journal of the Assam Research Society*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

included several panels depicting household scenes featuring female figures performing household chores.

Ramachandran attached to his report a statement of expenditure made in conservation work since the first survey of the region by Bloch. The report presented a total cost of Rupees 8053 borne by the ASI for various conservation works in the Brahmaputra Valley.⁷⁶ Ramachandran identified two types of conservation work carried out, viz. routine annual repairs and special repairs. A specific statement on measures and allowances for conservation work at the advent of the ASI in the region has been difficult to locate but Upinder Singh informs in her close study of archaeological archives of the 19th century, that a descriptive approach to historical monuments of India is directly linked with the emergence of concern for conservation.⁷⁷ The reports discussed above are found to be in keeping with this.

Following the observations from Bhishmaknagar, Bloch surmised that it bore close affinity with the art and ethnographic forms of Aryavarta.⁷⁸ Bloch backed his claim with an observation about a pilgrimage site called Parasuramesvara, somewhere in the direction up the river from Sadiya to Bhishmuknagar, then annually frequented by the inhabitants of Punjab. This ethnographic observation led Bloch to conclude that it perhaps formed the seat of the governor of one of the frontier provinces of Assam, namely Kaitapala, of the kingdom of Pragjyotisha. Bloch sought to imagine Assam within the political-cultural heartland of Indian civilization. When Dikshit, Banerji, Ramachandran repeatedly drew affinity between Assam's sculptures and architectures and Gupta, later-Gupta, Chalukyan and Pala artistic

⁷⁶ Ramachandran, "Explorations in Assam", 54-61.

⁷⁷ Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 184.

⁷⁸ Bloch, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey*, 17-28

influence they were subliminally following this thread. K. N. Dikshit observed that the ninth-century inscribed Deopani *Vishnu* image was characteristic of the Gupta idiom of the classical period in the expression of the face and the treatment of the lower lip and the crown.⁷⁹ In terms of an affinity with the art and architecture of India, R. D. Banerji observed that while the chronology of Assamese dynasties from the middle of the 7th to the end of the 12th centuries was still full of confusion, the architecture of this period and the history of the plastic art closely related to the general architecture and art of India.

Among the three groups of sculptures recovered by Banerji in 1924-5 from Planters' Club and Public Park at Tezpur, at least two groups of architectural members showed affinity with intricately embellished western Chalukyan pillars and the chaitya windows of central India.⁸⁰ Another of Banerji's most crucial discoveries, namely *Dah Parbatiya* bore clear affinity with the Gupta classical Sarvatobhadra architecture of Bhumara of Nagod and Nachna Kuthara in Central India and Deogarh of Jhansi district. Further, the influence of central India is observed in the treatment of dados in the extant lower section of a 7th – 8th century sanctum of Kamakhya. *Dah Parbatiya* proved a useful case in point too. It bore affinity with the Gupta classical age and medieval art of Bengal, especially the terracotta plaques. This interpretive move is also evident in Ramachandran's report on Davaka, Deoparbat and Kamakhya. Vidyadhara with scarf, *Kiritamukuta* crown, serpent motif – all betrayed Gupta influence or Pala elegance associated with the centers of Indian art such as Bengal, Bihar, and Central India. Dikshit, Banerji and Ramachandran were motivated by two distinct purposes – Assam's pan-Indian stylistic convergence served to refute colonial stereotypes of portraying Assam as a civilizational backwater, and secondly, their interpretation aligned with a

⁷⁹ Dikshit, "Annual Report of the Eastern Circle", 80-81

⁸⁰ Banerji, "Eastern Circle (1924-25)", 94-102

nationalist imperative to construct a unified, interconnected past of the Indian subcontinent. However, the rich and descriptive reports of the ASI offer valuable insights into iconographic typologies and contemporary archaeological and art historical methods.

Beyond the Myths: Archaeological Specificities of the Brahmaputra Valley

As one begins reading about the historical archaeology of the Brahmaputra valley, it is invariably described as the backwaters of South Asian archaeology. Bhuyan described this region, in terms of historical knowledge, as a *benighted province*.⁸¹ In so doing, Bhuyan was echoing T. Bloch. Early Indological essays further unanimously defined this region in terms of a *terra incognita* – an appellation that stayed with the region's archaeology much after its original description became irrelevant.⁸² Postcolonial archaeologists too subliminally subscribe to such colonialist appellations, but they critique it too.⁸³ However, the wide range of evidence presented in this chapter, in connection with the Brahmaputra valley, reveals that these appellations are misnomers.

⁸¹ Bhuyan, S. K. 1949. *Early British Relations with Assam*. Shillong, Assam: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, Preface.

⁸² J P Mills and other colonial writers were quite critical about the status of archaeology in the region. This view got widely repeated by postcolonial scholars like Dhavalikar, Gautam Sengupta and their likes, even about postcolonial Assam. Mills, J. P. 1933. "Assam as a field for research." *Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) 1 (1): 4-10.; Dhavalikar, "Archaeology of Gauhati.", 137-149; Singh, Jai Prakash, and Gautam Sengupta, . 1991. *Archaeology of Northeastern India*. New Delhi: Northeastern Hill University.

⁸³ Dhavalikar, "Archaeology of Gauhati.", 137-149; Hazarika, Manjil. 2008. "Archaeological Research in North-East India: A Critical Review." *Journal of Historical Research (An Annual Publication of the Department of History Dibrugarh University)* XVI: 1-14.

As can be deduced from the archaeological surveys of the 20th century, architecture abounded the early historic polity comprising what is now the Brahmaputra valley. Before these scientific surveys of the 20th century began, as discussed earlier, the recovery of the early historic architectures was conducted by political agents of the EIC that brought to light much of what was later surveyed by the Eastern Circle. The early military surveys usually jotted the remains as they were found, accompanied by delineation of the architecture and the sculptures.⁸⁴ The latter supply a compelling, early visual archive or graphic representation of a region thus known. A recurring deliberation in the reports by the Europeans was over financial allocations for the surveys and regarding the preservation of the monuments and objects. For example, surveying the remains of an old city at Kasomari Pathar close to Doyang river, Bloch opined,

“... in the forests near Kasomari Pathar ... it would be difficult and costly to settle down laborers for the time and to bring up the necessary supplies and machinery. ... I am afraid the place must be left as it is.”⁸⁵

Bloch during the survey next year dismissed the copper temple at Bhishmuk Nagar as a small family chapel, earlier noted by Major Hannay as an important pre-Ahom pilgrimage with roads connecting it to western India via Cooch Behar.⁸⁶ In the reports of John Marshall too

⁸⁴ As has been noted by Upinder Singh, in the documentation of these monuments disinterested scholarship vied with more measured approaches arguing for the preservation of Indian antiquities. Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 338.

⁸⁵ Bloch, *Report on an Archaeological Tour*, 5

⁸⁶ Hannay, “Notes on Ancient Temples and other remains”, 459-476; Bloch, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey*, 17-28.

reductions in expenditure towards the conservation of monuments, including in the Eastern Circle feature noticeably.⁸⁷

Such assumptions differed significantly in later surveys by archaeologists such as K. N. Dikshit, R. D. Banerji and T. N. Ramachandran. For example, in the early 1920s Kasomari Pathar came to be documented in detail by surveyor K. N. Dikshit recording the monoliths or the pillars resembling the Chessman and Sword Blade types comparable to Dimapur, and decorative elements consisting of flora, fauna and human figures. Dikshit further provided conservative treatment to the fallen columns and protected the site with fencing to keep wild animals away from ravaging the site.⁸⁸ In the subsequent years, Kasomari Pathar came to be conserved under the Eastern Circle, ASI.⁸⁹ Simultaneously, many new sites too came to be discovered by these early archaeologists of India. R. D. Banerji discovered the historic site of Dah Parbatiya and documented it in painstaking detail. Banerji further discovered other well-known sites such as Bamuni Hill in Tezpur, Bisnauth, Kamakhya in Kamrup and Negriting temple in Sibsagar. T. N. Ramachandran discovered the Davaka group of remains and remains at Numaligarh and Deoparbat. These surveys help to determine the architectural and iconographic specificities of the region, as noted above. However, the principal difference between the early 19th century orientalist surveys and the 20th century archaeological surveys is the approach towards the architectural heritage of this liminal colonial province. Although the scientific and legal object of archaeological study form a significant category of analysis and archaeologist's domain of expertise, analysing these early works acted as important

⁸⁷ Marshall, *Annual Report of the Director General of Archaeology (1918-19)* 1-16; Marshall, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey (1916-17)*, 1-22.

⁸⁸ Dikshit, "Annual Report of the Eastern Circle", 80-81.

⁸⁹ Banerjee, "Eastern Circle (1924-25)", 94-102.

moments in the colonial history.⁹⁰ First and foremost, it is relevant to ask what was the basis of producing this knowledge that was given the status of scientific knowledge. While for the likes of Cunningham, early texts such as those by foreign scholars such as Huen Tsang acted as the primary reference, much of the recoveries by these political agents comprised searches based on chance find or trailing along the jungles, as these officials found the local knowledge insufficient.⁹¹ Although local traditions or texts would not be the point of departure for these officials, these were certainly not absent.⁹² In this, the objects thus recovered and monuments chanced upon provided authentic and reliable historical evidences or observable material proofs. These taxing, early recoveries would often be accompanied by maps, ground plans and sketches of the structures and sculptures; although the descriptions may at times be desultory.⁹³ On the contrary, the later surveys and discoveries by the Indian archaeologists were characterized by detailed descriptions of the iconography, architectural composition and measurements accompanied by photographs. The object of the early 19th century recoveries by the EIC soldiers was directed at the better rule of an alien land i.e. India. The purpose, however, of the archaeological surveys later was to trace and organize the knowledge of the

⁹⁰ El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice*, 1-44

⁹¹ Westmacott was quite dissatisfied with the ignorant locals. Westmacott, "Description of Ancient Temples and Ruins at Chardwar", 185-195.

⁹² Kalika Puran supplies valuable information about the important cities of ancient Assam. Additionally, it also lists sacred places associated with the worship of Shiva, Devi and Vishnu as well as temples of other deities such as Kubera on the Darpana hill. Similarly, Yogini Tantra provides graphic description of sacred places or pilgrimages such as Apunarbhava or modern Hajo. References to the secular architecture of Pragjyotishpur are also found in the Mahabharata, Harivamsa, Bhagavat Purana and Vishnu Purana to name a few. Saraswati, S. K. 2017 "Art". In *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, 5th edn. 423-71. Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam.

⁹³ Not in a sense of wildly imaginary and unreliable tracts of JASB but Dalton's appraisal is a sweeping survey of a dozen sites accompanied by very useful, early drawings of these sites. Similarly, Butler's description too of remains at Dimapur is brief but usefully supplies early illustrations of this remote site. Dalton, "Notes on Assam Temple Ruins.", 1-24; Butler, J. 1855. *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam during Residence of Fourteen Years*. London: Smith, Elder and Co.

homeland of the Assamese. The early 19th century surveys, in matters of producing scientific knowledge, were not systematic compared to the surveys of the Eastern Circle of the ASI.

Map 1: Distribution of the early historic sites surveyed by the ASI in colonial Assam, map not to scale



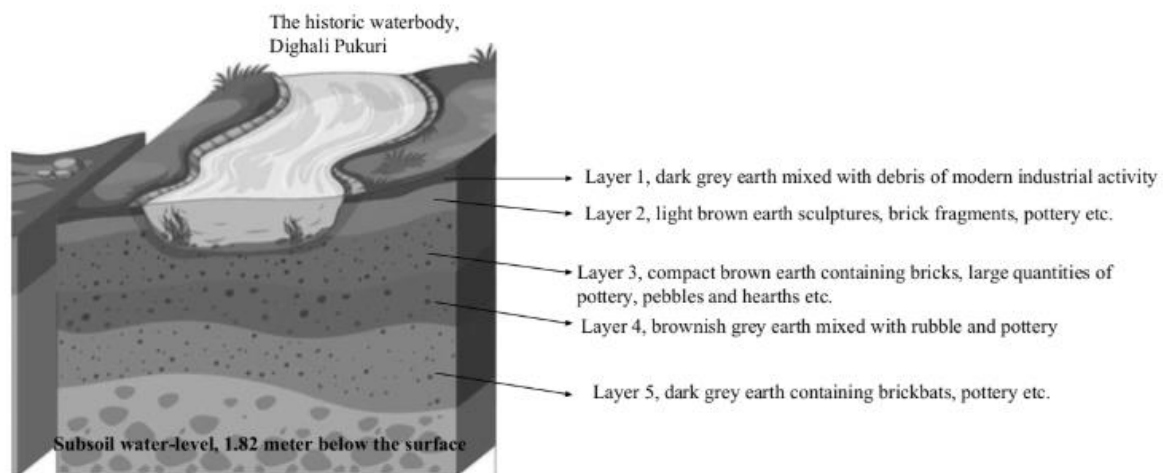
Source: Prepared based on temple surveys by self, dated January 2024

The Quest Continues: The Excavation at Ambari, 1969

The central premise of the thesis concerns with the British Assam of the 19th to early 20th century. But a very crucial discovery occurred outside this time bracket. While conducting foundational work for the construction of the Reserve Bank of India, workers at the Dighalipukuri area, an old channel of Brahmaputra and a historic trade route, chanced upon archaeological remains. Soon the state and central authorities visited the site and not long

before it was declared an ancient monument in exercise of powers conferred by Section 3 (i) of the Assam Ancient Monuments and Records Act of 1959.⁹⁴ Commemorating this occasion, the Reserve Bank, now situated near Pan Bazar railway station, preserves a Surya and a Vishnu sculpture from the Ambari excavation.⁹⁵ The excavation took place at the site in March, 1969, in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University and the State Department of Archaeology.

Figure 15: Indicative stratigraphic section of the Ambari archaeological site based on the initial excavation



Source: Compiled by self, based on the description provided in Dutta, H. N., ed. 2006. *Ambari Archaeological Site: An Interim Report*. Guwahati: Directorate of Archaeology. Page 7-9

Contrary to a persistent complaint about a lack of excavation, about the archaeology of Assam, the Ambari presents instance of a site excavated extensively in different phases. The Department of Anthropology, University of Gauhati played a central role in the excavation of the site. After the initial survey in the 1960s, reports were submitted to the Archaeological

⁹⁴ Dutta, H. N., ed. 2006. *Ambari Archaeological Site: An Interim Report*. Guwahati: Directorate of Archaeology.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 7-9.

Survey of India and soon the Government of Assam allotted the excavation project at Ambari to the Gauhati University.⁹⁶

Figure 16: Aerial view of the Ambari site during the early phases of excavation



Source: Collected from Ambari Site Museum by self, dated 18.11.2021

The finds from Ambari were extensive in nature. The findings can be divided into five specific categories viz., potsherds, ceramics, stone sculptures, rare potteries such as rouletted, Arretine, celadon and green glazed potteries, and rare stone beads. The Layer 3 of Fig. 14 above corresponds to the period between 7th and 12th centuries. And this phase is particularly plentiful in terms of structures and artefacts. Number of stone sculptures were recovered from two structures revealed at Layer 3. These are taken by Dhavalikar to represent high achievement in artistry in Kamarupa. The sculptures are made of granular buff and grey

⁹⁶ Letter no. 67/69/139, 2 March 1970 to the Registrar, Gauhati University by Under Secretary to the Government of Assam, Education Department quoted in Dutta, *Ambari Archaeological Site*, 1-11.

sandstone, and represent Brahmanical deities such as *Vishnu*, *Surya*, *Mahishasuramardini*, *Shiva* and *Nundi*.⁹⁷ These are the usual representations in the temple sites described in foregoing sections, associated with the timeframe mentioned. But more importantly, it is the pottery that occupies centre stage in Ambari excavation.

Buff coloured Kaolin ware and similar ware treated with red wash are the most prominent and predominant features of layer 3.⁹⁸ According to Dhavalikar Kaolin potteries are the finest variety of ancient ceramics. The only other region in India where it is found is the Deccan.⁹⁹ The Kaolin pottery is still a living practice among potter communities in and around Guwahati, just as the making of the cord marked and perhaps rouletted potteries too, are still in practice among people of the valley and parts of northeastern regions.¹⁰⁰ Dhavalikar further informs that the clay for Kaolin pottery used to be obtained from Lakhimpur district of Assam. This pottery was not only predominant in Ambari site but found also in Kamakhya, Navagraha and Saraniya hill sites. Discoveries of the last two are credited to the KAS. The method of producing this pottery involves baking at a uniformly high temperature to produce an extremely fine fabric, free from impurities of any sort.¹⁰¹ The vessels further are devoid of any slip or wash. The main type of implements made of this variety of clay are – different shapes of jars containing stamped designs of the sun, fruits, lozenge; further cups, carinated bowls, dishes and more interestingly Greek variety of vessel known as *cornucupia* too are made of

⁹⁷ Lal, B. B., ed. 1971. *Indian Archaeology 1968-69: A Review*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.
Deshpande, M. N., ed. 1974. *Indian Archaeology 1970-71: A Review*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.

