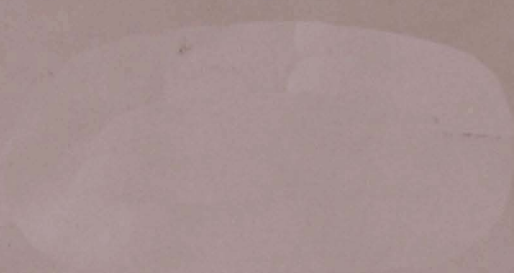


R. D. CHAUDHURI

# THE HAND-BOOK OF THE ASSAM STATE MUSEUM



অসমৰ ইতিহাস আৰু সাহিত্যৰ বিষয়ে অসমৰ বিভিন্ন অঞ্চলৰ লোকসকলৰ মাজত বিস্তৃতভাৱে প্ৰচাৰিত হৈছে। ইয়াৰে বৰাণসীয়া অঞ্চলখনৰ লোকসকলে ইয়াৰ বিষয়ে অসমৰ ইতিহাস আৰু সাহিত্যৰ বিষয়ে অসমৰ বিভিন্ন অঞ্চলৰ লোকসকলৰ মাজত বিস্তৃতভাৱে প্ৰচাৰিত হৈছে। ইয়াৰে বৰাণসীয়া অঞ্চলখনৰ লোকসকলে ইয়াৰ বিষয়ে অসমৰ ইতিহাস আৰু সাহিত্যৰ বিষয়ে অসমৰ বিভিন্ন অঞ্চলৰ লোকসকলৰ মাজত বিস্তৃতভাৱে প্ৰচাৰিত হৈছে।



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DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY & STATE MUSEUM  
ASSAM, GAUHATI



## FOREWORD

I am very glad to present to you "The Hand-book of the Assam State Museum" prepared by my colleague Dr. R. D. Choudhury, which fills up a long-felt desideratum. Way back in 1959, the department published the "Ancient Treasure of Assam", jointly prepared by Sri P. D. Chaudhury and Sri M. C. Das, both of them office bearers in this department at the time, which, however, became obsolete long back as the Museum developed and expanded with the addition of new materials and opening up of new galleries as the years went by. Of late, this hand-book became out of print, too. Hence, this new hand-book.

Although no efforts have been spared to make the new hand-book up-to-date and handy for the average visitors, the possibility of occasional mistakes creeping into the text owing to inadvertance cannot be ruled out of hand. For this, we sincerely apologize and request the readers to point these out to us, which will be rectified in the future editions.

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## **Location :**

The Assam State Museum stands on the south bank of the historic Dighali Pukhuri (a tank), flanked on the east by the Rabindra Bhavan and on the west by the District Library. Hard by the south-west of the Museum stands the Bhagawati Prasad Barua Bhawan, the Gauhati branch of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, and the Art Gallery, Govt. of Assam, in front of which is situated the District Congress office. On the east of the Rabindra Bhavan, a cultural institute, at present housing the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Lalit Kala Akademy, stands the Central High School on whose premises valuable archaeological objects were discovered a few years back, as a result of which the site came to be known as the Ambari Archaeological site. Further to the east is the campus of the Assam Textile Institute, where the Cottage Industries Museum and the Government Sales Emporium are situated. On the western bank of the Dighali Pukhuri stands the Handiqui Girls' College and the Nabin Chandra Bordoloi Hall & Library plus the Department of Zoology and Botany of the Cotton College. The Assam State Museum is, thus, situated at a place with academic and cultural atmosphere—a fitting place for the location of a museum.

## **Communications : facilities for tourist lodge :**

There is easy communication to reach the museum. The Railway Station is located hardly a quarter km. south-east of the museum. About half a km. west of the museum is the city office of Air-India. The mini-buses of the Department of the Tourism, Government of Assam, as well as city buses ply along the thoroughfare in front of the museum building. One can thus easily get down just in front of the museum precincts to visit it and thereafter move off to the Assam State Zoo and

Vasistha, a picnic spot of enchanting scenic beauty, where, as the legend goes, the sage Vasistha is said to have had his hermitage. At present, there is a temple built in the days of the Ahom king Rajeswar Singha.

