

## A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN BARAK VALLEY

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### **Abstract:**

The archaeological remains found in Barak Valley are relic of an art movement. Barak Valley, culturally distinct from the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam has a number of places yielding remains of architecture and sculpture. Barak valley in her architectural movement kept conformity with the rest of India. But in later years, there developed a local architecture. The visual art of the Barak valley in no way are connected with the artistic development in Brahmaputra valley and the Gupta idioms though missed the Barak Valley are found in the Brahmaputra Valley.

**Keywords:** Aestheticism, Architecture, Shrine, Indo-Arabic style, Sculpture.

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Barak valley, the truncated portion of the Surma Valley of the British period, is the natural elucidation of Bengal plain and bounded by mountains on all three sides except west, which is congruent with East Bengal, i.e., modern Bangladesh. The Valley is an alluvial basin of the river Barak that flows through it and is watered by the rivers and her tributaries. Its natural features include high and low lands, the former with alluring greeneries while the latter with cultivable land occasionally inundated by devastating floods. This valley, culturally distinct from the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and akin to Bengal, has a number of places yielding remains of architecture and sculpture, which constitute an important study.

So far as the archeological remains of art and architecture found in Barak Valley are concerned, they are relic of an art movement. It may be noted here that almost all archeological remains are chance-findings and no scientific explanation has hitherto been undertaken in the Valley. However, the remains so far found may be discussed under two heads: (1) Architecture and (2) Sculpture

### Architecture

In ordinary sense, architecture is the art of building. However, a building, whatever may be its utility, does not come under the preview of fine arts, unless it fulfills certain conditions. Firstly, it is to imply an intention to achieve unity of forms. Secondly, it has to bear an abstract idea behind it and this idea includes the plan arrangement of masses in such a manner that expresses aestheticism and ensures utility.

In Barak Valley, four sites are found yielding remains of architecture fulfilling the aforesaid conditions at least partially if not perfectly.

These four sites are – Bhuvan Tirtha on the top of the Bhuvan Hill, village Suryadas on the plain of Karimganj District, Khaspur in Cachar District and Badarpur in Karimganj District and for antiquity of the remains of Bhuvan Tirtha deserves to be discussed first.

The Bhuvan Tirtha occupies the most prominent place in the art History of North East India as it is one of the rarest places in the region yielding remains of rock-cut architecture although in rudimentary form. There at this place of pilgrimage situated on the top of a cliff-remain two spots presenting remains of rock-cut architecture.

At the first site, there is a cave temple with an arched façade and the whole retreat was originally prided by an entrance gate and hewn out of living rock. The horizontal lithic beam of the gate supported by two pillars had an image of *Ganesha* in relief at the centre of its exposed surface. Now the beam is broken away and preserved at a distant place and the remaining lower portions of the vertical pillars indicate the former position of the gate. The shrine is rectangular in shape. Though the back portion of the rectangular retreat is completely damaged, the remaining portion is 5 m long and 3 m wide, having its entrance on a narrow side. In fact, the shrine is a natural cave, where some signs of application of picks and chisels are only visible on the wall and roof without any artistic dexterity, excepting the vaulted roof.

Though the cave and its façade do not contain any sign of high workmanship, the architectural pretensions on the façade and vaulted roof of the cave are the definite influence of Buddhist rock-cut architecture. But the presence of *Ganesha* image forming the decorative part of the entrance of the gate is a new departure in the wide spread architectural movement, inspired by Buddhism during the ancient period of Indian History.

The second site situated about 2 K.M. away from the first, has the famous tunnels and assembly halls on the top of the mountain. The tunnel leads to an assembly hall measuring 486 square meters with a height of 9 meters. From this assembly hall, an exit tunnel leads down to another hall, having the same size and measure of the former. From the second assembly hall, a long and narrow tunnel runs to another assembly hall, the wall of which is decorated with some curved images, which cannot be identified clearly. The tunnels and assembly halls seem to be natural in origin while signs of application of picks and chisels are also found as some ancient architecture exerted their efforts to widen them and to ensure their utility. Though there is no visible sign of craftsmanship in the tunnel or assembly hall, the façade of the tunnel bears some signs of artistic dexterity. It bears some resemblance of the façade of rock-cut chitya halls of western India.

These remains are traces of the Buddhist movement in North-East India and may be ascribed to the same period when rock-cut caves of Yogigopa were erected. The gateway, decorated with *Ganesha* image in front of the cave temple, was later an addition to the retreat. So, the rock-cut architecture concerned may be ascribed to a period not later than 17<sup>th</sup> century C E.

However, the Bhuban Tirtha contains the traces of the earliest architectural movement of India, which indicate that the valley was under the same cultural stain that spread all over India.

The second site, viz. Suryadas under the district of Karimganj, contains the remains of such architecture belonging to the second great place of Indian architecture, which has been termed as Indo-Arabic architecture. The remains of architecture at Suryadas are dated and they are a bit better preserved than other dated remains of same architectural phase found at Asimganj and Maizdih of Karimganj District.

The mosque at Suryadas, excavated out of a raised place some 45 years ago by unskilled local people is in a very fragmentary condition. As no care was taken in excavating the structure out of the earth, much damage was done to the earth. However, the remains include half of the four walls of corner turrets. An inscription in Arabic language engraved on a black stone was also found at the spot. According to the information, the mosque was built during the reign of Alauddin Hussain Shah in the month of Sha-ban of 909 AH (1499/1500 CE).