⁹⁸ Dutta, *Ambari Archaeological Site*, 1-11

⁹⁹ Dhavalikar, "Archaeology of Gauhati.", 137-149.

¹⁰⁰ Hazarika, Manjil. 2013. Cord-impressed pottery in Neolithic-Chalcolithic context of eastern India', in *Neolithic-Chalcolithic Cultures of Eastern India* edited by K.N. Dikshit, 78-110. New Delhi: Indian Archaeological Society.

¹⁰¹ Dhavalikar, "Archaeology of Gauhati.", 137-149.

this variety of fine clay. Red washed potteries too, of coarse fabric and devoid of surface treatment are present at the site in a comparatively limited number. Dhavalikar describes this class of finds from Ambari as 'Ambari Ware' and it is a representative feature of this ancient site.

Dhavalikar extends the theory of golden period in the history of the Brahmaputra valley based on the artistic achievements evidenced by Ambari finds. However, to confirm such formulation there has to be sufficient data or evidences belonging to the preceding and succeeding periods. Ambari, a post-Independence find, contains a cultural phase dating back to Bhaskarvarman's reign, i.e. c. 7th century. The debate over the presence of Brahmanical religion in the early centuries CE is corroborated by Ambari as also confirmed by Kamakhya, Umananda, Urvashi and certain other parts of the valley such as Tezpur and Sri Surya Pahar, Goalpara. While potteries form a central topic of discussion because it is compared with ceramic finds in western and northern India, the busiest sites of post-Independence archaeology, for a period to identify as classical, several further factors have to coincide. The temples and associated art, architectural and sculptural specificities have been discussed above in empirical detail. However, there has not been much discussion in terms of designating a classical or golden age or a particular Kamarupa School of Art by scholars of the KAS.¹⁰²

Further, very little is known about the nature of the society as revealed in connection with unearthing the Ambari site. It is usually described as representing an atelier. However, it has

¹⁰² A noted explorer of Assam, Sarbeshwar Kataki conducted his most significant fieldworks commissioned by the KAS. He first proposed the theory of Kamarupa School of Art in 1941. But, it has been shown in detail in the previous chapter, neither Kataki himself in subsequent years nor scholars before or after him pursued this topic. Kataki, Sarbeshwar. 1941. "The Kamarupa School of Sculpture." *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) 8 (2): 38-43.

been agreed by modern authors that the general character of the society in the ancient and early medieval Assam, i.e., roughly the 4th to 12th century was that of a rural, riparian settlement.¹⁰³ To refer to Padmanath, however, in one of his various studies of Nidhanpur plates, the author refers to his debate with another noted coeval of his time Nalinikanta Bhattashali, curator of the Dacca Museum, over the location of Nidhanpur plates and the role of boundary demarcations represented in the plates in determining the nature of settlement the donation involved.¹⁰⁴ Here Padmanath differed with Bhattashali and certain European scholars such as M. Finot of Indo-China regarding the provenance of the plates. But he provided a useful reading of these plates in terms of determining the nature of their locations. Padmanath noted that determining the exact nature of the location, as derived from the boundary specification may not be entirely problem-free. Rather he touched upon the topic of how often the political boundary of a kingdom, differed from the spiritual boundaries.

The point being homed in, is that these theories are seldom endorsed by historians like Kanaklal Barua or Padmanath Bhattacharya of Assam. It shows a divide in the understanding of Assam's history in Assam and in other parts of the subcontinent. For one thing, the formulations of 'dark age' or 'golden age', theoretical constructions that emerged largely as a result of the 19th century nationalist and civilizational frameworks, were often based on sweeping generalizations and incomplete evidence base.¹⁰⁵ In more recent decades in historical scholarship, sources have become increasingly based on archaeological finds, as compared to the earlier primacy attached to the classics and written records. The gaps in the

¹⁰³ Chattopadhyay, B. D. 1990. *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India*. Calcutta: Primus Books; Lahiri, Nayanjyot. 1991. *Pre-Ahom Assam: Studies in the Inscriptions of Assam between the Fifth and the Thirteenth Centuries AD*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

¹⁰⁴ Vidyavinode, Pandit Padmanath Bhattacharya. 1936. "Location of the Nidhanpur Grant of Bhaskara-Varman of Kamarupa." *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) 4 (3): 58-66.

¹⁰⁵ Thapar, Romila. 1992. *Interpreting Early India*. Delhi: OUP

knowledge of a coherent national history, that these theories would be based on, are regularly filled with discoveries at regional levels. The Golden Period of Bhaskarvarman as proposed by Dhavalikar was essentially in connection with the Ambari excavation. Such formulations, however, are not observed in the 20th century historical scholarship or key texts produced by Padmanath or Kanaklal or Gait. Further, for a period to be called golden age only ceramic and architectural remains are considered insufficient. The political, social, intellectual or philosophical and economic conditions play a major role in determining the peak or zenith in the history of a particular territory. In terms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries discovery of ancient Kamarupa, Bhaskarvarman's Nidhanpur plates particularly and Dubi plates too made clear the genealogy of the Bhauma Varman dynasty. For example, Padmanath, did not follow the paradigms, as discerned most notably by Romila Thapar, of interpreting early India in terms of the periodization, the fraught racial theory and the theory of golden age.¹⁰⁶ In fact, writers like Padmanath especially were more interested in engaging with the nature of the region's past, as represented in epigraphic, antiquarian and traditional sources mainly. The stalwarts of KAS too, never showed an express interest in substituting the nationalist ideologies with the regional ideologies, or applying squarely the nationalist ideologies to the region. Much of the relics recovered and discovered in the 19th to 20th century found its way to the Assam Provincial Museum and demonstrated an emphasis in its collection and display of early archaeological history.

¹⁰⁶ Thapar, Romila. 2000. "Regional History: The Punjab." In *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, by Romila Thapar, 95-108. New Delhi: OUP.

Chapter 5

The 'Exhibitionary Order': Founding the Provincial Museum of Assam¹

The Assam State Museum of postcolonial Assam is one of the largest museums in the Northeast, housing a representative collection of the artistic and material heritage of the Brahmaputra Valley. The Museum was formally inaugurated in April, 1940, by then Governor of British Assam, Robert Neil Reid. Since its foundation the Provincial Museum operated as a private institution till March, 1953, when it was brought into the fold of the Government of Assam.² The nucleus of the inaugural assemblage was derived from the collections made by Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti (KAS) over a period of four decades prior to the beginning of the famed museum. This chapter seeks to present a hitherto untold account of the museum practices in Assam. By doing so, it will conduct an archival study and survey of the inaugural assemblage of the Provincial Museum. The particular questions, objects and concerns of the chapter are – the history and origins and also the nature of the collection of the museum, the roots of which lie not merely in colonial institutional initiative, but in the longstanding intellectual and antiquarian labour of the KAS; its social and intellectual implications mainly, and the limitations and specificities of the foremost Museum in the region, as unheeded to this day.

¹ The title is derived after Timothy Mitchell (1989), in a sense as representing the guiding principle of museum of ordering up exhibits of a particular territory, be it a provincial town, a capital city or the metropole. Mitchell, Timothy. 1989. "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order." In *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Donald Preziosi, 409-423. Oxford: Oxford History of Art: OUP.

² The Museum folder offered free of cost to researchers as well as casual visitors alike.

Museums, as it commenced in the Valley, started operating as a significantly different category compared to the 'European model of museums as state institutions' at the turn of the 18th century.³ The collections of the British Museum in the mid-18th century, composed of major and minor artefacts from all civilizations across the globe. Museums emerged within Britain or in the continental context, in the words of Tapati Guha-Thakurta, as 'an epistemological complex', but more importantly as formalized exhibitions of commercial and imperial power across the globe.⁴ The history of museums in the Valley, on the other hand, has been essentially much more instructive and represented a culture as curated by its own. Another point needs to be noted here that the ideal of the museum in this formative period was collection and display that 'should represent the universe by means of a systematic classification of all subject matter.'⁵ It may be presumed that the governing principle in the early days of organizing a museum collection in European nation states must have been driven by educational philosophy rather than on explicitly political concerns. However, as Mitchell and Anderson help us see, it was in fact essentially political.⁶ Once again to draw parallels with the then colonial superiors, i.e. the British government or Europe at large, museums for the specific purposes of art or natural history were being set up, by the mid-19th century, as distinct entities constituting distinct fields of knowledge. However, museums were yet to even

³ Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. 1997. "The museumised relic: Archaeology and the first museum of colonial India." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* (SAGE) 34 (1): 21-51, 22.

⁴ Guha-Thakurta maintains the position of viewing museum in the metropole as 'an imperial archive'; whereas Mitchell leans more towards an inherently political position for the beginning of museum exhibitions. Guha-Thakurta, "The museumised relic: Archaeology and the first museum", 22; Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order.", 409-423.

⁵ The definition is ascribed to an early treatise on museum practices dated 1565, cited by Guha-Thakurta, "The museumised relic: Archaeology and the first museum", 23.

⁶ Anderson, B. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso; Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order.", 409-423

achieve a satisfactory footing in the subcontinent by that time.⁷ In this way the museum practices in colonial India would have a life comparable to colonialist approach to other aspects of the subcontinent's history. The diverse nature and nuances of the historic and prehistoric pasts in India would not always be sufficiently represented in the earliest museums.

Order was quite central to the concept of museums from its advent in the modern times. It came into being precisely to give order and meaning to the vast array of material cultural artefacts of the 'chaotic Orient'.⁸ In terms of order of the display in the Provincial Museum, it was termed multi-purpose as compared to composite collections in the presidencies. To refer to the history and functions of the KAS in the previous chapter, the initial ensemble of the museum, obviously corresponded to the unidirectional quest of the KAS – i.e., focused on history, archaeology and ethnography.⁹ This represented a distinct field of knowledge as well as museum practices within the region. The composite character although would be the early ideal of the colonial rulers towards museums in the colonies.¹⁰ Disquisition of museums in India marks its beginning in the formation of the Indian Museum within the premises of the Asiatic Society in 1814. In the Brahmaputra Valley museums present a distinct identity tied to the network of indigenous, regional museums.

⁷ By 1814 the Indian Museum in Kolkata came up housing art, archaeological and scientific specimens all under one roof. All other major or provincial museums started coming up much later in the early 20th century. Museums dedicated to specific areas of knowledge would only be a postcolonial phenomenon, especially in India.

⁸ The term chaotic is quoted in single apostrophe because the guiding binaries of the museum and exhibition practices often juxtaposed the chaos of the Orient with the rationalism of the Occident. Mitchell's is one of the references where this underpinning is spelled out clearly. Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order.", 409-423.

⁹ Bhuyan, S. K., ed. 1927. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti or the Assam Research Society*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti, 4.

¹⁰ Guha-Thakurta, "The museumised relic: Archaeology and the first museum", 21-51

As the chapter examines the process through which Kamarupa's antiquity was reimagined within the modern institutional space of museum, the category of heritage functions as a central conceptual bridge – one that interlinks colonial ideologies of classification and preservation with an emerging regional-nationalist claim to Assam's antiquity. "Heritage is a multi-layered performance – be this a performance of visiting, managing, interpretation and conservation – that embodies acts of remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of place, belonging and understanding in the present".¹¹ Heritage-making through the process of selection, exhibition and museumization that carefully curates fragments of the past, detaching it from its cultural, often lived contexts, and reframed to fit a narrative that facilitates governance and control – appear again and again in postcolonial writings of Bernard S. Cohn, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Deborah Sutton et al.¹² What these definitions of heritage underscore is two broad dimensions of heritage – that of personal or lived experience and professional or expert view of heritage. The modern interdisciplinary concept of heritage has evolved over the past few decades and has intensified as a concept of serious academic enquiry beyond its characterization as a leisure activity and economic industry. This is the primary frame of reference for the thesis's usage of the category 'heritage'. Heritage as a professional and expert view comprises the 'authorized discourse of heritage'. It validates, negotiates and regulates what does or does not represent the identity and values of a culture, territory and community. It is often reinforced through the obvious modern contexts of tourism and museums. This complies with the dominant western/ west-centric view of the inherently material basis of heritage. But Smith usefully draws attention

¹¹ Smith, Laura Jane. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. New York: Routledge

¹² Cohn, Bernard S. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Guha-Thakurta, "The museumised relic: Archaeology and the first museum", 21-51 Sutton, Deborah. 2024. *Ruling Devotion: The Hindu Temple in the British Imperial Imagination*. Delhi: Permanent Black.

to an inherent intangibility of heritage beneath and beyond the obvious appearance of the self-evident form of heritage as places, sites, objects and landscapes. According to Cohn and Smith, what makes a piece of rock, paper or metal heritage are the activities and processes in the present. It is in this sense that Smith identifies heritage as a ‘process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present’.¹³ It is these processes that make a monument or artefact physically symbolic of particular cultural and social event. The west-centric view treats heritage as mappable, measurable, manageable, preservable and conservable in its materiality – tied inherently to governance and legislation. But these authorized and expert discourses of heritage serves to represent specific age/ time and aesthetics of a territory while invalidating, disadvantaging, silencing, and omitting multiple past, present and contemporary practices, aesthetics and ideas.¹⁴ The thesis does not pretend to be an all-encompassing compendium of the heritage of Assam as discovered and canonized in the early 20th century, much less a comprehensive take on the iconography and aesthetics of the ancient and early period heritage of Assam. It focuses rather on the formative phase in the Brahmaputra valley of the recovery and reconstruction of its early heritage. It is important because it represents the a cultural apex of Assam that is under-represented and under-researched. By directing attention to these archives and repositories faded into oblivion, the research seeks to underscore the centrality and relevance of this period to the identity of modern Assam. The thesis unravels that the intangible, personal and the tangible were

¹³ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, Introduction

¹⁴ Among others David Lowenthal and Tapati Guha-Thakurta have highlighted the aesthetic and emotional appeal of heritage in making it a dominant, hegemonic discourse and its relation to counter-narratives, alternative remembrance and memory-work mobilized in the present in service of identity, resistance and authority. Lowenthal, David. 2003. *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. 2004. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

enmeshed in the search for ancient Kamarupa as undertaken by the Assamese and Bengali scholars of Assam and other regions in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Heritage is not heritage just because it simply is. It becomes heritage through multi-layered performance situated in a political region. Kamarupa's antiquity was not merely an academic exercise, but an act of cultural assertion. The museum, drawing on the collections and ethos of the KAS, became a space where Assamese and Bengali scholars could re-inscribe their history on their own terms –resisting colonial epistemologies while also selectively applying their classificatory methods.

The Formation of Museum in Assam: An Archive of the KAS

“The construction of the house has removed a long want of the Samiti. The house is divided into two rooms. The Western room will be used as a sort of strong room for depositing valuable historical relics and the other room will be used as an office. The dimension of the house is 36 x 18 feet.”¹⁵

During 1917-18, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti declared that the principal work achieved during that year was that of the construction of the house for the Samiti. Previously, the Samiti undertook a project to construct a house and a deputation was sent to the Chief Commissioner of Assam. In 1916-17 the Assam Government sanctioned a grant towards this and accordingly a sub-committee comprising Jogendranath Barooah, Bhuban Ram Das, Hemchandra Goswami and Munshi Azizar Rahman was formed for the construction.¹⁶ A formal opening

¹⁵ Report for the Year 1917-18, Work During the year in Sarma, Chandra Nath ed. 1920. *The Work of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, 10.

¹⁶ Report of Kamarupa Anusandhandhana Samiti, For the year 1916-17 in Sarma, *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 1-7.

of the house was organized on November 19, 1917 which was presided over by Lt. Col. P. R. T. Gurdon, the Hon'y, Director of Ethnography in Assam. The opening of the house was a great excitement for the workers of the Samiti. The high price of house materials and the financial status of the Samiti did not allow a bigger room, but such constrictions certainly did not stand in the way of its scholarly pursuit. Gurdon memorialized the occasion by communicating the recovery of Kanai-Barasi rock inscription by the Samiti¹⁷ and reading the decipherment of another rock inscription that remained a puzzle for a long time, namely the Tezpur inscription, brought to light by Edward Gait in 1893. Rubbings or stamping of the inscriptions was officially unveiled during the occasion and exhibited in the Samiti's collection. This perhaps marks the beginning of the museum collection and display practices in the region. Further, Gurdon added that this building that was being inaugurated was a temporary one that hopefully would form the nucleus of the museum which was proposed to be founded in Gauhati.¹⁸ Aside from Gurdon, Archdale Earle, the Chief Commissioner, took great interest in the project of the proposed museum in Gauhati that got deferred by WWI.¹⁹ The temporary building was supposed to function as a substitute till a fully-fledged museum

¹⁷ The discovery is credited to Sonaram Chowdhury by Col. Gurdon in his Presidential Speech, and this seems more accurate. However, the KAS Report of the year 1918-19 informs that the discovery of the inscription was a result of exploration work during the year by a team comprising of H. C. Goswami, Jogendranath Barooah, Bishnu Ram Medhi, Shishir Kumar Barooah, Sona Ram Chowdhury, Jogendra Nath Barooah. It is mentioned in the same report that the exploration of the North Guwahati was conducted by the team 'with a view to see if there were any relics of historic interest.' 'They found many interesting stone-cut carvings and inscriptions there, the most interesting of which' was the pre-Ahom Kanai Barasi rock inscription commemorating 'the defeat of Bakhtiyar Khilji at the hand of the king of Kamata'. KAS Report for the Year 1918-19 in Sarma, *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 20-21; Presidential Speech of the Hon'ble Colonel Gurdon, Commissioner AVD: Assam Valley Division, dated Gauhati the 19th November 1917, Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti in Sarma, Chandra Nath, ed. 1920. *The Work of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti* 28-35.