The tourists or the scholars who intend to visit the museum can get their accommodations in the Hotel North-East India, situated just in front of the museum premises, and the Tourist Lodge situated half-way on the way to the Railway Station. The circuit house, situated across the tank, is also not very far from the museum.

### **Historical back-ground of the museum :**

The Assam State Museum was established on 21st April, 1940, by a band of selfless workers of the *Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti* or the Assam Research Society, Gauhati. It was the only institute at that time that undertook researches in the history and culture of this part of the country, particularly Assam. Founded in 1912, it was the result of tireless endeavours of a number of persons genuinely interested in history and culture. The late Raibahadur Kanak Lal Barua, an important member of the Samiti, was the first editor of the *Journal of the Assam Research Society*, the bulletin of this learned institute, and it was he who evinced keen interest in the establishment of a museum in Gauhati. With this idea in mind, Barua went on collecting materials with full co-operation from other members of the Samiti and ultimately succeeded in translating his dream into reality. He got a museum, of which naturally he became the first president. It was, by then, known as the Assam Provincial Museum. This non-government museum was housed for sometime in the small building of the samiti. Later on, through public contributions, a brick building ( the central part of the existing complex ) was constructed ; and it was inaugurated by Sir

Robert Neil Reid, the then Governor of Assam. Unfortunately, Barua did not live to see the inaugural ceremony of the building. He was away at Calcutta to attend the Indian History Congress, where he suddenly breathed his last. After his sad demise, the late Dr. S. K. Bhuyan was nominated by the Government to take charge as its president, in which capacity he remained for a short period and was succeeded by the late Raibahadur Kaliram Medhi. It was during his time that the museum was inaugurated by the Governor.

Sri P. D. Choudhury was the first Curator of this museum, who was associated with this institute since its inception. On 1st April, 1953, this institute was taken over by the Government of Assam. In 1947, Sri M. C. Das was appointed Assistant Curator. In 1961, Government established the Department of Archaeology and put it under the charge of the Curator. Subsequently in 1966, the two departments were amalgamated and converted into a composite department, with Sri P. D. Choudhury, the then Curator, as its first Director. After the retirement of Sri P. D. Choudhury, Sri M. C. Das succeeded him.

As said above, the Museum was started with the collections of the *Kamarupa Anusandhan samiti*, which numbered as follows—

Stone images	....	86
Metallic objects	....	30
Wooden images or other objects	....	8
Terraçotta sculptures	....	18
Old earthen pots & potteries	....	46
Textiles of the Ahom period	....	36
Tribal articles	....	19
Coins	....	33
Miscellaneous articles	....	25
<i>Sanchi</i> bark manuscripts	....	256

(For details see *Antiquities of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti*. Gauhati, 1939.)

In addition to these, the *Samiti* donated some foreign coins. Except the manuscripts, all the other articles are now on exhibition in the museum. From the nature of the objects housed in the museum, it appears that it was intended to make it a cultural museum. Later on, the main building was extended and a wing on either side was added. When enough space was thus available, some new sections, such as the children's section, painting section and zoological section, were opened. Thereafter, it was considered appropriate to call it a multi-purpose museum. With the addition of more and more collections, however, the galleries have of late become congested, thereby affecting the mode of display. In recent years, therefore stress has been laid on better display by way of the re-arrangement of the galleries. Even though the existing buildings of the museum has a number of shortcomings and is not fit for a modern museum, all possible attempts have been made to improve upon it by effecting certain alterations on the building structure as well as on the display system. For the time being, the children's section has been kept closed and a reserve collection has been opened. Some not so important objects that cluttered up the galleries have been shifted to the reserve collection and store-rooms. At present the following sections are there in the museum:—

- (a) Epigraphy
- (b) Sculpture (a)
- (c) Miscellaneous
- (d) Geology
- (e) Arts & Crafts
- (f) Gandhi Corner
- (g) Old Costumes
- (h) Musical Instruments
- (i) Literature section
- (j) Painting section
- (k) Sculpture (b) and
- (l) Arms and Accoutrement section.

All these sections are, it is felt, by and large able to represent the cultural heritage of Assam. Our intention is to give a fairly comprehensive idea about the history and culture and the natural resources of the State to the visitors.

