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## **Education through Museum: A Historical Study of the Assam State Museum, Guwahati**

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### **Abstract**

*A museum is no longer an institution only to store its collection, or just to tell people about the glories of the past or the particular period or of the present. In its modern sense, museum is considered as a unique medium of teaching, it has to prepare continuous programmes for schools and colleges by selecting the objects in order to form a visual impression and make it meaningful to students. New methods in display arrangement of objects make the museum more informative and impressive and can easily convey knowledge visually through these exhibits, so that it would be possible for any visitors to acquire knowledge within a very short span of time. Museum all over the world attract thousands of visitors, both learned and laymen, a multipurpose museum can serve as a research centre for scholars, researchers and students of different categories. In the light of this perspective, an attempt is made in this paper to assess the role of Assam State Museum, the oldest and multipurpose museum of Assam in imparting education to the visitors of various categories.*

**Key Words: Museum, Assam State Museum, Education, Visitors, Strategies**

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Museums are conventionally viewed as institution dedicated to the conservation of valued objects and the education of the public. International Council of Museum defines Museum as a nonprofit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”<sup>1</sup> Museum do not only preserve rich heritage of the country but disseminate knowledge and communicate with the visitors through a unique medium of visual presentation of its collection and thus imparting education informally. Museum all over the world attract thousands of visitors everyday both learned and illiterate. They go there to acquire knowledge. The medium of communication in a Museum is the object- the collections either man made or natural. They are collected, preserved and displayed in an interesting eye-catching manner. It displays the rare collection of prehistoric and proto-

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<sup>1</sup> International Council of Museum Statues, 2007, article 3,s.1,<http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user-upload/pdf/status/statutes-eng.pdf>).

historic materials. Thus, the distinct cultural inter-relationship between all living being and past organisms in this global environment is projected through the exhibits of arts, paintings, sculpture, craft, dresses, household appliances arms and armour and archaeological findings of different periods and different races. A number of museums have initiated series of lectures and have organized a permanent Co- operation with schools and universities. The advent of audiovisual methods has compelled museums to present in special projection rooms, program of films complementing the displays of exhibitions. In many central museums and in certain regional museums, teaching chairs at university level have been froned principally in art of history, anthropology, natural sciences, and museology. In increasing number of countries, school teaching is closely linked to a museum.

Museums encouraged the parallel study of objects that were gradually becoming the counterpart to texts. Information from texts is intangible and abstract. Objects are tangible and three-dimensional. Often the juxtaposition of objects creates or erodes connections. The pattern of their proximity is therefore significant. The larger collections fuelled a study of historical change through objects that came from the same region over a number of centuries. The change could be of material, from clay to stone to metal, or it could be of form. Such collections also enabled a comparative study of the same object from different region- the most striking example of which was the portrait of Buddha. Thus, the Gandhara, Mathura and Amaravati heads of Buddha, representing the same person, sculpted in three different regions, are physically quite distinct.

In the context of Assam, the history of Museum in modern sense was started in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most popular and oldest museum in Assam is the Assam State Museum which is located at Guwahati. The nucleus of Assam State Museum is *Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti*, a voluntary organization founded in 1912 by a few persons interested in the history and culture of the eastern region of India. The *Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti* since its inception has been endeavoring to collect information regarding the archaeological and historical relics and other antiquities lying scattered in different parts of the province, and has made several exploratory excursions in various parts of the state. The devoted members of *Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti* made a good collection of stone images and other objects and founded their own museum. The *Samiti*'s main aim behind formation of museum is to the preservation and exhibition of antiquities bearing the history and culture of the land. The Museum, initially known as the Assam Provincial Museum, was inaugurated on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1940 by Sir Robert Neil Reid, the then Governor of undivided Assam. On 1<sup>st</sup> April 1953, this institution was taken over by the Government of Assam and renamed as Assam State Museum<sup>2</sup>. Though it was intended to make a cultural museum primarily, the Assam State Museum was an Archaeological museum having collections of Epigraphy, Iconography and Numismatics. During the tenure of R.D. Choudhury, the former Director of Assam State Museum a few more galleries of different branches came up

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<sup>2</sup> R.D. Choudhury, *Hand Book of Assam State Museum*, Directorate of Museums, Guwahati,p.4  
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turning the museum to the multipurpose museum keeping intact its original archaeological value. From the time of collection of a few objects to become a multipurpose museum, Assam State Museum traversed a long period of development. In our present study an attempt has been made to study in what way and how far the Assam State Museum is successful in imparting knowledge and education in the society.