¹⁸ Presidential Speech of the Hon'ble Colonel Gurdon (op. cit.)

¹⁹ Although Gurdon did not elaborate, in the inaugural speech he hinted that the Museum could not be established earlier due mainly to the war and consequently the house had to function as the temporary structure housing relics. Ibid, 28-35.

building was constructed. The Samiti acknowledged Jogendra Nath Barua for supervising the work of construction and also contractor Achyutananda Choudhury for charging only the actual cost for the construction.²⁰

It is difficult to trace a definitive ‘prehistory’ of museum formation in the Brahmaputra Valley. But, it could be discerned from the reports of the Samiti’s extensive collection activities during the early 20th century that the Ahoms maintained a large collection of historical articles comprising regalia and armoury.²¹ These were eventually donated to the Samiti and formed a foundational layer of what would become Assam’s first museum collection.²² Most notable of these donations were made by the royal family of Kesava Kanta Singha and Queen Mahendri. Royal families of tributaries of Ahoms such as Dimarua and Rani made significant donations as well. Aside from this, a deputation consisting of Hem Chandra Goswami, Radhanath Phukan, Sarveswar Kataki, Jnana Nath Borah, Muktheadhar Sarma and S. K. Bhuyan was sent specifically for the acquisition of Ahom royal family articles in August 1926.²³ This team collected array of royal attires obtained from various places including a *Guna-patti* for head with Tai characters written on it. Other than the Ahoms, E. F. Lydall and J. H. Crace, political officers at Sadiya collected bowls and armlets of the Sutia rulers and presented them to the Samiti.²⁴ However, whether or not these can be bestowed the status equivalent to that of a

²⁰ KAS Report for the year 1917-18 in Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 8-14.

²¹ Lists of such items are delineated in the previous chapter as well as subsequently in the current chapter.

²² Report of the years 1919-20 to 1924-25 and 1926-27 in Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 3-33.

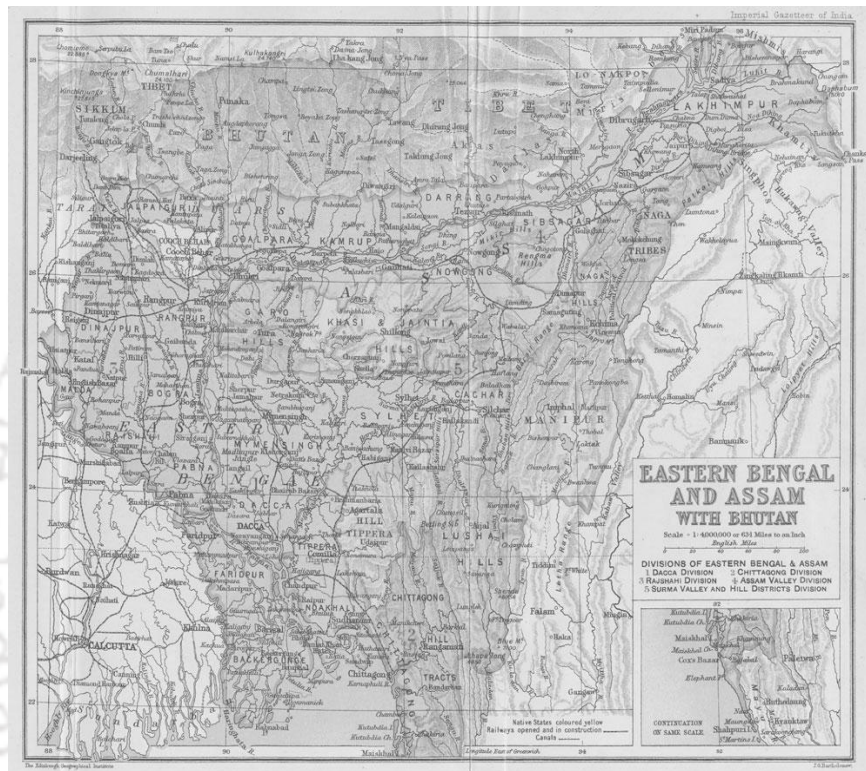
²³ Work during 1926-27 in Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 19-28.

²⁴ Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, For the years 1934-35 & 1935-36 in Goswami, D. and S. Kataki. 1937. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*. Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

princely collection, especially the Ahoms', alongside the archive of *Buranjis* remains a matter of contention.

Kalicharan Sen, secretary and treasurer of the Samiti, drafting the prospectus of the KAS in December 1914 insisted that the idea of the Samiti 'certainly was not an original one'.²⁵

Map 2: Map of Eastern Bengal and Assam



Source: Bartholomew, J. G. 1907-09. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*. New edition, published under the authority of His Majesty's Secretary of State for India in Council. XI. Oxford: Clarendon Press [Digital South Asia Library].

Clearly, because Asiatic Society by William Jones and later re-organization by H. T. Colebrooke, and the Royal Asiatic Society in London set the precedent for orientalist search

²⁵ Kalicharan Sen, Secretary during the opening of the Samiti's house, the earliest repository of the region's antiquities, belonged to the lineage of the distinguished Rajballav family of Bagbajar, WB. Col. Gurdon praised Sen in glowing terms for his devoted labouring at the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti in his adopted motherland Assam. Presidential Speech of the Hon'ble Colonel Gurdon (op. cit.); Sen, Kalicharan. 1914. *Prospectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

and collection of Asiatic customs, manners, artefacts and scientific specimens. However, the prospectus of the Samiti did not identify itself within an orientalist search but within the spheres of regional organizations. The vast network of local museums that grew in the first quarter of the 20th century in the Eastern regions, traced its origin to the Bhagalpur Session of Bengal Literary Conference held in February, 1910. It was only a year after the demise of the first President of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad or the Bengali Literary Society, Ramesh Chandra Dutta. The Parishad took the unfortunate incident on the chin and in remembrance of the historian proposed the idea of a Literary and Historical Museum at Calcutta.²⁶ Due to its location at the heart of colonial politics and economy, the opening fund was a comparatively considerable amount of Rupees 5000. The opening fund was entirely a donation of the Maharaja of Baroda towards the Museum. According to the Bhagalpur Resolution, the institution came to be known as 'Ramesh Bhawan'.²⁷ Another plot of land of 7 *cottahas* adjacent to the existing building of the Parishad, was also donated by Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandy of Cossimbazar. Further amounts were collected from the subscription of common people. "A general committee consisting of representative Indians from all the provinces" was formed at the session.²⁸ Question was raised about the relevance of a local museum despite presence of the Imperial Museums in the Presidencies, especially Calcutta. Ramendra Sundar Trivedi, then Secretary of the Parishad, while firmly attesting the necessity defended, "There has been within recent years mainly through the efforts of the Sahitya Parishad, an awakening in the land for preservation of relics of its ancient greatness."²⁹

²⁶ Das, Sajani Kanta. 1960. "Foreword." In *Historical Relics Etc. in the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Museum*, by Manoranjan Gupta, 1-7. Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad.

²⁷ Ibid, 1-7.

²⁸ Ibid, 2.

²⁹ Ibid, 3.

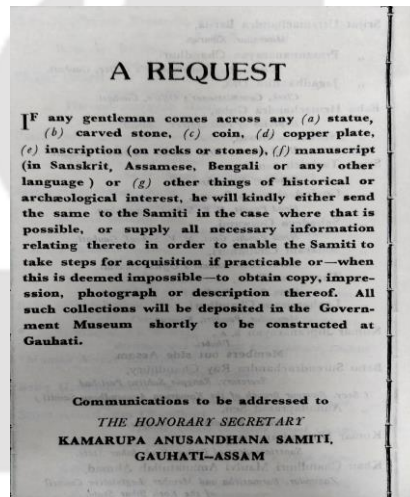
As a direct outcome of this session and the support of Henry Creighton, manager at indigo factory in Gaur and author of *Ruins of Gour*, a band of scholars embarked on a nationalist search for the archaeological remains in North Bengal. With an incentive from Sarat Kumar Roy, antiquarians such as Akshay Kumar Maitreya, Radhesh Chandra Sheth, Rajanikanta Chakrabarti, Umesh Batabyal, Abid Ali Khan et al. formed Varendra Anusandhan Samiti in Rajshahi. This regional society, inspired avowedly by a nationalist zeal, was dedicated to the collection of numerous sculptures, inscriptions and manuscripts from the said regions.³⁰ Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti while tracing its antecedent to these local organizations explicitly distinguished itself too. The KAS identified the difference precisely in method, “But though similar in name the method of work has to be quite different from that followed by the Varendra Anusandhan Samiti.”³¹ In asserting that its methods were ‘quite different’ from those of the Varendra Anusandhan Samiti, the KAS positioned itself not merely as a regional offshoot but as an autonomous intellectual formation. This distinction signaled a reflexive awareness of local conditions – geographical, archival, and cultural – that required a methodological reorientation from the Bengali antiquarian model. The relatively dense archaeological landscape of North Bengal and the heavily sculpture-centric and archaeological emphasis of the Varendra Anusandhan Samiti were in sharp contrast to the emerging archaeological landscape of Assam. Here, KAS faced the challenge of a fragmented, dispersed, and often ‘living’ heritage. This required different approaches that combined ethnographic sensitivity, textual scholarship, and field-based recovery. Additionally, KAS’s financial constraints too led to its distinct self-positioning and method.

³⁰ Maitreya, Akshay Kumar. 1985. *Uttarbanger Puratattva Samgraha*. Kolkata: Pratiti Prakashani.

³¹ Sen, *Prospectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*, 1

The regional research societies of eastern India operated in close intellectual dialogue, as evidenced by the composition of the founding body of the KAS. Notably, it secured honorary memberships from distinguished figures such as Haraprasad Shastri, President of Radha Anusandhan Samiti; Akshaykumar Maitreya Panchanan, Director of Varendra Anusandhan Samiti and Nagendranath Vasu, President of Virabhumi Anusandhana Samiti.³² These affiliations reflect that the Samiti was deeply embedded in a wider network of learned societies in Bengal and eastern India. It significantly shaped KAS's antiquarian pursuits based on shared ideological currents and collaborations in regional historical enquiry.

Figure 17: Example of a public notice disseminated by the KAS



Source: Sen, Kalicharan. 1914. *Prospectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, 6.

A notice (Figure 16) communicating about the prospective museum, was attached to the prospectus, published and circulated widely for public knowledge, dissemination and opinion. The public nature of the work of these research societies would be a unique feature and especially in matters of the KAS, it was seen as a substitute for constriction of fund under which the Samiti operated. The promise of the Samiti's Museum was unmistakable in the

³² Ibid, 1-6.

notice and could be gleaned as the guiding principle of its collection and preservation activities. The foundational prospectus further informed,

“Research Tour: Members of the Samiti have sometimes formed into small bodies of tourists to inspect places of historical importance; and also have either collected, or earmarked for collection, statues and other materials which might conveniently be placed in the Museum when started.”³³

A great part of the establishment of the society’s footing would depend on building a museum collection.³⁴ The Samiti, as policy, began work in close tandem with the region’s pioneering Department of Ethnography and naturally, archaeology and ethnography came to be at the center of its collection and survey too.³⁵

Soon enough the Samiti’s mounting collection drew notice of the government archaeologists and bureaucrats of British India. Visiting premises of the KAS in February 1921, Eastern Circle Superintendent of ASI, K. N. Dikshit expressed hope of a Provincial Museum based on the commendable archaeological collection made by the Samiti over the short span of a decade.³⁶ An urgency for a local Museum was clear in Dikshit’s entreaty that the general population of the region take sufficient interest in its creation. Dikshit made a few useful recommendations to the Samiti, local government and the people. The archaeologist urged the Samiti to extensively collect relics scattered across the Province, and not only that, to make

³³ Sen, *Prospectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*, 1-6

³⁴ O. P. Kejariwal states that the proposal for a Museum within Asiatic Society was part of a larger attempt at providing the Orientalist society with a solid institutional footing. Kejariwal, O. P. 1988. *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

³⁵ Sen, *Prospectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*, 1-6.

³⁶ Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 50-60.

impressions and plaster-casts of various epigraphs. He further urged the Samiti to embrace more effective measures to reach out to the Government and public with learned publications and exchange of reports. Further, Assam's Education Minister Syed Abdul Mazid visiting the Samiti's premises in the same year commented on the 'fine' collection made by the Samiti towards the establishment the Museum.³⁷ Among other visitors, attention may be drawn to the comments of B.C. Allen, Commissioner, AVD. Allen praised the Samiti on its commendable collection despite slender resources. These efforts of the Samiti soon yielded results. There had been much furore about the neglect of the Museum Scheme on the part of the Assam Legislative Council.³⁸ After an initial rejection of the Scheme in 1921, the Council finally passed a resolution sanctioning a grant of Rupees 30000 towards the institution of the Samiti's Museum.³⁹ This imparted hope and much necessary incentive for the ardent workers of the Samiti. Alongside this, the Samiti also frequently appealed to the government for an extension to the existing building. In later reports, additions of showcases, coin cabinets, and other collection, preservation and display facilities occur repeatedly. Eventually, the proposal and sanction of the society's Strong Room in 1926-27, is discussed in detail in the foregoing chapter.

Aside from the visitors just cited, visits of distinguished professionals continued. For example, Rakhal Das Banerji while on duty as the Superintendent, Eastern Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India visited the Samiti's premises in 1924.⁴⁰ He observed the small Museum already built by the Samiti became a representative institution of Assam. He too like Dikshit,

³⁷ Ibid, 53.

³⁸ Ministers of Local Self-Government and Assamese members of the Legislative Council recorded their reaction to the Council's neglect and refusal of the Museum Scheme and sanction of subsidy for the Museum. "No. 7 Remarks by Distinguished Visitors" in Ibid, 50-60.

³⁹ Work during 1925-26 in Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 16-19.

⁴⁰ Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 50-60.

advised the Samiti to form a representative coin committee. He further suggested collections to be made by the Samiti for preservations to be made by the Provincial Museum. However, eventually, the project would be sponsored by the Government. The Samiti could also possibly add cabinets to exhibit Ahom royal collections separately. The leading archaeologist also added on behalf of the ASI, Government of India that the numerous relics scattered across the province remained uncared for. The Government could help the Samiti in collecting and organizing them so that the museum could be instituted quickly and at a lesser expenditure. Need for better preservation techniques and Government support was echoed also by J. H. Hutton in 1925.⁴¹ Hutton was aware of the want of adequate preservative measures such as air-tight cases for *puthis* and *Buranjis*, glass-sheets for illustrated works and other such protective measures. The solution suggested by Hutton was to persuade the construction of the Provincial Museum and immediate appointment of an expert curator. The Assam Legislative Council was then yet to approve a sanction and without the Museum the future of these heritage artefacts were observed to be dismal. There was an increasing tone of urgency among the distinguished visitors for a museum in Assam, as the Samiti was observed to have already formed the nucleus. Governor Lawrie Hammond's remarks have been found particularly telling,

“The Committee of the Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti have done well in getting together a series of very interesting exhibits. A museum is necessarily a costly affair but we have here the nucleus for a provincial museum... build a suitable edifice classified to exhibit and preserve in suitable surroundings these interesting relics from the past. The inscriptions and *puthis* are

⁴¹ Ibid, 50-60.

particularly interesting...I congratulate President Hem Chandra Goswami and the Committee on what they have done.”⁴²

This would provide the necessary incentive to take up more zealously the longstanding project of museum by the Samiti. The process would, however, not be without its share of delays.