### **Sections in the Galleries : Epigraphy :**

Entering the museum building through the front door, i.e., the entrance, one comes across the epigraphy section first. The idea of putting this section near the entrance is to give the visitors an idea about the most important hand-maid of history. He finds here the brief history of the State written in English and Assamese and hung up on the wall. Looking into the inscriptions, both copper-plates and stone, he tries to understand how history is reconstructed from inscriptions. He also comes to know that inscriptions play the most important role in the reconstruction of history. In our section here, both the Pre-Ahom and the Ahom inscriptions are displayed. The earliest inscription of Assam is the Umachal rock-cut inscription at the foot of the Nilachal hill facing the Brahmaputra, which is datable to 5th century A.D. As the rock-cut inscriptions belonging to the Pre-Ahom period and Ahom period cannot be removed to the museum, a list of these inscriptions has been hung up on the wall as a ready reference for the interested visitors. The earliest copper-plate inscription so far discovered in Assam is the Doobi copper-plate of Kumar Bhaskarvarman, datable to 7th century A.D. The language of this inscription is Sanskrit and the script is the Eastern variety of Brahmi. In the Ahom period, we find inscriptions in Sanskrit language but in Assamese script. The Tai language and script are also used in some of the inscriptions of this age. Inscriptions in Assamese language and script are also not wanting.

### **Sculpture (a) :**

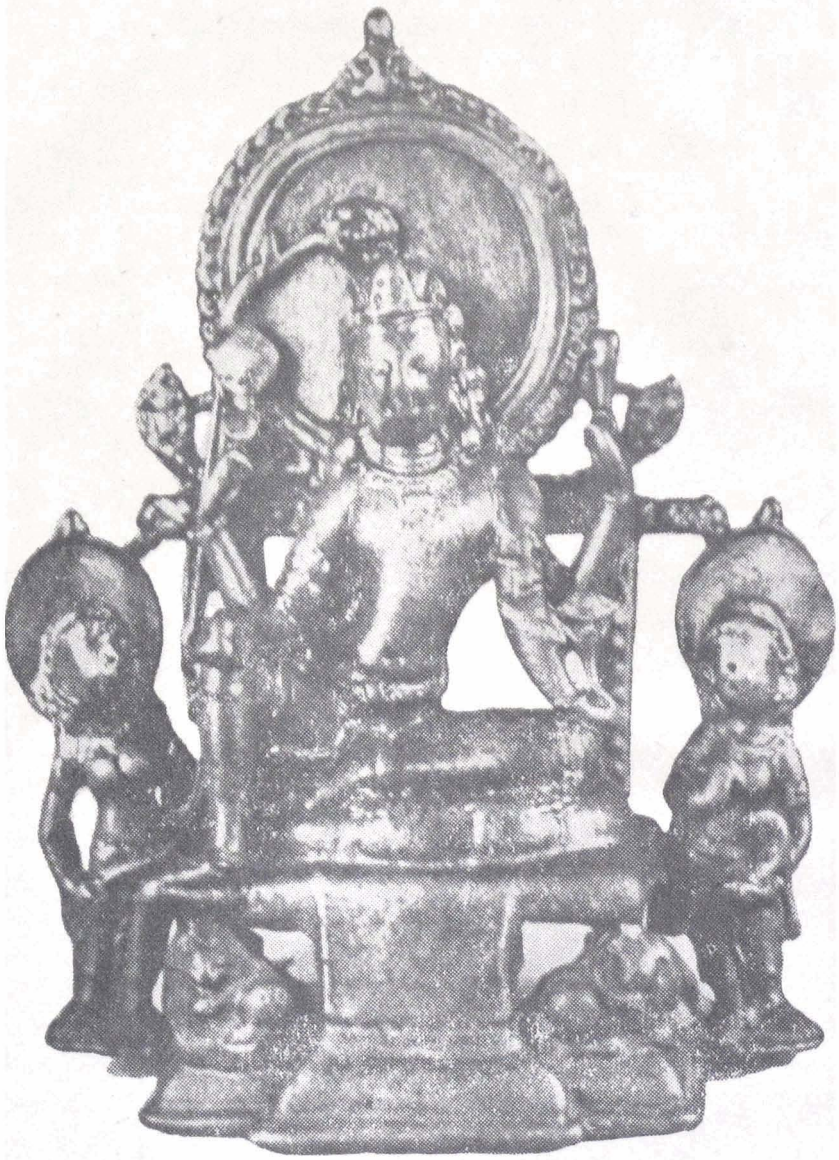
Crossing this section, the visitor finds himself in the Western gallery which houses sculptures from Assam and rep-