It is a small structure; the interior being 8 m by 6 m with a door on the front wall attached spacious verandas known as *Chehen* and two other doors on two sidewalls. The remaining portion of the corner turrets are the octagonal. The western wall contains the usual alcove or *Mehrab* on the walls of the alcove, and based on the octagonal corner pillars some petal designs are found. The structure is built of thin-burnt bricks cemented with mortar. Therefore, the shrine obviously belongs to Indo-Islamic schools of architecture during the Turko-Afghan period.

The next phase of architectural movement in the Barak Valley is found at Khaspur, the last capital of the Kachari Kings. The Kachari Kings were famous for their cultural attainment and when they came to the plain of the Barak Valley, they had proper knowledge of architecture in their heritage.

One of the important remains of architecture at Khaspur is the *Snan Mandir* or the Bathing Temple for the deity. It is a square building, open on all sides. It was erected on a square plinth topped with a dome found in the Rajput architecture with cornices on all sides round the dome is topped with a conical cap. The other prominent remains at Khaspur are the *Ranachandi* Temple. It is a brick built temple with thick walls and four planned curved roofs. The roof is constructed with pan-tiles made with baked earth, in the shape of a half-bamboo with its inter-nodes scooped out. Joints were flushed with lime and *Surki* mortar. The whole tiled roof was covered with a

thick plaster of lime and *Surki*, beaten down slowly. This method is definitely a tribal style and taken from the process of roofing dwelling houses by indigenous people. Thus the Kachari builders employed the style of that shed roofs in brick architecture. The door archers bear the influence of Bengal provincial style of the Indo-Islamic schools. But the linted above the door is plain forming a contrast to other temple architecture.

Another small brick built structure erected by the Kacharis is the remains of a fort at Badarpur on the bank of the river Barak in the district of Karimganj. It bears all the Bengal provincial style of the Indo-Islamic school. Historically both the sites are of recent period and not earlier than eighteenth century CE.

### Sculpture

The sculptural remains so far discovered in the Barak Valley are mostly in icons except some crude images of Devarapala preserved in the premises of the Silchar Normal School and pieces of the architectural remains lying scattered at places under Patharkandi police station of Karimganj district.

The stone images of Devarapala preserved in the premises of the Silchar Normal School are claimed to be brought from the Bhuvan Hill although in round, characterized by their jejune appearance, heavy body, disproportionate limbs and crude workmanship. They resemble the crude images found at Maibong erected under the Patronage of the Kachari Kings.

Among the pieces of stone pillars, lying scattered at places under the Patharkandi Police station, two deserve mention. These two places are preserved in the premises of Asimshah Mosque in the neighborhood of Asimganj about 28 K.M. south of Karimganj town. Both the pieces are identically round and curved out of black-stone. The local people believe that the pieces of the designed pillars are the remains of a mosque built earlier by a saint named Asim Shah. Again, two rock-cut quadrangular pillar shafts are also lying there about which the local people narrate that they were carried with Asim Shah with his spiritual powers from a place named Rajbari located 2 K.M. south-east of Asimganj.

Rajbari also yields a stone pillar of Polygonal shape engraved with designs of interior quality to those of Asimganj Pillars. Historically, Rajbari was the Head Quarters' of a Vessel

King of the Tipera King up to 14<sup>th</sup> century. And in all probability, the remains are the traces of the patronage of creative art by the Tipera Kings. The technique and style applied, the designs and objects engraved on the pieces of decorated pillars at Asim Shah Mosque bear the signs of the rich heredity of the medieval Hindu art developed in North-India.

The remains of the icons come from the Bhuvan Hills and village Latu near Karimganj Town. The Bhuvan images were originally lying scattered around rock-cut cave temple and now assembled at a neighbouring place and preserved under a shed. But the images were so badly handled that only three are almost in site (S. Choudhury – *Srihatta Kacharer Prachin Itihas* – P.37). Among the three, the best preserved are of a male deity and of a female God renegated as *Bhuvaneswar* and *Bhuvaneswari* respectively.

The images found at Bhuvan Tirtha are ascribed to be a period later than that in which the cave temple was excavated. Because, the cave temple bears the influence of *Hinayana* form of Buddhism while the images are mainly Saivite. Of course, their connection with the images of unokoti in Tripura cannot be ruled out.

The last phase of sculpture comes from Latu in the district of Karimganj. The sculptural piece is an image of *Krishna* in *Venugopal* aspect. It is in *Tribhanga Sthanaka* attitude playing on flute. Though the flute is missing, the hands are in the position of playing the flute. The image is in round chiseled out of a piece of black-stone. Signs of crudity are noticeable in the treatment of face and eyes.

From the above discussions, it is clear that the architectural movement in the Barak Valley in ancient days kept conformity with the architectural movement prevailed in rest of India. Though in the later years, particularly during the reign of the Kacharis, an attempt was made to develop a local architecture, it could not be made free from all India influence. But the remains of sculpture speak a bit differently as they bear the signs of local craftsmanship, to some extent independent of all India style. Of course, it is due to the lack of ability of the local sculptures. A distinct pointer is found here in respect of character of the visual art of the Barak Valley is that they in no way are connected with the artistic development in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. But it is rather strange that the Gupta idioms somehow missed the Barak valley, while the remains of Gupta art are found in the Brahmaputra Valley.

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