A Museum Movement in Assam

When the concept of museums, of European origin, travelled to India in the 19th century it was conceived officially as an imperial state organization, however the element of *Wunderkummer* of the early 17th and 18th centuries was retained.⁴³ By the 19th century museum started to be more specialized in the metropole, dedicated to distinct fields of knowledge such as art, archaeology, natural history and so forth. However, the museums that came up in the 19th and early 20th centuries in India were conceived essentially as a composite space housing disparate materials of art, history, ethnography as well as botanical and zoological specimens under one roof.⁴⁴ The emergence of museum in India traces its antecedent to the late 18th and 19th century antiquarianism.⁴⁵ The composite nature of museum as a house of wonder, collecting a gamut of floral, faunal, mineral and historical specimens reflected the early antiquarian's vision of India as a collective constellation of historical, scientific and natural elements. Order and visual extravaganza occupied the center stage in organizing these natural

⁴² Annual Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 2-3.

⁴³ The first Imperial Museum of Calcutta is still known as *Jadughar* in Bangla, which is a colonial appellation of *Wunderkummer* or House of Wonder.

⁴⁴ Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. 2004. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁴⁵ Guha-Thakurta, "The museumised relic: Archaeology and the first museum", 21-51.

and historic specimens within the space of museums. As it has been already mentioned, for the KAS to be established on a sound footing as an archaeological research society, building a collection for museum alongside maintaining a library were seen as essential.⁴⁶ The defining feature of the collection was to house objects of historic, ethnographic and natural environmental value that were exclusive and unique to India.⁴⁷ This overarching frame applied to the regions, albeit not without specific variations.

Museums emerged in different shapes and forms in the metropole and the colonies. The modern life of the discipline's trajectory follows an analogous route of the necessity to represent the measurable phenomenon called the orient – its history, culture and environment.⁴⁸ As has been already discussed museums evolved in Europe from Renaissance collections of the royal families through cabinets of curiosities such as Ashmolean Museum to major museums like the British and Louvre that functioned as a unified complex of knowledge about the colonies as well as colonial prowess.⁴⁹ However, the concern of scientific classification of the exhibits acted as a constant across the colonies, regions as well as Europe.⁵⁰

Here, the conventional route of locating or accommodating the Provincial Museum of Assam within a frame of imperial museums in India will be avoided. The thesis seeks to situate the

⁴⁶ Although brainchild of William Jones, Asiatic Society was viewed to be established on a solid institutional ground with its own premises, museum and library under the stewardship of H. T. Colebrooke. Kejariwal, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery*, 1-28.

⁴⁷ Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 43-85.

⁴⁸ Said, Edward W. 2003. *Orientalism*. New York: Penguin Books.

⁴⁹ Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order.", 409-423; Guha-Thakurta, "The museumised relic: Archaeology and the first museum", 21-51.

⁵⁰ Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 43-85; Guha-Thakurta, "The museumised relic: Archaeology and the first museum", 21-51.

museum of KAS within the holdings of private enterprises, or more appropriately, the definition provided by Guha-Thakurta of the museum of indigenous societies.⁵¹ The museum emerging out of the efforts of the KAS, was less a colonial state institution than an indigenous enterprise grounded in regional initiatives of collections and preservation. One of the earliest official texts marked the Indian Museum as the single, rightful custodian of archaeological finds in the colony. But in the early 1880s, the newly formed archaeological galleries of the Indian Museum would remain largely empty. John Anderson, then superintendent of Indian Museum observed that “On this point it appears to the Government of India that small local museums, although doubtless of great utility for other purposes... interferes with the completeness of the archaeological series at the Imperial Museum...”⁵² This points to a friction between centralized imperial control and the proliferation of regional initiatives – a tension that played out prominently in the museum movement across Eastern India.⁵³

⁵¹ The collection and conservation activities that spilled over to local organizations such as Bangiya Sahitya Parishad and Varendra Anusandhan Samiti are identified by Guha-Thakurta as museums of indigenous societies. A remark by Ramendra Sundar Trivedi is relevant here. Trivedi observed the space of Indian Museum to be inadequate for accommodating mounting archaeological remains from Bengal alone. Trivedi stated “Government here as elsewhere should be supplemented by private enterprise.” Gupta, Manoranjan, ed. 1960. *Historical Relics Etc. in the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Museum*. Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 5; Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 196.

⁵² Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, 'Resolution: Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India in the Home Department (Archaeology), Shimla, 8 November 1882', in *Scope and Management of the Indian Museum*, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Nos, 117-118, Home Miscellaneous, B, December 1882 [ASA]

⁵³ Mukherjee, Sraman. 2009. "Unearthing the Pasts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa: Archaeology, Museums and History Writing in the Making of Ancient Eastern India, 1862-1936." Doctoral Dissertation, Faculty of History, University of Calcutta, Kolkata.

Let us hark back to note the essay by J. P. Mills in the pages of Journal of the Assam Research Society once again. The text outlined Assam as ‘a field that could be mined for knowledge’.⁵⁴ Mills set out to delineate, however ‘brief and sketchy’, as he would himself admit, the scope of research that Assam presented for the Samiti’s workers.⁵⁵ Mills echoed a general⁵⁶ concern over conservation of the country’s heritage by identifying three prime sources of destruction viz., war, ‘luxurious vegetation’ and climate.⁵⁷ The key responsibility of the fledgling Society was, therefore, to salvage the extant remains from these ravages and to study and interpret them. Keen eyes and trained skills defined an expert who could be entrusted the responsibility of recovery of the region’s heritage. The author did not make any distinction between orientalist societies in the presidencies and indigenous societies driven by ideological ardor and identified the objective for KAS to push increasingly back the frontiers of Assam’s past. Collection of textual records, such as manuscripts, was rendered primary and also, its interpretation from a ‘strictly objective standpoint of all true scientists.’⁵⁸ Verbal records and generational wisdom, for Mills, presented a category comparable to the textual. Mills was particularly observant of the religious bias inherent in modern interpretations of the country’s past. However, Mills’ own focus on the question of religion and in relation to that on Ahom

⁵⁴ In tracing the trajectory of the first museum in colonial India Guha-Thakurta observes that the amateurish Antiquarian and Indological passions transformed into a systematic quest. To the Western gaze India presented ‘a field that could be mined for knowledge.’ Guha-Thakurta, “The museumised relic: Archaeology and the first museum”, 24.

⁵⁵ Mills, J. P. 1933. “Assam as a field for research.” *Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti) 1 (1): 4-10.

⁵⁶ The official focus of Archaeological Survey of India in the post-Cunningham Era shifted to documentation and conservation from extensive explorations and excavations. The particular concerns of conservation diverged from region to region. An overall preoccupation would be ravages caused by natural and man-made adversities. Guha-Thakurta and Singh describe the disciplinary evolutions introduced by the necessity for conservation. Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects and Histories: Institutions of Art*, 43-75; Singh, Upinder. 2004. *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology*. Delhi: Permanent Black.

⁵⁷ Mills, “Assam as a field for Research”, 3.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 3.

rule is problematized in the thesis. Mills' directive of such a focus drove a hierarchical wedge between the textual and the material, Ahom and the pre-Ahom. Further, Mills' idea of history contained a conventional undertone of monarchy, civilization and the machinery of state. On the other hand, the 'dumb' material records were to be obtained by bringing the whole of Assam under the command of spade, the chief tool of an archaeologist. Subsequently how the archaeology of Assam was, to some extent, misread by Mills has been presented in Chapter two of the thesis. Mills was also clearly convinced that the reach of the chief tool of archaeologist was futile in fetching anything of value from ethnographer's vast field in Assam. However, spade and its commission were not altogether dismissed and Mills acknowledged the necessity to follow up the 'tantalizing stories of great walled towns' coming to light regularly since the early 19th century. Notwithstanding the elaborate plan of documentation proposed by Mills, the author expressed justly his concern in the same vein over the fund required to meet such a plan. In divergence to a lot of Mills' guidelines the Samiti, however, took up the Herculean task of heritage-making of the region through recovery, collection, interpretation and dissemination.

After the formation of KAS in April 1912 at the conference of Uttar Banga Sahitya Parishad, held at Kamakhya the Samiti directed its attention to twofold objectives – first, a Museum of its own comprising a collection representative of Kamarupa and second, securing a good deal of organization and money.⁵⁹ The paltry grant in 1915 would be lamented by the Samiti's workers and would be a deviation from Bangiya Sahitya Parishad or Varendra Anusandhan Samiti that would be fortunate to have on its committees personalities like Kumar Sarat Kumar

⁵⁹ Sen, *Prospectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*, 1-6

Roy or Maharajas of Bengal, Kashmir and Baroda.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the Samiti continued to make strides. Soon enough the Samiti's building would be inaugurated in 1917 with view to house a fair amount of collection already made by then. The Samiti collected alongside inscriptions, various hewn stone slabs, bricks and images of Shiva, Ganesha and Buddha as well as a few other images and stone implements all from explorations in and around Guwahati.⁶¹ It also collected the estampage of Kanai Barasi inscriptions. The Samiti circulated the notice above (fig. 2) with a view to invite more collections from different parts of the city and adjacent places. The Samiti bore the cost of these collections and finances remained a major constraint in the way of a more extensive collection. However, the mounting collection started forming the nucleus of the proposed Museum at Gauhati. The Samiti as its fountainhead enrolled with the Museum Association, London as an Institutional Museum in 1916 – signalling participation in transregional museum networks.⁶²

Kanaklal Barua, a key figure in bringing about the Provincial Museum first expressed his hope for a State Museum at the Presidential Address to the History Section of Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1927.⁶³ A letter dated 25 July 1929 from the under secretary to the Government of Assam to the Commissioner, AVD reported that an estimate of Rupees 64,700 was submitted for administrative approval towards the project of the construction of Museum at Gauhati.⁶⁴ The 1930s would hence become a formative decade in the institutionalization of the museum.

⁶⁰ Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, Report for the Year 1916-17 compiled in Sarma, *The Work of Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti*, 1-7; Gupta, *Historical Relics Etc. in the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad*, 1-7.

⁶¹ Sen, *Prospectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*, 1-6.

⁶² Shastri, Biswanarayan. 1993. *An Account of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti (Assam Research Society)*. Guwahati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.

⁶³ Barua, Kanaklal. 1973. *Studies in the Early History of Assam*. Edited by Maheswar Neog. Jorhat-Gauhati, Assam: Asam Sahitya Sabha, viii.

⁶⁴ Under Secretary to the Government of Assam, 'Letter no. 1703 E., dated Shillong 25th July 1929' in *Proposed Museum at Gauhati*, General Department Proceedings, No. VIII-14 of 1929 [ASA]

Assam Museum Committee formed around 1934, set about raising fund for the Museum and reported a collection of Rupees 9750 from the people of Assam. Other than that, an amount of Rupees 8000 came from Rai Bahadur Naupat Kedia, principal donor to the Museum Fund. Further, Kanaklal Barua played an instrumental role in generating Rupees 10000 from the Government of Assam, especially at the behest of then Education Minister Maulana Wahid.⁶⁵

Following the Museum fund, the Executive Committee of the KAS decided in March 1936 to float an advertisement for the position of Curator for the proposed Museum at Gauhati.⁶⁶ The Committee shortlisted three candidates namely, Premadhar Choudhury, Birinchi Kumar Barua and Keshab Narayan Dutta. An M.A. in Sanskrit, History and Epigraphy and B.A. in the former two, Premadhar Choudhury was chosen, in a meeting held in July 1936 by the Executive Committee, to be the Curator of the “Museum of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti.”⁶⁷ Choudhury later reported to the Superintending Archaeologist at the Calcutta Museum for training in the craft of curatorship. The initial endeavor of Choudhury was directed at arranging a scientific layout of the display and classification. The Museum’s growing prominence was marked by its representation in the conference of the Museum Association held at Newcastle upon Tyne in July 1937, attended by S. K. Bhuyan.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Barua, *Studies in the Early History of Assam*, i-xx.

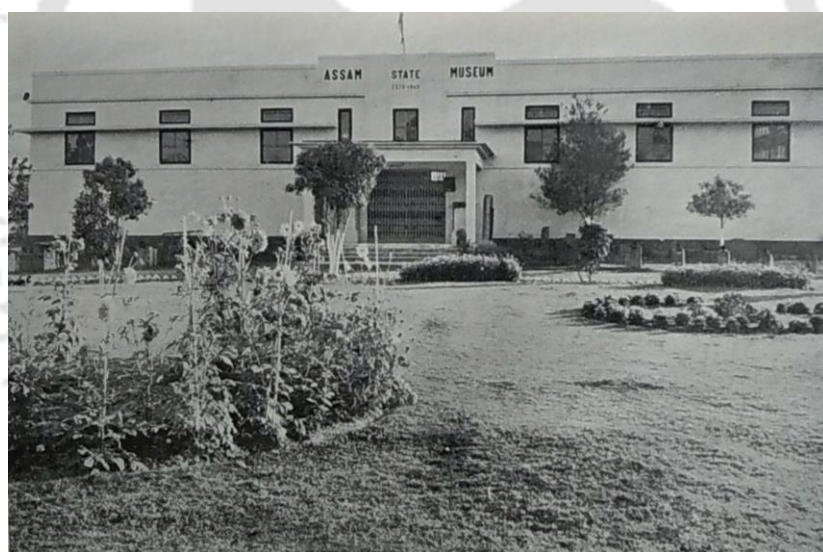
⁶⁶ Shastri, *An Account of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti*, 1-20.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 19.

⁶⁸ The executive committee comprised of K. L. Barua, Amarnath Roy, H. P. Barua – executive engineer, Lower Assam Division, S. C. Goswami – Inspector of Schools, Assam Valley Circle, and C. S. Mullan – Secretary, L.S.G Department. Ibid, 1-20.

In the same year, a meeting of the Assam Museum Board was held on 18 September.⁶⁹ The Board members acknowledged the Government for the grant of Rupees 10000. A plan of the building of the Museum, submitted by Executive Engineer, H. P. Barua was approved with some modifications. The engineer would supervise the work of the construction of the building. A Local Building Committee was entrusted the responsibility of supervision and construction of the Museum building.⁷⁰ In the meeting, the Local Building Committee was given authorization to call for and dispose of tenders and to construct the building according to the approved plan. The meeting made the most crucial decision as to the inauguration of the Museum, conveying that the Museum would be inaugurated by the Governor. The inauguration was slated after the 1938 budget session of the Legislative Assembly.

Figure 18: Early photograph of the Museum building



Source: 1959. "K. L. Barua and the State Museum at Gauhati." *Journal of the Assam Research Society* (The Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti) XIII: 75-79.

⁶⁹ Secretary, Assam Museum Committee, 'Proceedings of the meeting of the Assam Museum Board held on the 18th September 1937' in *Provincial Museum at Gauhati*, General Department Proceedings, No. XV-3 of 1937, [ASA].

⁷⁰ The Local Building Committee comprised of Commissioner A.V.D., Retd. Additional Judge Jogendranath Barua, K. L. Barua, and the Executive Engineer, Lower Assam Div. Ibid.

Further institutionalization came with a resolution passed by the Education Department of the Government of Assam on 20 June 1939.⁷¹ This resolution constituted a Board of Trustees for the maintenance of the Assam Provincial Museum. Kanaklal Barua was selected as the president with members comprising the Honorary Provincial Director of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, the Superintendent of Archaeological Survey's Eastern Circle, and three members nominated from the KAS.⁷² The Board urged the Samiti to handover such articles in its collection which were deemed suitable for display at the Museum. In view of this, Sarbeswar Kataki, assistant secretary of the KAS, prepared a complete list of antiquities in the collection of KAS to be deposited in the Assam Provincial Museum.⁷³ The Samiti recorded over 630 articles in stone, metal, wood, terracotta and textiles along with epigraphic exhibits of inscriptions and coins including European coins, manuscript and transcripts. Clearly, a focus on archaeology was conspicuous in the making of the collection of the Provincial Museum.

There is, however, a parallel argument that these local movements remained removed from a larger network of imperial museums as the receptacle and reflective of the country's national ethos.⁷⁴ Such lack of dialogue created a chasm even in the central objective of education and dissemination of the regional museums along a spectrum of visitors and Assamese population at large. However, in engendering from a regional or more appropriately provincial need, as a distinct administrative division, these museums presented its own formats and practices.⁷⁵ Museums, according to Mukherjee, became sites where the distribution of cultural and

⁷¹ Barua, *Studies in the Early History of Assam*, viii.

⁷² The names of the Trustees were announced in Assam Gazette Notification of 21-09-1939. Ibid, i-xx.

⁷³ Kataki, Sarveswar Sarma. 1939. *Antiquities of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti*. Gauhati: Assam Research Society.

⁷⁴ Mukherjee, "Unearthing the Pasts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa", 165-229.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 165-229.

political power would be constantly negotiated.⁷⁶ In this sense, Assam Provincial Museum while grounded in local efforts became a site where colonial, nationalist and regional frameworks converged and contested over the meaning and value of Assam's past.