Handwritten text in an ancient script, likely a form of Prakrit or Pali, inscribed on a copper plate. The text is arranged in approximately 15 horizontal lines, though the right side of the plate is significantly damaged and the characters are mostly illegible. The script is finely etched into the metal surface.

No. 1993

Doobi copper plate of Bhaskarvarman, 7th cent. A. D.



No. 3003-76  
Visnu (metal) 9-10th century A.D.,  
Odalbakra, Gauhati





No. 1124

Surasundari ( stone ), c. 10th cent. A. D., Gauhati.



No. 2195/16

A mutilated image of Mahisamardini (stone), medieval period, Gauhati





No. 3000  
Indra (metal), c. 10th cent A.D.  
Odalbakra, Gauhati.





No. 3152

A deity (?), c. 11th cent. A.D., Gauhati



No. 1486

Visnu, 11-12th cent. A.D., Barpeta

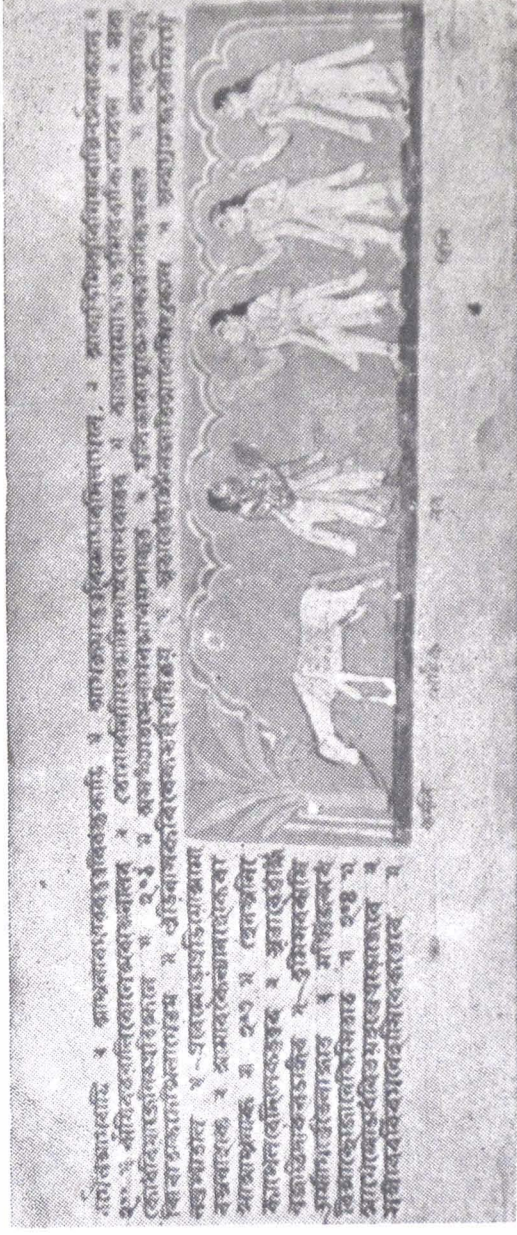




No. 3014/52

Warrior, c. 18th cent. A. D., Baghapara, Goalpara.





Folio 21

A leaf from Lauakusar Yuddha, 18th cent. A. D. On loan from Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti, Gauhati



No. 3003/59  
Budhi Gosani ( Tribal Durga ),  
Late mediaeval period, Mengaldoi



licas of selected sculptures from other parts of India, representing the various schools of sculptures of the country. Most of the sculptures found in Assam and displayed here are of stone, with a few metallic images included in the repertoire. Of the stone sculptures, mention may be made of the figure of the Apsara standing in an elegant posture, the image of Brahma, the peculiar image of Indra (?), the icons of Vishnu from Burha-Burhi, Nowgong, the image of Surya from Davaka, Nowgong District, and that of Visnu from Barpeta. The two images of Visnu from Burha-Burhi and Barpeta and the sculpture of Surya are noteworthy. They are datable to 12th century and are representative of the Sena style of Bengal.

