PREFACE

Assam is a land of rich culture, both Aryan and non-Aryan. Though unique, it is not focused methodically and emphasis has not been given to develop the original structure of our heritage.

Assam State Museum is a great treasury of a unique collection of the archaeological remains of ancient Assam, which needs a proper study to find out its real artistic values.

This Museum was established in the year 1940 under the auspices of the Kāmarūpa Anusndhāna Samiti (Assam Research Society). The Museum has several branches of collection of various materials, such as epigraphic records, sculptures, paintings, coins, manuscripts etc. It has also established different sections in separate branches by displaying the life-style of various villages, ethnographic sections, coins, arms and other miscellaneous collection. All these materials are the representation of the rich cultural heritage of this region, especially of the Brahmaputra valley.

The Museum has a unique collection of sculptures from different parts of the region. It had its first collection from the K.A.S. (Kāmarūpa Anusandhān Samiti) which was a volentary research organisation established in 1912. Most of the collections of this organisation were donated to the Museum. The second major collection was from Bhārat Kalā Bhavan, Benaras. The last phase of collections were the excavated
icons from the Ambiqri site of Guwahati, very near to the Assam State Museum. Some other collections are made from Khairabari T. E., Tamresvar and Bijulibari in the Darrang District of Assam.

Most of the sculptures are of the pre-Ahom period, belonging to the 7th to 13th century A.D., which roughly corresponds to the reign of the Varman, the Sālastambha and the Pāla dynasty of ancient Assam. The late medieval structures are very few in numbers. From a study of these sculptures we come to know that Brahmanical culture was very much popular in early Assam. The Museum has also preserved some Buddha images, but the materials for study of the expansion of Buddhist culture in early Assam are scanty. Not a single inscription has given any information about the popularity of Buddhism in this region.

The pre-Ahom sculptures are executed in classical pattern, which are devoid of folk elements. But the sculptures belonging to the late medieval period are full of ethnic elements. The Museum has also preserved some metallic sculptures. But compared to the stone art, the metallic art objects are quite small in numbers. Terracotta art objects are also preserved in this Museum. The figures of different birds, animals, mythological figures, erotic sculptures etc. are well preserved in this Museum. Broken pieces of doorsill, āmalakas, caitya-gavākṣa etc. with various ornamented designs are also found. These carvings are generally found in the form of architectural designs, floral designs and geometrical designs.
The sculptures of Assam are fundamentally based on Indian traditional design as laid down in the Śilpaśāstras. In spite of all this, we have found that Assamese art has some peculiarity. The peculiarity and difference between Assamese art and those of the other parts of India were mainly due to the non-Aryan influence in Assam, which was more effective than in other parts of India. Regarding the development of art in early Assam before the 4th century A.D., not a single archaeological remain has yet been discovered. It may, therefore, be presumed that the social life of Assam was predominantly tribal till 3rd-4th century A.D. The religious customs of the people were based on the symbolic worship of various mythological deities. The history of sculptural art in Assam developed only from 5th century up to the early part of the 18th century A.D., when the Ahom monarchy completely collapsed.

This research work has been done on various forms of sculptures preserved at the Assam State Museum, Guwahati. The artistic designs of various images inspired me to study the artistic designs of the archaeological remains and find out the inner approach of the concept of the archaeological designs. The artistic styles of these images give us an impression that the sculptural technique followed the traditional Indian concept of art based on the Śilpaśāstra. Beautiful and graceful images are the product of both local and traditional craftsmanship on stone by the artists of this region.