The Early Exhibitions

“... there is its colonial nature: the age of the exhibition was necessarily the colonial age,”⁷⁷

The ‘modern’,⁷⁸ educative category of exhibition was born within the colonial-orientalist institutions. Exhibitions in France and England preceded the formation of museums in the colonies, especially India to a great extent. Early world exhibitions, such as the Industrial Exposition of 1844 in France and more famously the Crystal Palace Exhibition or the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, held in London in 1851 and the Universal Expositions in France in the second half of the 19th century induced addition of economic, industrial and art departments in Calcutta.⁷⁹ In the wake of The Great Exhibition of 1851 two of the other earliest museums in India were established, viz. the Government Museum of Madras in 1851 and the Museum in Bombay in 1855.⁸⁰ These exhibitions often coincided with proliferation in industrial production such as textiles, machines and other manufactures. This

⁷⁶ Ibid, 165-229.

⁷⁷ Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order.", 419.

⁷⁸ The first exhibition referred here is the *Exposition Universelle* of the year 1889 in Paris. The vaudeville nature of the exhibition, subjecting the Oriental visitors to burlesque entertainment, makes the label of modern to be put under the microscope. Ibid, 409-423.

⁷⁹ *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*. (1851) London: W. Clowes and Sons.

⁸⁰ Sivaramamurti, C. 1959. *Directory of Museums in India*. New Delhi: Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs.

also coincided with the use of new building materials such as iron and glass and it featured prominently in the elaborate ‘courts’ or exhibition galleries of the 19th century.⁸¹

The 19th century machinery of knowledge and representation as produced by the global west gave a lot of emphasis on the non-west. The Great Exhibition prominently featured preindustrial art of the Indian subcontinent and provided an impetus to the search and discovery of the traditional or more aptly, the early historic past. Mitchell observes the exhibitionary practices from the point of view of its focus on the representation of the orient in relation to the world. Order was central to these imageries and pictorial representation in the form of dioramas and photographs depicting the nature of eastern civilizations. Mitchell places the representation of the non-west at the center of the 19th century exhibitions. A large part of this representation could at times be disputed and epistemologically desultory. It began from a position that the empire’s purpose was to give meaning to the non-western world and thereby construct and define a western self. Exhibition was a modern device to order the world and assign meaning to it. Colonies were increasingly viewed as a store of resource, scientific and artistic, for the west to draw on. The disingenuous educational imperative translated to something else in actuality. These experiences of objects of the global south, then orient, often stood as painful reminders of oriental subordination. It is these world exhibitions, however, that set down the techniques of museum practices comprising the objective representation of the orient for the education (satiation) of the ‘curious’ west, the panorama and dioramas, the architecture, the lectures, and guidebooks.

⁸¹ Benjamin, Walter. 1969. "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century." *Perspecta*, 12: 163-172; Marsden, Christopher. "The Great Exhibition of 1851." *The Gazette: Official Public Record*. Accessed July 31, 2024.

Exhibitions emerged in relation to the Mediterranean countries and diffused by way of its southern and eastern shores.⁸² For example, Calcutta International Exhibition of 1883-84, modelled after the Great Exhibition of 1851, was focused on representing India as a resource for the benefit of the colonial power. These exhibitions were meant to create a blueprint of the metropole for Indian visitors before avenues of direct visits were liberalized. The scale of the exhibition was unprecedented in Calcutta and it was 'the first International exhibition held in the Indian Empire'.⁸³ The exhibition further aimed to disseminate among the Indian people a better knowledge of the commerce and society of the colonies of the Empire. Exhibitions at Calcutta occurring in the wake of the Mutiny of 1857 would have benevolent intents on the part of the Victorian government, as was evident by the prominence of the Victorian Court, surpassed only by the Indian Court. A significant part of these exhibitions would be the fine arts gallery dedicated to the visual archives, such as the photographs, oil paintings, lithographs etc. Again, a large part of these visual archives came to be produced by the 19th century antiquarian surveys. These exhibitions, displaying a whole gamut of goods and manufactures, such as fetish commodities targeted especially at the working class, were meant to tap into the colonial market and create colonial consumerism.⁸⁴ A clear distinction in the purpose of these exhibits displayed within the colonies and in metropole is conspicuous. While in France the purpose of these displays would be national prestige, in colonial markets these would have clear pecuniary role.

⁸² Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order.", 409-423.

⁸³ Bosisto, Joseph, and James Thompson. 1883-84. *Calcutta International Exhibition 1883-84*. Report of the Royal Commission for Victoria at the Calcutta International Exhibition, Melbourne: John Ferres, Government Printer, 10.

⁸⁴ Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century.", 163-172.

Museums thus emerged, differed in form and functioning depending on the location of the museum. Mitchell and Guha-Thakurta agree on the point that the orientalist enterprise viewed the non-western world in terms of an exhibitionary order, as landscapes of ancient sites, perceived in terms of museums and exhibitions. The necessity for collections representative of the overarching culture of the subcontinent as well as the representative reserve of archaeology in each of its regions, started being felt by the turn of the 20th century.⁸⁵

“প্রাচীন জিনিস দর্শন, রক্ষণ ও সংগ্রহ যে বিশেষ তৃপ্তির, আনন্দের ও গৌরবের তাহা লোকে বেশ হৃদয়ঙ্গম করিয়াছে।”⁸⁶

People have started to cherish the idea of viewing, preserving and collecting ancient relics as glorious and enjoyable. [Translation, self]

On the eve of the INC session at Calcutta in 1906, the Indian Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition was organized in conjunction with the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad or the Bengal Literary Academy. Educative exhibits too were displayed alongside the industrial and agricultural specimens. The organizers of the Exhibition requested the Parishad to send in ancient handwritten manuscripts, some old Bengali volumes, and photographs of historical townships, capitals, temples, palaces as well as artefacts. Accordingly, a host of articles including early paintings, engravings and copperplate inscriptions and photographs of personalities in the history of Bengali literature were dispatched by the Parishad. After an effective presentation of these historic articles at the Exhibition, an inflow of art and archaeological objects was received in the premises of the Academy. This formed the nucleus

⁸⁵‘India-as-a-museum’ is a formulation by Guha-Thakurta in connection with the workings of the Department of the Conservation of Ancient Monuments. Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 61

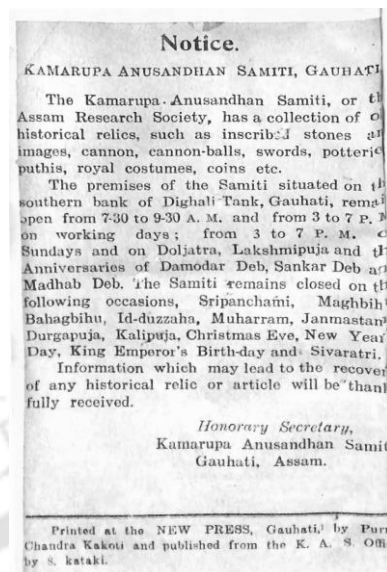
⁸⁶ Bandyopadhyay, Brajendralal, ed. 1940. *Parishad-Parchay*. Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 91.

of the Academy's Museum. It further spurred interest among the scholars in the glorious past and the extant remains of the past. These events imbued the local intelligentsia with not only an archaeological quest but enthusiasm to organize more such exhibitions.

While the Samiti regularly collected antiquities with the aim of preservation and formation of the material and epistemic basis of the proposed Provincial Museum, it regularly printed notices as above to educate and create awareness among the Assamese populace. These notices in the covers of the Society's *Reports, Proceedings, Journal* as well as Assam Gazette were meant to appeal to the people in general and the educated section in particular for awareness and participation in the recovery of the region's historical heritage. Participation would essentially involve providing information on relics or sites by common people or learned individuals as indicated in the above notification. These early attempts at dissemination would evolve into lantern slides and, most importantly, exhibitions of the Samiti's archaeological and textual collection. Thus, much before the foundational art exhibitions of 1947,⁸⁷ art objects in Assam were travelling to the exhibition sites outside its permanent address of the KAS building.

⁸⁷ Exhibition of Indian Art, held at the Government House, New Delhi, November 6 – December 31, 1948 in Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 175-204.

Figure 19: A subsequent notice by the KAS indicating continued public engagement



Source: 1931. *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*. Report and Conspectus, Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti. Back cover

Prior to organizing exhibitions or sending its entries, the Samiti would come up with a unique mode of imparting knowledge among people through the Samiti's collection. Sarbeswar Kataki, Samiti's noted explorer would espouse most prominently this form of articulation. Kataki would prepare slides based on the Samiti's archaeological collection and present them in form of Lantern Lectures. Kataki initially prepared 35 such slides demonstrating choicest collection of the Samiti such as royal apparels, ceramics, sculptures, facsimiles of inscriptions, coins, paintings, architectural members, manuscripts and so forth.⁸⁸ The Samiti would purchase a *Harlands' Magic Lantern with accessories* for the lantern exhibitions.⁸⁹ Such lectures were most notably presented at the meetings of the Cotton College and Ekata Sabha in Curzon Hall. Samiti would spend about a cumulative Rupees 450 on the preparation of these lectures that became instantly popular among students, scholars and general

⁸⁸ Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 1-39.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 1-39.

population.⁹⁰ Innovative lantern lectures by the Samiti's prominent explorer Kataki would be presented in subsequent years at the Government House, Shillong; Head Master's and Deputy Inspector's Conference, Jorhat; Public Hall, Sibsagar; Goalpara High School and Guahati Mahila Samiti Exhibition.

Since 1928 onwards these lectures would be linked to Samiti's exhibitions. The Samiti would regularly participate in industrial, agricultural and other oriental exhibitions as well as commence exhibitionary practices within its premises during its annual meetings.⁹¹ First such exhibition attended by the Samiti would be the Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition of Sibsagar in February 15, 1929.⁹² Kataki would be a key member in these dissemination and educative initiatives. Kataki was the delegate at the location and the event was inaugurated by the Commissioner, AVD. As the Samiti's representative, Kataki opened a stall at the exhibition ground. The articles on display would arrive from Samiti's collection. This earliest exhibition participated by the Samiti would be highly appreciated by visitors to the exhibition. Not much is known about the rest of the exhibits at the presentation, but the Samiti's spread of archaeological and historic relics in an industrial exhibition is reminiscent of the early Imperial exhibitions. But whether these art objects were utilized for generating designs for the industry as would be the practice in metropole and Calcutta cannot be ascertained. The same year, articles for permanent display would also be considered. Provision of a 10 feet long showcase for display of rare antiquities in the Samiti's collection would be reported.⁹³ This permanent display would be open for public viewing. Nonetheless, the Samiti's collections

⁹⁰ Accounts for the Year 1929-30, Receipts and Expenses-Actuals in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 27-28.

⁹¹ Ibid, 27-28.

⁹² Annual Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1928-29-30 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 13-22.

⁹³ Ibid, 13-22.

would be regularly visited by members of the government and the Archaeological Survey of India.

In the 1930s, the KAS would receive several applications from exhibition authorities of different places for putting up Samiti's collection for temporary display.⁹⁴ Most of such requests would have to be turned down owing to expenses and hazard of transporting the antique items from and back to the Samiti's Museum.⁹⁵ However, in April, 1931 Samiti would send articles for exhibition held by Mahila Samiti at the premises of Gauhati, Panbazar Girls' High School.⁹⁶ In 1935, the Samiti participated in the Gauhati Silver Jubilee Exhibitions too.⁹⁷ The Samiti's exhibits would be installed in two stalls. Naturally, it can be inferred that this exhibition was significant on various counts. For one thing, the fame of Samiti's collection grew and accordingly, the audience too increased. The two stalls would put on display a significant number of heritage articles that had been carefully curated. The instructive exhibits of the Samiti would earn it Certificate of High Commendation by the Silver Jubilee Committee of Gauhati.⁹⁸

Furthermore, the Samiti was an institutional member of the All Indian Oriental Conference (AIOC) and would regularly send its delegates to the anniversary meetings.⁹⁹ In the eighth session at Mysore the Samiti presented an exhibition of its selected antiquities, coupled with

⁹⁴ Annual Report of the KAS for 1930-31 & Part of 1932 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*.

⁹⁵ The Samiti's collection, prior to provincial museum, would often be addressed as Museum.

⁹⁶ Annual Report of the KAS. for 1930-31 & part of 1932 Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*, 222-229.

⁹⁷ Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for the Years 1934-35 & 1935-36 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*, 219-270.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 219-270.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 219-270.

lantern lecture. Sarbeswar Kataki, a key member at the Conference would present lectures on the Samiti's collection and it would get rave reviews from the participants. In this Exhibition at the Conference venue, Samiti would again be awarded Certificate of Honor. Apart from these external exhibitions, Samiti's collection would also be put up for temporary exhibitions in its general meetings.

Due to the Samiti's incessant persuasions as can be observed in its notices shown above (Figure 18), the response and participation of the people of Assam would be overwhelming, especially following these crucial exhibitions in regional and national conferences. The Lantern Lectures in addition to archaeological exhibits would quickly gain popularity among lay and learned audiences. As a result, donations of historic articles such as art objects, manuscripts, utensil items, and epigraphs would pour in in large numbers and regularly. Alongside a host of distinguished visitors, the Samiti would by the 1930s boast thousands of ordinary visitors to its permanent exhibits.¹⁰⁰

From Ideas to Collection

Since its advent, as mentioned above, the twofold objectives of KAS have been the collection and preservation of the archaeological heritage of the Province and the creation of a nucleus thereby of the Museum. Kalicharan Sen, an early proponent of the Samiti's historical pursuit noted in the Annual Meeting of 1928 that the early explorers, who travelled across the Valley in a genuine quest for gathering historical sources of Assam's ancient past Padmanath Bhattacharya, Dhireswaracharya and Hemchandra Goswami were particularly unstinting in

¹⁰⁰ Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for the Year 1932, 1933 & 1934 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti for 1930-36*, 230-237.

their labor.¹⁰¹ One of the founding members of the Samiti, Goswami embarked on one of his earliest excursions to North Guwahati in 1917 in collaboration with the Commissioner of AVD P. R. T. Gurdon to explore and collect impressions of Kanai Barasi inscription.¹⁰² Gurdon noted about Goswami that his knowledge of the region's antiquities provided necessary guidance in the search. Goswami was a lifelong devotee to the cause of Assamese literature and history. He was a source of inspiration for the Samiti as well as its museum. Since a very early age Goswami was introduced to a vast trove of traditional history by his mother. As a result, Goswami taught himself to read manuscripts and memorized *Amarkosha* early on in his education. Despite many hurdles Goswami remained indomitable in his scholarly pursuit and was in the vanguard of the Assamese cultural and historical revival in the region.¹⁰³

His self-education earned him one of his earliest responsibilities of collecting the region's manuscripts on behalf of the Government of Assam.¹⁰⁴ Much of this collection went to the Samiti for a safe custody and preservation of the region's textual heritage. While Goswami's biggest contribution was in the domain of traditional texts, he was an avid collector of material remains too. A significant part of the coin cabinet of the KAS, bearing legends in Assamese

¹⁰¹ Passed in the Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, and read at the Anniversary of the Samiti held on 13-10-28 under the Presidency of Rai Bahadur Kalicharan Sen in Annual Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 23-25.

¹⁰² Presidential Speech of the Hon'ble Colonel Gurdon (op. cit.)

¹⁰³ Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2018. "Vernacular for the nation: Hemchandra Goswami's Typical Selections from Assamese Literature." In *On Modern Sensibilities: Culture, Politics, History*, edited by Ishita Banerjee-Dube and Sarvani Gooptu, 179-197. New York: Routledge.

¹⁰⁴ Under the supervision of Col. Gurdon as the Honorary Director of Ethnography and encouragement of Sir Archdale Earle, H. C. Goswami undertook to collect manuscripts or *puthis* narrating epics, chronicles, hymns and mathematical treatises from all across Assam and parts of Bengal. Goswami, Hemchandra. 1930. *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta on behalf of the Government of Assam.

and Persian, was a present from Goswami. This is observed by S. K. Bhuyan as a momentous contribution to the overall nucleus of the collection of the future Provincial Museum.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Goswami also presented some *Bartop* or cannons of historic significance to the Samiti's collection. A crucial undertaking by the Samiti also was its collection of the *Buranjis*, of which much of the *Purani Assam Buranjis* were collected and translated by Goswami himself. These *Buranjis* would be noted for the correspondences it contained of Ahom kings with the courts of Cooch Behar, Jaintia, Kachar and Delhi. Further, Goswami's translations would be referred text for the BA examination at the Calcutta University.¹⁰⁶ Goswami is also credited with the finds of Dharmmapal's first copperplate charter and Indrapala's second charter or Guwakuchi lipi.¹⁰⁷

A crucial aspect of Goswami's professional life, that has not received sufficient attention or documentation is his role as an 'interlocutor', or as the thesis proposes to reframe as intellectual and political actors, as compared to an intermediary, in the history-making of Kamarupa. Goswami was a collaborator of E. A. Gait in his historical research, particularly with respect to the early history of the region.¹⁰⁸ Goswami assisted Gait in the preparation of his *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam*. Further, Goswami presumably also might have assisted Gait in his search for the Koch history and translation of the *Darrang*

¹⁰⁵ Report of the Work for 1925-26, and Part of 1926-27 in Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 1-33.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 1-33.