Amongst these three images, the image of Visnu from Burha-Burhi again is more interesting, as it is cut in the round and is the only piece of this type that we possess. The other important sculptures are the seated brass image of Buddha from Chabua, the image of Visnu from Tinsukia and the image of Mahisamardini from Dibru-garh. The image of Buddha is datable to 17th century and bears south-east Asiatic characteristics. A few images discovered at Ambari and a few sculptures belonging to the Ahom period are also displayed in this gallery. Just near the showcases containing the model sculptures, replicas of the Kamakhya temple, the Ranghar, the Sivadol etc. are displayed for the benefit of the visitors who are unable to visit the places where these monuments are situated. In the same gallery, on the verandah, the visitor finds a row of sculptures. They represent Visnu, Surya, Yamuna, Ganga and Rishi. All these pieces, preserved in the museum temporarily, were discovered at Ambari a few years back and are datable to C. 13th century, if not later. It is, however, clear that they are sculptured in Pre-Ahom style. The most important piece of icon in this group is the image of a four-armed Surya (sun-god).

Four armed image of Surya, it may be mentioned, is extremely rare.

### **Miscellaneous section :**

Moving towards east from this gallery, the visitor then arrives at the Miscellaneous Gallery, which houses an assorted number of objects. Two images of seated Buddha on slabs of basalt stone each bearing beautiful designs of a votive stupa and a votive stupa of sandstone from Bihar, are shown. These may be datable to 8th/9th and 11th centuries A. D. respectively. There is also a good collection of terracotta art works. Except for a few pieces, which were brought over from Paharpur, Bengal, all the rest were locally found. Of these, three plaques are datable to C. 11th century. One shows a scene of dance-teaching where the *guru* or the teacher is depicted as seated, showing some *mudra* with his hands and a girl is shown dancing and a man playing on *Mridanga* or *Pakhowaj* before him. In this gallery some old metallic objects, a few plastercasts of stone tools found elsewhere in India, some pieces of pottery representative of the Painted Grey and Northern Black Polished wares etc., a good number of designed pots found while digging a tank at Gauhati, a few articles from Barpeta Satra, a seat of Vaisnava learning founded by Sri Sankardeva, the great saint of Assam of 16th century A. D., and some pottery pieces and other articles from Harappa and Mahenjodaro are displayed.

### **Natural History :**

Next comes the Natural History section, which normally attracts the school children and people from the countryside. Noted among the exhibits are, a rhinoceros from Assam, a crocodile, a stuffed monkey, a peacock, a python, a duck, a bear and other birds and animals.

### **Geology :**

Moving from this section one finds oneself in the big gallery housing geological specimens and those of local arts and crafts, the Gandhi Corner, old costumes and musical instruments. First comes the geological section. This is a small corner, where, in three show cases, specimens of rocks and minerals to be found in Assam are displayed. A piece of fossilized wood found at the foot of the Garo Hills is also kept here.

### **Arts & Craft :**

The Arts and Craft section shows old utensils used by the people of Assam, wood works, bamboo works and a few illustrated manuscripts. These manuscripts are given on loan by the *Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti* for display. The names of these manuscripts are *Gita Govinda*, *Lavakusar yuddha* and *Ananda Lahari*. The wood works are from x Kamalabari Satra of Majuli, Assam.

Kamalabari was one of the important Satras founded by Sri Sankardeva. The wood works represent, among other things, Garuda, the vehicle of Visnu, and a tortoise. Though not very old, these are excellent in craftsmanship and representative of local expertise in the craft.

### **Gandhi Corner :**

Moving forward, the visitor comes across the Gandhi Corner. On the walls here some important photographs of Mahatma Gandhi and his associates are displayed. Photostat copies of Gandhiji's letters in his own handwritings and some of his books are also shown in a showcase. Many books and photographs have also been preserved in the reserve collection for want of adequate space here.

### **Old Costumes :**

Next to this is the old costumes section. The first show-case contains some clothes and decorated garlands from Madras. All these pieces were presented to Sri B. R. Medhi, the ex-governor of Madras, by the authorities of some temple there. After the death of his wife, Sri Medhi has donated all these pieces of art to the museum in memory of his wife. All the other show cases contain the old costumes used by the nobility of yore of this region. Royal dresses used by the Ahom royal families are also shown here.

### **Musical instruments :**

The musical corner shows some local musical instruments in a few show-cases. There are various types of *dholas* (drums), *kholas* (a type of *mridanga*), cymbals etc. Most of these traditional musical instruments were used in religious and social functions.

### **Litterateurs :**

Moving forward, one goes upstairs and enters the litterateur section. Here on the walls are to be found the photographs & paintings of the personalities, who contributed towards the development of the Assamese language and literature. Some of the early European missionaries, who did pioneer works in the development of the Assamese language are also shown here. In two show cases, some of the personal effects of Lakshminath Bezbarua are displayed. Letters in his own handwriting, as also that of his family members, also find place here.

### **Painting :**

The next gallery houses the paintings of the artists of Assam. Here the paintings have been classified and displayed

as follows :- (a) historical, (b) cultural, (c) mythological and (d) contemporary. The oldest painting represents the Kurma incarnation of Visnu by R. K. Sarma Barua. Paintings of artists like, Mukta Bordoloi, Tarun Duarah, Benu Misra, Jugal Das, Ramesh Ghosh, Sobha Brahma and Hem Mahanta, to mention but a few, have lent prestige to this gallery. Themes like the dream of Usha, the battle of *Kurukshetra* and the depiction of the *Ramayana* in painting are the creations of Sri Ramesh Ghosh, which have beautified the walls of the painting gallery. 'The Assamese weavers', by Tarun Duarah and 'Joymati' by Mukta Bordoloi are works of high standard.

### **Sculpture (b) :**

Going downstairs along the passage indicated for him, the visitor comes across the sculpture gallery. Here, on the verandah, a few pieces of sculpture found in Gauhati are displayed. A few objects i.e., Sivalinga, Nandi etc., discovered at Ambari are also exhibited here. Inside the gallery, many beautiful works of art in stone are exhibited, all of which were found in the State itself and are of the Pre-Ahom age. The row on the right shows the beautiful dancing icon of Siva, the Varaha incarnation of Visnu, the panel of Apsaras from Numaligarh, the image of Siva, the piece of sculpture showing Uma & Maheswara surrounded by minor cult deities, the inscribed image of Visnu datable to C. 8th century A.D., and others. The row of sculptures on the left shows figures dancing and playing on drums engraved on a door-sill, images of Kamadeva, Sarasvati and a few erotic sculptures. These erotic sculptures were found in Gauhati (?). The middle row of sculptures represents Rishi, Visnu and a dancing scene. The images of Visnu and Rishi of the middle row were discovered at Ambari in 1969.

### **Arms Section :**

Coming out of the sculpture (b) gallery, the visitor enters

the Arms & Accoutrement section in which various types of arms are shown. A few bombs, machine guns and a diving outfit (?) used by the Japanese soldiers during world war II and found at Kohima are displayed here. There are quite a good number of iron cannons captured by the Ahoms from the Mughals. A cannon made of bell-metal and belonging to King Parikshit Narayan is also exhibited here. Various types of sacrificial swords, fighting swords, armour, daggers etc. are displayed on the walls. At the end of this section is the exit. Outside, on the verandah stands, among other objects, the inscribed serpent pillar of the sixteenth century.

On the premises of the Museum, among others, the large and elegant image of Nataraja, found at the Ambari archaeological site, and the beautiful image of Vidyadhara of c. 10th century A.D. are on display. Last but not least comes the beautifully decorated pleasure-boat gifted by the 'Satradhikar' (Pontiff) of the Kamalabari Satra, Majuli. Reserve collections consist, among other things, a tea garden diorama, impression of Harjjaravrmn's rock-cut inscription, wooden masks etc. and are shown on request only.

#### **Future plan :**

Plans are under way to expand the existing building and add a few more storeys to the present structure. Should a more spacious area at a suitable locality be available, the shifting of the museum cannot be precluded too. □ □ □