¹⁰⁷ Bhattacharya, Padmanath. 1931-32. *Kamarupashasanavalee*. Calcutta: Rangpur Sahitya Parishad.; Goswami, Hemchandra. 1926. "Maharaj Indrapalar Tamar Fali." *Milan* 1: 58-59.

¹⁰⁸ E. A. Gait, Esq., Honorary Director of Ethnography in Assam "No. 21 E. Dated Shillong the 8th February 1897" in Gait, E. A. 1897. *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam*. Shillong: Superintendent of Assam Secretariat.

Rajvamsavali.¹⁰⁹ Goswami, a manuscriptologist also assisted E. A. Gait in collecting and translating *Purani Assam Buranji* that was in the collection of Ahom Prince Kesava Kanta Singha.¹¹⁰ Goswami further collaborated with Col. Gurdon on various occasions including editing Hemchandra Barooah's Assamese Dictionary.¹¹¹ His role as 'interlocutor', actively negotiating colonial ideological discourse, to these hegemonic figures in Assamese history soon earned him renown as an expert in Sanskrit as well as an antiquarian explorer of the region.¹¹²

An Executive Committee member of the KAS, Goswami was also among the delegates appointed for the collection of historical articles from the Ahom family.¹¹³ This has been mentioned in the previous chapter along with another important acquisition of three stone sculptures from Makrang tea estate in Sibsagar, credited to Goswami and his brother Jagat Goswami. These images were particularly instructive in presenting the iconography of the region. These were observed by Governor Lawrie Hammond in 1927 as forming a nucleus of the museum in future and congratulated Goswami as a key contributor to the making of the region's museum.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Though Gait does not directly refer to Goswami's service however, the latter was in fact his interlocutor in his study of the Koch Kings of Kamarupa. Gait, E. A. 1893. "The Koch Kings of Kamarupa." *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* LXII (4): 268-308.

¹¹⁰ Goswami, D., and S. Kataki. 1931. *Swargiyo Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Likhito aru Sampadita Grantha aru Prabandhabalir Talika (A Bibliography of the Work of Pandit Hemchandra Goswami Compiled under the Auspices of Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti)*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti.

¹¹¹ Bhuyan, S. K. 1960. "Hemchandra Goswami ." *Journal of the Assam Research Society* XIV: 1-9.

¹¹² Some of Goswami's copious Indological writings include Goswami, Hemchandra. 1918. "Kamakhya Mandir." *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Patrika* 25 (2): 77-83; Goswami, Hemchandra. 1922. *Puroni Assam Buranji*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti; Goswami, Hemchandra. 1916. "Kanai Barasiboa Shilar Padya." *Alochani* VIII (3): 112-13.

¹¹³ Work during 1926-27 in Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 19-33.

¹¹⁴ Annual Report of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28 in Goswami and Kataki, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti for 1927-28-29-30*, 1-10.

Another crucial development and an early practice of museum's publication involved Hem Goswami along with Surya Kumar Bhuyan, Sarbeswar Kataki as Committee Members, being entrusted with the responsibility of compiling the handbook for the Samiti's collection.¹¹⁵ The handbook contained description of articles with an introduction to the process of exploration and acquisition along with a roadmap of future work. This crisp publication, it was hoped, would attract public attention towards Samiti's work and form an early literature on the museum for public dissemination. Goswami was also engaged in the preparation of the catalogue of the Samiti's collection.

With the demise of Goswami in 1928, the mantle of the formation of the region's museum would be taken up by Kanaklal Barua as he became the President of the Samiti. Barua belonged to the noted and rare band of historical and archaeological scholars of early 20th century Assam. One of Kanaklal's key contributions is the *Early History of Kamarupa*. In this seminal text, the author evinces an early concern for the region's art and antiquities. As a school-goer, the vandalism caused to the local heritage would create a lasting impression in Kanaklal's memory.¹¹⁶ In *EHK* he brought to the fore the necessity for a coterie of local scholars, outside colonial bureaucracy, that could salvage these antiquities from destruction.

Kanaklal's major contribution to the cause of archaeological research in the province is the *Journal of the Assam Research Society*, initiated under his editorship. Here, he realized the need to reach out to the public.¹¹⁷ The journal, a mouthpiece of the Samiti, played a crucial

¹¹⁵ Work during 1926-27 in Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 19-33.

¹¹⁶ Bahadur, Rai K. L. Barua. 1933. *Early History of Kamarupa: From the earliest times to the end of the sixteenth century*. Shillong: Printed by Rev. Fr. Foglia S. C. at the Don Bosco Industrial School Press.

¹¹⁷ Barua, Kanaklal. 1933. "Introductory." *The Journal of Assam Research Society* 1 (1): 1-2.

role in disseminating and popularizing the Samiti's works while also promoting the necessity for a museum. Implicit in Kanaklal's scholarly endeavor was an inspiration for bringing about the region's own Museum, hosting a representative collection of the Valley. Kanaklal's association with the Samiti enabled him to realize the necessity for the collection and preservation of the region's historic relics. Consequently, he served on the Provincial Coin Committee of Assam and was appointed by the Viceroy and Governor-General of India as a member of the Indian Historical Commission.¹¹⁸ More than the collection, Kanaklal's contribution lie in securing the finances and the construction of the Museum.

As has been already mentioned Kanaklal was instrumental in generating a sum of Rupees 10,000 towards the construction of the Museum.¹¹⁹ In this regard, a museum committee presided over by Kanaklal Barua would meet on 18 September, 1937.¹²⁰ Construction of the Museum's building and transfer of objects was spearheaded by Kanaklal. The Museum Committee and thereafter the Local Building Committee presided over by Kanaklal and comprising engineers and local higher-ups would commence the construction of the Museum's building with C. S. Mullan as the Secretary of the Committee. Board of Trustees of the Museum, once again with Kanaklal at the helm and members drawn from ASI and neighbouring Surma Valley, took charge of the maintenance of the Provincial Museum.

Kanaklal was conferred the designation of the first non-official President of the Museum in recognition of his contribution to its founding.¹²¹ The colonial Provincial Museum and the

¹¹⁸ Barua, *Studies in the Early History of Assam*, i-xx.

¹¹⁹ C. S. Mullan, Secretary Museum Committee, 'Letter No. 2233-42 E. Shillong, 9 September 1937' Provincial Museum at Gauhati, General Department Proceedings, No. XV-3 of 1937 [ASA].

¹²⁰ Secretary, Assam Museum Committee, 'Proceedings of the meeting of the Assam Museum Board held on the 18th September 1937' (op. cit.).

¹²¹ Barua, *Studies in the Early History of Assam*, i-xx.

modern Assam State Museum stands as a monument of Kanaklal's role for the cause of historical research movement in Assam.

Kanaklal and Hemchandra were the principal patrons of the museum, deciding to a great extent the terms of the discovery, collection and classification of objects signifying the heritage of Assam. In this, the key figures were assisted by a few other scholars such as Sarbeshwar Kataki, Sonaram Choudhury, P. D. Choudhury et al. Kataki, a noted explorer of the Samiti, was in charge of the collection of ancient relics from 1926-27.¹²² Kataki not only published the handbook of KAS, providing short description of its activities, its collections and the possibilities of future work; the eminent explorer also prepared the catalogue of the inaugural assemblage of the museum.¹²³ In his investigations and survey Kataki would often be accompanied by Sonaram Choudhury. Both retrieved relics comprising metallic weapons from Khetri and were also engaged in inspection of *Pera-Kakats* (documents attached to copper-plates), copper-plates and other inscriptions in the office of the Commissioner, Assam Valley.¹²⁴ The credit for many a discovery and exploration between 1915 to 26 goes to Kataki and Sonaram Choudhury as well as Benudhar Sarma, among others. The latter investigated into the premodern Assam and a patron, in its broader sense, of the Samiti's collection activity.¹²⁵ Sonaram Choudhury was the man behind the discovery of stone inscription at

¹²² Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 1-33.

¹²³ Kataki, *Antiquities of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti*, 1-39.

¹²⁴ 'Resolution: Extract from the Proceedings of the Executive Committee Meeting, Kamarupa Anusandhanan Samiti, Gauhati, held on 11.10.28', in General Department Proceedings, No. XVII-54 of 1928 [ASA].

¹²⁵ Cohn describes patron variously but a simpler definition of OED describes patrons as individuals or groups, who support or protect an institution, a cause, art or undertaking. However, the conventional definition of OED is more in terms of financial support whereas Cohn employs the term in its extended sense of recovery, discovery, classification and collection of ancient relics as a colonial enterprise. Here, in describing Sarma's contribution it is the latter meaning that is resorted to. Cohn, Bernard S. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The*

Umananda. P. D. Choudhury, initially appointed curator of the Museum by the KAS, later received curatorial training under the supervision of the Superintending Archaeologist of the Eastern Circle – an entangled institutional protocol of colonial archaeology. While Choudhury undertook the task of organising and labelling the museum's holdings under what was then understood as 'scientific classification', this process also reveals how early curatorial practices in Assam operated within – while also pushed against – the dominant paradigms of colonial museology and the epistemological authority imposed by imperial frameworks.

Planning a Museum in Assam

“The work of...antiquarian institutions is bound to be imperceptible and slow. A lot of spade-work has to be done, and a lot of correspondence has to be entered into before any historic article can be acquired for the museum.”¹²⁶

An early correspondence such as that circulated to the Chief Commissioner of Assam was the Resolution dated 8 November 1882. The Resolution forwarded to the local administration a memorandum prepared by then Superintendent of Indian Museum, Dr. John Anderson as to the subject of the scope and management of the Institution in relation to the Local Governments and Administration.¹²⁷ At that point, the disciplinary practices of either museums or archaeology were at its nascence in Assam. The Eastern Circle of ASI might have barely formed and surveys were yet to commence systematically. The Chief Commissioner

British in India. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 12-13.

¹²⁶ Bhuyan, *Report and Conspectus of the Kamarupa*, 29.

¹²⁷ Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, 'Resolution: Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India in the Home Department (Archaeology), Shimla, 8 November 1882', in *Scope and Management of the Indian Museum*, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Nos, 117-118, Home Miscellaneous, B, December 1882 [ASA]

replied expressing general agreement and mentioning: “We shall hear separately about the museum (para 7) [as] we have none.”¹²⁸

The first enquiries conducted into the history of Assam would not be before 1894. At the instance of Edward Gait, William Ward, Chief Commissioner of Assam initiated measures in July for enquiries into the ancient history of the Province.¹²⁹ The Department of Ethnography came into being at the behest of Charles James Lyall, William Ward and Edward Gait. Simultaneously, funds were allocated from provincial revenues towards establishing the Department, the official depository of the region’s art and archaeological (then antique) materials. Gait was succeeded by Col. Gurdon in the position of Director of Ethnography, Assam and during Gurdon’s tenure, the study of anthropology of Assam gained greater importance across the world.¹³⁰ It was during Gurdon that a glaring necessity arose for separate branches or departments for historical and archaeological study. While Hemchandra embarked on a search for manuscripts in 1912, Padmanath went for the epigraphic records of the past. Thus, history and literature would be inextricably tied to one another in this search, collection and study. A parallel study of the region’s ethnicities too would be conducted simultaneously by the likes of Bamfylde Fuller, J. H. Hutton and others. The exigency for a converging necessity of these disciplines in Assam at that point gave birth to the region’s first autonomous (and) archaeological research society viz. the Assam Research Society.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Bhuyan, S. K. 1934. “Historical Research in Assam” in *Bulletin II of the DHAS in Assam*. 1-15. Guwahati: DHAS.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 1-15.

Historians such as Guha-Thakurta and Cohn view museum as a locus of knowledge representative of the region's material heritage.¹³¹ Guha-Thakurta reminds us that although the museums in the colonies – be it in the presidencies or the provinces – belonged to the loose confederation of museums as knowledge producing units and an imperial archive, its location determined its function and form. Unlike in Madras or Calcutta the nucleus of the Provincial Museum would not be result of collections by Europeans such as Col. Colin Mackenzie or antiquities that poured in in the Asiatic Society.

It will be useful here to go over briefly how the definition and role of a provincial museum in Assam was decided on. Let us consider a proposal for the distribution of antiquities dated 1930.¹³² It described the provincial museum as an institution under the provincial government. Within its borders may be local site museums built on or in the vicinity of an excavation site. But where there is no such necessity for local museums under a provincial museum, the latter acted as the custodian of relics recovered from the respective provinces jointly in consideration with then Central Archaeological Department, Government of India. The province thereafter would take a call on the set of antiquities best representative of its heritage and retain it for the purpose of 'proper exhibition and adequate protection'. For decision, however, on loan or distribution of the antiquities, the province would be dependent on the then Government of India. This leads to the question as to what comprised these representative antiquities.

¹³¹ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 76-105; Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 43-85.

¹³² G. S. Bajpai, Esq. C.I.E., C.B.E, I.C.S., Joint Secretary to the Government of India, 'Letter No. 154 Archy – dated the 26 April, 1930' in *Central Advisory Board of Museums, Procedures for Distribution of Antiquities, Rules and Instructions*, Secretariat Proceedings, No. ETM 116/57, Education (PTM), Miscellaneous, 1957 [ASA].

Two entities conducted the excavation and conservation of the relics recovered from the Valley prior to the foundation of the museum – namely the Eastern Circle of the ASI and Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti. The inaugural assemblage of the Provincial Museum was derived from the art, archaeological and historical specimens collected indefatigably by the explorers and scholars of the KAS from across the Assam Valley. In this regard, Sarbeswar Kataki prepared a catalogue in 1939 of objects to be transferred for the opening of the Provincial Museum. The catalogue listed about 631 items that were curated from a larger collection by the KAS, for transfer to the Provincial Museum.¹³³ These articles were classified into thirteen groups, namely stone articles, epigraphic and numismatic records, metal articles, terracotta objects and potteries, textile, ethnographic materials, manuscripts and transcripts and European currencies.¹³⁴ The defining facets of the collection naturally were epigraphy, iconography and numismatics.¹³⁵ These were taken to represent the sculptural art and archaeological heritage of the province of the pre-Ahom cultural zenith.

The founding thrust of archaeology had a focus on sculptures, mainly ‘the art in stone’ but also metal.¹³⁶ The galleries hosted a representative collection of art and sculptural practices of the Valley both prior to and during the Ahom rule. However, the system of assemblage at the Museum followed a *masterpieces approach*.¹³⁷ The sculpture gallery of the Provincial Museum might be taken as the main locus of the museum’s function. Housing originally about

¹³³ Kataki, *Antiquities of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti*, 1-39.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 1-39.

¹³⁵ Sivaramamurti, *Directory of Museums in India*, 16-17.

¹³⁶ Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 73.

¹³⁷ The grandest example of exhibition of masterpieces of Indian art is the Exhibition of Indian Art held at the Government House, New Delhi in 1948. This marks a moment when Indian Art began to be viewed for its merit, free from colonial prejudices such as viewing the deities of Hindu pantheon in the foreign eyes as multiple-limbed monsters. Ibid, 175-204.

a hundred sculptures in stone, bronze and terracotta, the gallery aimed to present the sculptural and architectural traditions in Assam long before the invasion of the Ahoms. The early schools of sculptures were generally held to present 'the uniqueness of Indian [/local] art history'.¹³⁸ P. D. Chaudhury, curator of Assam observed that these sculptures supplied 'concrete' evidences of early and early medieval Assam without resorting to any literary evidences.¹³⁹

In its opening days, a visitor to the Provincial Museum at the entrance would be greeted by a stuffed Rhino, a faunal heritage of Assam and the pride of Kaziranga.¹⁴⁰ Following this the visitor would enter the archaeological gallery that would be the richest in the multi-purpose Provincial Museum. It housed the choice specimens of sculptural art recovered from across the length and breadth of the Valley. The famous stone door frame of Dah Parbatiya, Tezpur was one of the earliest antiquities of Gupta affinity. Dating back to the 6th century, the remains of the oldest temple on the Valley were brought to light by R. D. Banerjee in the exploration by Eastern Circle, ASI in 1924-25.¹⁴¹ In 1926 further conservation treatments and minor excavations were conducted by Banerji at the site of the temple and discoveries were made. Of them, notable specimens recovered were some of the finest terracotta plaques known from the Valley, depicting poise and naturalism of the human figure.¹⁴² These were added to the museum's collection.¹⁴³ Other art specimens from Bamuni Hill in Tezpur, Kamakhya and other parts of Gauhati, Nagaon, Numaligarh and other parts of Sibsagar, Deopani and

¹³⁸ Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 177.

¹³⁹ Chaudhury, P. D. 1959. "K. L. Barua and the State Museum at Gauhati." *Journal of the Assam Research Society* XIII: 75-79.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 75-79.

¹⁴¹ Banerji, Rakhaladas. 1927. "Eastern Circle." In *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1924-25*, edited by J. F. Blakiston. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch.

¹⁴² Chaudhury, P. D., and M. C. Das. 2017. *Ancient Treasures of Assam: Through Assam State Museum Guwahati*. Guwahati: Directorate of Museums, Assam.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 1-20.

Goalpara entered the initial collection of the Provincial Museum. The sculptures that best represented the iconoplastic art of this easternmost state were – the sandstone *Nataraja*, the rare form of *Nrityarata Ganapati*, several black stone images of *Vishnu*, *Brahma*, *Indra* of the 10th – 11th centuries; and metal images of *Vishnu* and *Durga* recovered from Guwahati and its neighbourhood.

Figure 20: Metal sculptures exhibited at the Assam State Museum



Source: Chaudhury, P. D., and M. C. Das. 2017. *Ancient Treasures of Assam: Through Assam State Museum Guwahati*. Guwahati: Directorate of Museums, Assam, 1-48.

The famed sculpture galley of the Provincial Museum would indeed be a ‘treasure house’. Another sculpture, comparable to Dah Parbatiya would be the bust of three female figures in sandstone, recovered from Numaligarh in Upper Assam. This piece dated to the 9th century.¹⁴⁴ Only a few of the pre-Ahom sculptures were collected at the Museum but a comparative study of these sculptures supplied a likely foundation for the evolution of Assamese sculptures in a coherent manner. According to Saraswati, Assamese sculptures followed two distinctive trends namely, a sophisticated trend developed out of the 5th – 6th century Gupta classical heritage and a popular idiom or autochthonous trend. Objects on display at the Museum

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 1-20.

presented evidences of the simultaneous existence of both the trends. For example, the Hari-Hara and the Vishnu images from Deopani in the collection of the Provincial Museum.¹⁴⁵ The donative inscriptions in both the images indicated a date of the ninth century. But the stylistic appearance in both images differed significantly. The former depicted crude, low-cut relief while the latter illustrated an advanced plastic diction in higher relief, thereby demonstrating simultaneous presence of two idioms of pre-Ahom Assamese sculptures. In the earlier centuries a paucity of output in sculptural art in stone as well as metal was observed. The tenth-century Uma-Mahesvara image from Davaka presented evidence of later evolution following the plastic form of the ninth century. In this image there was an increased sense of ornamentation and the plastic forms bore evidences of definitive modelling. The shape and ornamentation of the rectangular stela with a rounded top was distinctive of the tenth-century Eastern, Pala sculptures with certain amount of individuality. Two black stone images of Brahma and Indra from Guwahati too were important for the plastic form accentuated by flowing definitive outline and belonged to the tenth century.¹⁴⁶ Miniature images of Vishnu, Mahishasuramardini and Surya preserved in the Museum from Ambari were eminent productions of the eleventh century. The characteristic features included greater elaboration of the stela. Two further fragmentary pieces of Mahishasuramardini in black stone from Tezpur were recognized with a dynamism that was distinctive of the images of the eleventh century. From the same phase terracotta images from Bhaitabari and Bhishmuknagar poured into the Museum's collection. These terracotta pieces belonged to the ornamental scheme of a religious shrine. Of the first half of the twelfth century two images of Vishnu might be

¹⁴⁵ Saraswati, S. K. 2017 "Art". In *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, 5th edn. 423-471. Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam.

¹⁴⁶ One of the two most important hoards of sculptures from Assam, namely Narakasur hoard yielded several metal images belonging to the tenth century that presented well-integrated plastic forms with sinuous contours. Ibid, 423-471.

referred that were preserved in the Provincial Museum of Assam. In these sculptures the forms were slender and elongated and the higher reliefs of the decorative motifs of the stela tended to subdue the principal figures. Towards the later twelfth century this trait became more prominent and the Surya images from Kamrup and Davaka in the Provincial Museum might be assigned to this trend. Another small stone image of Surya in the collection of the Museum recalled the popular idiom of Hari-Hara image from Deopani and reached a point of exhaustion of the Assamese version of Eastern sculptures.

Archaeology, in the Provincial Museum did not have to joust its way up a hierarchy of scientific collections, unlike the imperial museums in the colonial presidencies. Another of the prominent archaeological galleries of the Assam Museum would be the instructive epigraphic gallery. The original collection boasted the earliest inscription of the valley, namely, the Umachal Rock Inscription. It was discovered by R. M. Nath, a local engineer and self-taught antiquarian. The impressions and photographs of the inscriptions were sent first to the Museum before decipherment by the Government Epigraphist.¹⁴⁷ Further, the Barganga Inscription of Bhutivarman bore a close resemblance to the foregoing, too adorned the early collection of the Museum.¹⁴⁸ Another important inscription brought to light by the first curator of the Provincial Museum, P. D. Choudhury himself was the Doobi plates. It is one of the inscriptions that present an unbroken genealogy of the Assam kings from the middle of the 4th century to the 12th century. According to Chaudhury, these are the principal charters for the reconstruction of the early period of the history of Assam. Further, Vanamalavarmmadeva's charter of 9th century and Dharmapala's inscription of the 12th century were added to the

¹⁴⁷ Sircar, D. C., and P. D. Chaudhury. 1960. "Umachal Rock Inscription of Surendravarman." *Epigraphia Indica* (1955-56) (Government of India) 31: 67-69.

¹⁴⁸ Chaudhury, "K. L. Barua and the State Museum", 75-79.

collection in its early days. These inscriptions fairly settled the genealogies of the historical and mythological lineages of the Bhauma-Varman, Salasthambha and Pala kingdoms and thus created much enthusiasm among the people of the province.¹⁴⁹ All these inscriptions date prior to the 12th century and are written in Sanskrit language and *Kutila* script. Other than pre-Ahom Sanskrit inscriptions the gallery boasted a significant collection in Assamese and Tai. The Assam coin cabinet in Shillong was transferred to the Provincial Museum and formed a core collection. The numismatic collection included other than early Assamese, Persian and Ahom coins, coins from north Indian kingdoms of the early centuries such as the Kushanas and the Guptas.¹⁵⁰

Figure 21: Copperplate charters issued by Kamarupa king Bhaskarvarman (from the collection of Assam State Museum)



Source: Chaudhury, P. D., and M. C. Das. 2017. *Ancient Treasures of Assam: Through Assam State Museum Guwahati*. Guwahati: Directorate of Museums, Assam, 1-48.

The museum would continue to add to its collection in the subsequent years. For example, in 1941 Harappan antiquities would be added to the museum's sculptural treasures thereby connecting the region within the history and heritage of the subcontinent. These antiquities were brought in under the instruction of the Superintendent of Archaeology, Eastern Circle

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 75-79.

¹⁵⁰ Kataki, *Antiquities of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti*, 1-39.

and displayed in three show-cases.¹⁵¹ The Samiti also reported the addition of some “fine specimens of painted potsherds” recovered from Punjab region dating between 3300 and 1500 BCE. This would be presented to the Provincial Museum by the Archaeological Department, Govt. of India.¹⁵² The same year R. M. Nath would recover from Barpeta a beautiful 22” high, black slate stone image of Vasudeva that indicated stylistic affinity with Sena sculptures of 12th century CE. Sculptures would be the main acquisitions in the early days of the museum. Stone slabs containing images of *Brahma*, *Kartikeya*, *Agni* and *Parashurama* from Tezpur were contributed to the museum’s collection by Mr. Smith, Agent of the Steamer Company.¹⁵³ Further stone sculptures from North Guwahati and Kamakhya hills would also enter the museum’s collection. Additionally, terracotta plaques recovered by R. M. Nath from Garo Hills, three well-preserved copper plates with seal attached purportedly issued by Balavarman, coins of various descriptions and cannon balls would pour into the Museum’s collection.

Augmentation of the collection necessitated visitor engagement. Early records show an emphasis on conservation and collection. From the 50s, the official discourse begins to take into account the question of public engagement. At this point museum was viewed to have cultural and educational importance.¹⁵⁴ The early focus of the museum would be children’s education and the little information on the provision of research facilities to artists and anthropologists feature briefly in the official discourse. The shifting curatorial strategy however, may be viewed as aimed at shaping public perception about Assam’s past – what

¹⁵¹ Chaudhury, P. D. 1941. "Museum Notes." *Journal of the Assam Research Society* (D. Goswami, KAS) VIII (2): 56-57.

¹⁵² Ibid, 56-57.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 56-57.

¹⁵⁴ Under Secretary to the Government of India, ‘Letter no. F.44-50/51-G, 3., Government of India, Ministry of Education dated 24 December 1952’ in *Preparation of a National Directory of Museums in India*, Secretariat Proceedings, No. EMI 3/53, Education [ASA]

they were expected to see, understand and internalize. Soon following the foundation of the museum, a children's gallery was introduced with an aim of educating the visitors about the art, culture and history of the state through pictorial representation.¹⁵⁵ Paintings and images would be displayed on the wall depicting mythological episodes such as the creation of the stars and planets by Brahma, narrations from *Kalika Purana*, and Naraka's involvement in the Bharata war would be shown in paintings and scrolls. Similarly, historic events such as arrival of the Ahoms, Lachit Barphukan at the battle of Saraighat etc. would be represented variously by means of oil paintings, watercolor pictures, photographs of temples, places and sculptures that would line up the walls of the children's gallery.¹⁵⁶ Diorama of the peoples of Assam, charts, maps, postal stamps and coins would also decorate the gallery. This seems to be a prominent addition and early activity of the Museum towards visitor engagement.¹⁵⁷

A recurring deliberation within the Indian Museum in the latter part of the 19th century was a close collaboration between the Archaeological Survey of India and the Museum.¹⁵⁸ However, the Provincial Museum housing only ethno-archaeological collection presented its unique concerns. For one thing, provincial museums at large were concerned at this point with archaeological site museums within its borders.¹⁵⁹ But in Assam, the museum had close ties with the Eastern Circle, ASI. The Survey of Nagaon by the Superintendent, Eastern Circle, ASI, T. N. Ramachandran in the 1930s yielded among various sculptures, the *Umalingana-murtis*. This artistic and neatly carved image adorned the sculpture gallery of the Provincial

¹⁵⁵ Sivaramamurti, *Directory of Museums in India*, 16-17.

¹⁵⁶ Chaudhury, "K. L. Barua and the State Museum", 75-79.

¹⁵⁷ Sivaramamurti, *Directory of Museums in India*, 16-17.

¹⁵⁸ *Annual Report, Indian Museum, 1881-82*, Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing in Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 317.

¹⁵⁹ G. S. Bajpai, Esq. C.I.E., C.B.E, I.C.S., Joint Secretary to the Government of India, 'Letter No. 154 Archy – dated the 26 April, 1930' (op. cit.).

Museum. Further, the Numaligarh Remains in Sibsagar district explored by the archaeologist in the same season yielded from the *Shiva* temple some striking sculptures of which the most notable is a row of busts with hands holding lotuses, donning tiara in head, with *tilaka* in the forehead and sporting a smiling face. Another decorative floral carving too is a part of the museum. It was imported from the foregoing exploration. The inscribed Deopani *Vishnu* image bearing a corrupt Sanskrit verse was brought to light by the preceding Superintendent of Eastern Circle K. N. Dikshit and dated by the scholar to the 9th century CE. This image was noted by the first Superintendent of Eastern Circle, T. Bloch too.¹⁶⁰

The thesis seeks to argue that the archaeological heritage of the region, as represented in the Museum, boasted a continuous legacy of Assamese art of a millennium and a half.¹⁶¹ There was also an implicit hierarchization in the structure and classification of the exhibits. The original assemblage of antiquities contained a large profusion of sculptures in stone, making it a foremost category of the ancient and early medieval art of Assam. The original classification of exhibits as well as in the Assam State Museum have been based on the findspot as compared to early ateliers or schools of art in Museums of the metropolises. The objects in the Provincial Museum were illustrated using bilingual labels in English and Assamese.¹⁶² At the point the museum started, curators were expected to label objects ‘scientifically’ and it comprised attaching short labels to objects, explaining concisely the basic information about the object. The scientific labelling was aimed at generating visitors’ interest, who would probably even be visiting a museum for the first time. The labels would

¹⁶⁰ Chaudhury and Das, *Ancient Treasures of Assam: Through Assam State Museum*, 1-20.

¹⁶¹ A centrality of sculptures in representing five thousand years of Indian art is studied by Tapati Guha-Thakurta in the context of the Exhibition of Indian Art in 1948 and following the exhibition, a permanent establishment of the National Museum at the country’s capital. Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 175-204.

¹⁶² Sivaramamuti, *Directory of Museums in India*, 1-11.

thus be bilingual and ‘short, lucid and to the point’, keeping in view the purpose of the collection for the visitor to gain knowledge about the historical and scientific wealth of their land.¹⁶³ The curatorial logic of the Provincial Museum in its early days negotiated the imperial frameworks, its aesthetic and classificatory categories while at the same time upheld parallel epistemic approach rooted in KAS’s methods and regional understanding and experiences.

The Arrival and Afterlife of the Assam Provincial Museum

When J. P. Vogel supplied details of the museum movement at the Conference of Orientalists in 1911-12, the first Directory of Museums that came out recorded only 39 museums in India in total.¹⁶⁴ A large number of those closed down and it would not be till the mid-1910s that museums started springing up in different parts of the country. Precisely four types of museums came up, namely, scientific museums established by Europeans or colonial officials at great centers of the government, the collection of Indian states, local museums developed by Archaeological Survey and museums mounted by learned society with specific objects and functions.¹⁶⁵ At this point Assam lacked any collection comparable to any of the four categories. Vogel recorded four aspects that made a museum collection truly educational and scientific – first, arrangement of the exhibits in the galleries, labelling, a detailed catalogue and charge of fully competent archaeologists and historians.¹⁶⁶ In the early 20th century

¹⁶³ Ibid, 8.

¹⁶⁴ Markham, S. F., and H. Hargreaves. 1936. *The Museums of India*. London: The Museums Association

¹⁶⁵ Ibid 152-153.

¹⁶⁶ “Museums as Educational Institutions” paper presented by Dr. Vogel, Officiating Director General of Archaeology in India, in *Report of the Museums Conference Held in Madras, 16-17* in Guha-Thakurta *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 79.

colonial India, museum was viewed as an extension of education through schools and libraries.¹⁶⁷

The second directory of the museums in India came to be written by S. F. Markham of the Museums Association, London and H. Hargreaves of Archaeological Survey of India. Provincial Museum in Assam was then still to arrive. Assam was mentioned to hold an embryonic museum collection. In the early days, museums were formed in direct relation to population density. More population necessitated more museums and thereby determined the cultural superiority of a nation state. Naturally, India fared poorly compared to Britain, USA, Germany and France. It ranked among the world's lowest recording only 105 museums for a whopping 359 million population.¹⁶⁸ A question was raised then – whether or not history itself was responsible for such lagging. The surveyors, however, were of the view that India was found to lack in educational or cultural vigor in historical training. The criterion to determine the efficiency of museums in any Indian provinces had to differ from those determined by the museum services of the leading countries of Europe, British Dominions or the USA. Climate featured as a crucial determinant in terms of organization and conservation of museum collection in tropical regions. Population and climate primarily decided the terms. But there was also a third factor that decided the formation of museums in less populous places. It was plentitude and importance of antiquities from a region or locality. Under the viceroyalty of Curzon and the auspices of John Marshall in ASI, such local archaeological museums thrived centering largely in the Indo-Gangetic plain and the focus of antiquities would be the ancient and early India, covering a period of more than a millennium and a half from 5th century BCE

¹⁶⁷ Sivaramamuthy, *Directory of Museums in India*, 16-17.

¹⁶⁸ Markham and Hargreaves, *The Museums of India*, 3.

to 11th century CE.¹⁶⁹ Assam sufficiently complied with these criterias that decided the formation of a museum. Survey was conducted in Assam too and in the absence of a local archaeological museum, the Assam Research Society would be reported as the sole custodian of the region's antiquities.¹⁷⁰ The survey reported committee comprising K. L. Barua, then President, D. Goswami, Hon. Secretary and S. Kataki, Assistant Secretary operating as the main staff. The Samiti had by this time gathered the nucleus of the museum and prepared for an opening. In this direction, grant was disbursed by the local government and curator was trained, under the Archaeological Department, Indian Museum, Calcutta.¹⁷¹

The call for specialization of museum such as art, science, industrial, historical museums etc. only entered the subcontinent in the post-colonial period in the 50s. It has been observed and discussed above that the Provincial Museum in Assam like provincial museums elsewhere in the country such as Bengal, Benares, Poona concerned a distinct set of questions.¹⁷² It is the enthusiasm and endeavor of the local learned societies in the provinces that engendered some prominent provincial museums and contributed significantly to the museum movement. The multiplication of museums in regions impelled the need for further surveys and updating.

¹⁶⁹ For example, local museums at Sarnath and Taxila were justified despite the scanty population. It housed 'exceptionally rich and varied antiquities' and illustrated a cosmopolitan culture of the ancient world. Ibid, 10.

¹⁷⁰ G. S. Bajpai, Esq. C.I.E., C.B.E, I.C.S., Joint Secretary to the Government of India, 'Letter No. 154 Archy – dated the 26 April, 1930' (op. cit.); Markham and Hargreaves, *The Museums of India*, 152-153.

¹⁷¹ Markham and Hargreaves, *The Museums of India*, 152-153.

¹⁷² For example, provincial museums were largely archaeological and historic in character and scope, compared to composite collections of larger cities such as Calcutta and Bombay. Further, it varied in function in terms of holdings on art and links with art schools such as the link between the Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay and Sir J. J. School of Art or Indian Museum in Calcutta and the Government College of Art and Vishwabharati. Ibid, 43-100; Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*, 43-85.

So, when the circular for the third directory reached Assam, the issue was not the organization but the dissemination. Many a museum would not publish its own reports regularly, nor did it maintain a compact volume on all its collection and workings.¹⁷³ This was viewed as a hindrance to the scientific enquiry and research, the prime function of museums.¹⁷⁴ The response of the Provincial Museum was brief and in terms of education it informed that it provided facilities for students of art and anthropology as well as separate gallery for children's education. More importantly, it still identified the *Journal of the Assam Research Society* as its mouthpiece and annual reports or catalogue and guidebooks would not be reported. In view of such shortcomings, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) proposed compilation of an updated Directory of Museums in India to keep the government and the public updated about the progress of museum movement.¹⁷⁵ As the said Directory reported seven years following the first circular, the Provincial Museum would come to be identified as the Assam State Museum. In any case, the scope of collection largely entailed and emphasized the pre-Ahom period, 7th to 16th century to be precise and observed specimens of Ahom era to betray a clear sign of degeneration from the pre-Ahom phase.¹⁷⁶ Further, visitor engagement was found satisfactory as the Museum recorded about 30,000 yearly visitors and was overcrowded during regional festivities such as Magh Bihu.¹⁷⁷ The response to the circular recorded –

¹⁷³ Under Secretary to the Government of India, 'Letter no. F.44-50/51-G, 3., Government of India, Ministry of Education dated 24 December 1952' (op. cit.).

¹⁷⁴ Other functions as delineated by the second directory would be collection and preservation and interpretation. Markham and Hargreaves, *The Museums of India*, 43-100.

¹⁷⁵ Sivaramamuti, *Directory of Museums in India*, 16-17.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 16-17; Chaudhury and Das, *Ancient Treasures of Assam: Through Assam State Museum*, 1-20.

¹⁷⁷ P. D. Chaudhury, Curator, Assam Provincial Museum 'Letter no. 1257/88 dated 24.02.1953' in *Preparation of a National Directory of Museums in India*, Secretariat Proceedings, No. EMI 3/53, Education [ASA]

“A good number of distinguished and expert visitors have by now visited the Museum and expressed their appreciation at the fair collection and arrangement of the exhibits. Most outstanding of them is Dr. S. Radhakrishnan who remarks The Museum is very well kept and the Curator knows his business.”¹⁷⁸

The foundation of the Assam Provincial Museum, like its precursor the KAS, was not simply an institutional act of collection but a deeply political and epistemological intervention into the region's historical self-fashioning. As Anderson, Cohn, Mitchell and Guha-Thakurta remind us, the museum is not a neutral space – it transforms the meaning of objects through processes of classification, secularization, and what these scholars and Anderson term ‘museumization’.¹⁷⁹ The artefact removed from ritual or quotidian use and displayed behind glass becomes part of a taxonomic logic that frames it as a relic of a past, now over, yet recoverable as national or regional heritage. In Assam, this shift was not purely an imposition of colonial science; rather, it emerged through the agency of regional actors who actively negotiated the terms of inclusion, value, and representation. The Samiti and later the Museum transformed archaeological remnants into icons of regional antiquity, a process that constructed Kamarupa as a historical community rooted in material continuity rather than just mythic memory.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* 76-105; Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin*, 156-176; Preziosi, Donald, ed. 2009. *The Art of Art History*. Oxford: OUP, 10; Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 43-85.

This act of heritage-making was not confined to the museum's walls. Through print journals, lantern lectures, exhibitions, catalogues, and bilingual labelling, the Samiti and Museum extended the museological rationale into the public sphere. Much like the standardization of language described by Jayeeta Sharma,¹⁸⁰ the print culture around the museum translated fragmented historical material into a coherent archive, accessible to and shaped by the region's foremost intellectuals. This print-museum nexus enabled the formation of a standardized historical lexicon – where epigraphs, sculptures, and manuscripts were not only stored but interpreted, catalogued, and re-circulated in a vernacular idiom. In this sense, heritage was not just preserved – it was actively produced, and with it, a new kind of Assamese historical consciousness. The process echoes what Anderson terms 'logoization', wherein emblems of the past (e.g., sculptures, copperplates, or even the term 'Kamarupa') circulate beyond their origins and accrue new meanings in commercial, pedagogic, or nationalist domains.¹⁸¹

Thus, the Assam State Museum was not merely a provincial institution. Its founding marked the formal inheritance of a precolonial legacy, restructured through the lens of early twentieth-century regional nationalism and colonial archaeology. While the museum reproduced elements of the colonial 'exhibitionary order', its formation in Assam was also a mode of regional self-assertion – an effort to reclaim local antiquity on terms that did not just mimic those of the metropole. By focusing on a carefully curated assemblage of pre-Ahom artefacts, the museum foregrounded a classical heritage that could anchor a modern Assamese identity, while selectively reinterpreting the region's past through scientific, aesthetic, and historical frameworks.

¹⁸⁰ Sharma, Jayeeta. 2011. *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

¹⁸¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin*, 156-176

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The 19th and early 20th centuries in India were periods of profound transformation, marked by intellectual ferment, political awakening, and a rethinking of the Indian past. This was the time when colonial rule had deeply entrenched itself, but also when resistance – especially in the cultural and intellectual spheres – began to solidify. In response to utilitarian and orientalist portrayals of India as static, despotic and irrational, led by institutions like the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Fort William College, Calcutta, a group of Indian intellectuals arose who reinterpreted India's history, religion, society that sought to free itself of the clutches of colonial epistemology. While Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore forged a historical consciousness through art and literature, Aurobindo Ghosh, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi turned to a spiritual-political resistance, envisioning India not just as a political entity but a spiritual civilization with a global mission – in alignment with Vedantic philosophy advocated also by Swami Vivekananda. This also spurred scholars in Eastern, Peninsular and Western India such as D. R. Bhandarkar, Bhau Daji, Haraprasad Shastri, R. C. Dutt et al. to recover ancient India's political system, cultural splendour and civilizational unity with a nationalist intent that would not mimic the narrow and aggrandizing European form of nationalism. In Assam, it was the search for the pre-Ahom dynasties of Kamarupa that drove a band of Assamese and Bengali scholars. The thesis studies, rather interrogates, the records of the British colonial officials, produced by the necessities of war and administration, that first spurred the discourse of 'discovery' – of ancient monuments and artefacts with a zeal for epigraphic search and study. The colonial pursuit of 'discovery' proclaimed to systematize and establish Kamarupa's antiquity and heritage on a 'scientific'

footing. But there were local scholars who were unhappy with the interpretation these colonial officials often provided. The thesis also studies archives created purely by the endeavor of the Assamese intelligentsia. It examines how this momentous endeavor aided in the scientific explorations and earliest archaeological practices in the region. Thereby, the thesis formulates the archives as contested sites negotiating imperial discipline of regulatory knowledge and the indigenous sphere reimagining and reinterpreting its own history. The process of museumization and museum-making was part of this contestation where the unique nature of Provincial Museum further complicated the widely-held postcolonial approach to museum as a technology of modern state power.¹ The thesis examines the distinct nature of the cultural and intellectual processes that witnessed the culmination of the search for Kamarupa in establishing the region's first representative museum. The thesis infers that there was a prominence of scholars from the region in establishing the early past. While administrator-scholars like Gait benefited from official backing and had access to a steady stream of sources as part of their institutional duties, it was often the Assamese and Bengali intelligentsia, who labored under severe constraints, that produced meticulous and profoundly scholarly contributions and interpretations. Despite these constraints, these scholars, such as especially Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath, Dhireshwaracharya Kavirantna, Kalicharan Sen, Sarveswar Kataki and all the scholars associated with the pioneering KAS, made genuine endeavors at unravelling the early past that had often been dismissed within a Eurocentric orientalist paradigm as obscure.

The thesis contends that Kamarupa was not simply a rediscovered historical entity but a construct shaped through the intersecting discourses of colonial governance, orientalist

¹ Anderson, B. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso; Cohn, Bernard S. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

inquiry, and indigenous intellectual resistance. Foregrounding this core argument, the study has combined archival and historiographic research with a critical conceptual lens, making sustained interventions in the study of colonial knowledge production, and indigenous negotiation, resistance and contestation of it. In its method and orientation, the thesis draws upon the intellectual history of orientalism most famously propounded by Edward W. Said, Bernard S. Cohn, Ronald B. Inden et al.; studies on colonial archaeology by postcolonial archaeologists, namely Dilip K. Chakrabarti, (historian) Upinder Singh and Nayanjyot Lahiri; decolonial historiography of Michael S. Dodson and Nicholas B. Dirks, and regional intellectual traditions. In doing so, it also recovers the agency of overlooked figures such as Mahamahopadhyay Padmanath, Dhireshwaracharya Kaviratna, Hemchandra Goswami et al., whose role in shaping the idea of ancient Assam has been overshadowed in the dominant historiography.

The theoretical interventions of this study include rethinking the politics of temporal disjunctions and historical absence. A more sustained conceptual engagement with such disjunctions allows us to better understand how colonial power not only altered institutions and politics but also reshaped temporal consciousness itself. The colonial construction of Kamarupa sought to fix its past within a linear, secular, historical narrative – often via archaeology and epigraphy. In contrast, Assamese intellectuals invoked sacred geographies (such as Nilachal and Ashvakranta hills, Bhishmaknagar) and mythic kings (Naraka, Bhagadatta), challenging the purely secular and colonial narrative of antiquity. Further, the colonial effort to recover Kamarupa was riddled with absences – gaps in the archive, silences in the record, and ruptures in interpretive continuity. But these were not merely coincidental or genuine gaps in knowledge; rather, they were symptomatic of a deeper violence of constructing and weaponizing knowledge and truth, where colonial modernity reconstituted the past to render it intelligible to the British government and a metropolitan audience.

The thesis attempted to highlight the value of local scholarship around the search for the heritage of ancient Kamarupa, especially in a colonial context that harboured an adverse view towards the non-textual remembrances of the early past. In this light, the thesis draws on Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, first introduced in Derrida's 1967 lecture of the same name.² The term foregrounds the perpetual deferral of meaning and the instability of all attempts at closure in linguistic or epistemic systems. While the term itself makes a brief appearance in the beginning, this concluding chapter seeks to make its heuristic potential more explicit. The thesis traces how meaning-making around Kamarupa – through maps, epigraphy and then museums – varied through time. The colonial interpretations were haunted by gaps, silences and contradictions. The colonial projection of 'discovery' and the self-imposed role of the moral improvers of decadent Indian civilization was an ideologically charged process. In imposing the modern Eurocentric notion of history, it discarded and dismissed existing and time-honoured indigenous traditions and knowledge preserved by Brahman pundits, women and various other social groups. It also, as Sutton demonstrates, turned sacred and lived geographies into monuments and landscapes representing secular, imperial heritage. When towards the early 20th century Indian intellectuals began to reclaim this act of 'discovery', Kamarupa's meaning was never fully present in fixed places and objects, but it was always arriving shaped by absences and displacement.

For instance, while Gait's *A History of Assam* sought to establish a linear, positivist account of Assam's ancient past grounded in epigraphy and colonial rationality, figures like Padmanath resisted this fixity and linearity. His deep engagement with the Puranic traditions, his counter-readings of colonial renderings, and his insistence on including mythic, and

² Derrida, Jacques. 1982. "Différance." In *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, 1-27. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

collective memory within the scientific idiom of modern, professional history, all reveal how the very meaning of Kamarupa remained fluid – always differing and deferred across texts, regions, and interpretive communities. It is in this ceaseless oscillation between presence and absence, text and relic, archive and ruin, that the productivity of ‘différance’ emerges. The thesis thus situates its argument within this temporal and conceptual tension, resisting a homogenized, fixed, closed past – instead embracing its plurality, openedness and contestation.

This conceptual framing also enables a hitherto overlooked and unappreciated reading of the uneven emergence of institutional archaeology in Assam. The arrival of archaeology in Assam did not follow a linear trajectory or logic. Instead, it was marked by hesitations, exclusions, and selective interest. The Brahmaputra Valley was described as a terra incognita by colonial officials even as they actively dismissed or overlooked the dense cultures and forms of knowledge that invigorated the region and its past. The thesis shows how figures like Theodor Bloch and John Marshall prioritized certain sites (and thereby regions) over others based on cost-benefit assessments, and how later Indian archaeologists like Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyay, K. N. Dikshit, T. N. Ramachandran et al. reoriented the discourse toward systematic excavation and conservation. Nonetheless, these efforts at times operated within and were shaped by the orientalist gaze, colonial aesthetics and archaeological discourses in defining what constituted ‘monument,’ what could be ‘preserved,’ and what was rendered as ‘relic.’

The thesis also interrogates the museum as a site of heritage-making. Drawing on postcolonial concepts of museological consciousness such as Bernard Cohn’s notion of transformation of objects into artifacts, and Benedict Anderson and Tapati Guha-Thakurta’s writings on heritage and museumization, the thesis foregrounds the unique trajectory of the formation of Assam Provincial Museum. It was not established by the colonial government but by a group of

Assamese scholars and antiquarians with limited institutional support. This creates, what Tapati Guha-Thakurta have formulated in a different context related to Indian Museum, a hybrid space enmeshed in colonial, indigenous and an emerging public discourse, where the production of heritage reflected both rationality of colonial state and regional aspirations. Provincial Museum of Assam, in this sense, does not escape the underlying logic of ‘museumization’ as a profoundly political act of the state, but its origins and practices also reveal counter-modern impulses in Assam, shaped as much by archaeology and cultural traditions as by emotional ardour and devotion of figures like Kanaklal Barua and others.

The thesis also draws attention to indigenous traditions, memory, rituals and forms of remembrances, constitutive of the region’s historical consciousness that was already existing before colonial inroads. Such consciousness opposed to orientalist, positivist prescription, viewed the past not as foreign, distant and alienated but as living, re-enacted and remembered in embodied practices. If one refers to Anundoram Borooah and Padmanath Bhattacharya, may discern that the sacred spaces of Kamakhya, Nilachal Hill, Ashvakranta, Umananda and its association with Tantric and Puranic traditions are not mere textual appendages but forms of lived, cultural entities.

A unique methodological stance of the thesis involves reading archives as contested spaces. Such as especially the living, disordered and unpredictable archives of, for example the KAS, housing a storehouse of unpublished records, vernacular publications, material and textual remains. These emerge and formulated in the thesis, as the gaps and omissions of the curated cabinets of global repositories. These living spaces are far from neutral and are ideologically charged. The thesis formulates these places, in both colonial context and later, as vernacular public spheres representing visions of counter-colonial modernity. A main argument in the thesis concerns the Sanskrit-expert Brahman scholars such as Padmanath, Dhireswaracharya

et al. They are crucial and leading actors in the making of these archives and a competing vision of indigenous modernity. Yet, their story is one of marginalization under colonial dynamic and a formidable resistance put up by these mighty wielder of pen – as they sought to forge the idea of Kamarupa and thereby Assam's identity through their sophisticated translations, reading and interpretation of texts, objects and traditions, to speak nothing of the prodigious intellectual and physical labour. Unfortunately, they were never granted the authorship they warranted, that the thesis has sought to recover from these minor, forgotten spaces within the archival discipline of colonialism.

In conclusion, the thesis contributes to several interlinked domains – the intellectual history of colonial Assam; the historiography of Kamarupa; the ideas and politics of heritage and museumization; and the complexities surrounding colonial and indigenous knowledge production. It intends to offer a decolonial and regionally situated and specific account of the making of ancient Kamarupa, resisting fixity while illuminating the historical processes that rendered the region's past both visible and legible. Its findings are not limited to Assam or Kamarupa alone but speak to broader questions in South Asian historiography, such as how, after all, is the past remembered? Who gets to write history? And what does it mean to decolonize archives, museums, and histories?

Ultimately, this thesis holds that the past is not contingent on a fixed, neutral act of discovery but is a nuanced quest – unravelled across objects, texts, institutions and its afterlives and fluidities. It is in the interplay of these deferrals, disjunctions, and recoveries that the history of Kamarupa continues to be written and debated.

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