The Archaeological section of the Assam State museum is very rich. The principal object of this section generally fall under three main heads namely, Epigraphy, Iconography and Numismatics. In Assam State Museum there is quite a good number of such a epigraphic records, which enable us to trace an almost unbroken genealogy of the Assamese kings from the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A. D. to the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. These charters are in fact, the principal source of the early period of Assam history. Gauda- Kamarupa conflict was so long unknown and people were in the dark about this event, brought to light by the discovery of the Doobi plates. The copper-plate inscription of Dharmapala of 12<sup>th</sup> century A. D. was edited in the *Journal of the Assam Research Society* and reviewed by late Dr. N. K. Bhattasali in the said journal. This copper plate charter is now in the museum<sup>4</sup>.

Assam had no tradition of writing history in ancient days. The epigraphs left by the royal authorities are the only sources of the history of the early period of Assam history. In the epigraphy section both the Pre-Ahom and the Ahom inscriptions are displayed. A few inscriptions left by the Koch rulers were also displayed<sup>5</sup>. The language of the inscriptions of ancient Assam was Sanskrit. The epigraphs left by the Koch rulers were also written in Sanskrit. The Ahom rulers used Sanskrit, Assamese and Tai Ahom languages for their inscription<sup>6</sup>. The earliest stone inscription of Assam is the Nagajari- Khanikar Gaon Fragmentary stone inscription is preserved in this section<sup>7</sup>. The inscriptions kept and preserved in the gallery and engraving, copper plates issued by kings, seal left by royal authority, and inscriptions on cannons and some other objects. These inscriptions are important source for writing the history of Assam. Scholars can have a visual experience of the inscriptions which enhance their foresight.

Manuscripts deal with literary works like epic, drama, poetry, grammar, popular story and so on. Some of the manuscripts are fine specimens of history of medicine and art and paintings as well. Manuscripts of the late medieval period in old Assamese, Tai, Burmese etc. are preserved in the museum. These manuscripts are written on *sanchipat* (bark of Agar tree), *tulapat* (handmade paper) and *talpat* (plam leaves) etc<sup>8</sup>. Some of the Assamese

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<sup>3</sup> P.D. Choudhury, M.C. Das, *Ancient treasure of Assam*, Government of Assam, 1959, p.3

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p-3

<sup>5</sup> Sarharuddin Ahmed, 'The Assam State Museum', in (eds.) Y.S. Wunglengton, Sarharuddin Ahmed, *Platinum Jubilee Assam State Museum Souvenir*, 2014-15, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>7</sup> R.C. Das, 'A Brief Note on Assam State Museum', in (ed.) R.D. Choudhury, *Museum of North-East India*, 1988, p.84.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

manuscripts preserved in the museum are illustrated with colours. Under the scheme, Assam Bikash Yojana, during the financial year 2007-08, Rs. 1 crore was sanctioned for the preservation, conservation, restoration and exposition of manuscript kept in the Assam State Museum. The scheme covers several programmes and the most striking completions are- Digitization of 15,000 pages of Manuscripts, Installation of Microfilming Unit and, Publication of *Anadipatan*, a monumental work on *Vaisnavite Faith*<sup>9</sup>. Digitalization will render immediate informations to the learners and researchers without handling the original manuscripts, the installation of costly Micro-filming Unit will benefit the people for generation together, and the task of bringing *Anadipatan* in a book form is a good contribution to knowledge.

The symbol and figure of ancient Indian coins and the legends of the coins of medieval period of Indian history symbolize some important aspects of a ruler- religious belief, administrative ability, social outlook, indomitable prowess, benevolent generosity, attitude towards life and finally submission to the Almighty. The coinage of India can be situated in the gallery of Numismatics of the Assam State Museum. The Assam State Museum is proud of having a Coins Cabinet of its own containing about six thousand coins of different periods of Indian history. The regional coins of different ruling houses displayed in the gallery supply materials to the learners and researchers<sup>10</sup>.

The picture-cum-children gallery of the museum includes quite a few beautiful water-colour pictures, oil paintings, etc., depicting important events relating to mythology, history and culture of the state. It is known to all that the names of our state at different periods- ancient, medieval and in modern period were *Pragjyotisha*, *kamarupa* and *Assam*. An honest attempt is being made to explain through pictures, with explanatory labels, why our state was called by different names. To illustrate it may be said that the first picture, as referred to in the *Kalika Purana* contains the figure of Brahma creating stars and planets, in this easternmost region. The second shows Kamadeva burnt into ashes by Lord Siva who propitiated by Rati Devi, spouse of Kamadeva brought back Kamadeva to his old form (Rupa). Likewise, the third depicts a scene showing Sukapha, the first Ahom King, a descendant of Shan Tribe entering *Saumarpith* through Patkai hill ranges. Similarly the battle of Kurukshetra, as narrated in Mahabharata, has been neatly depicted through painted pictures on a scroll. A few important events of our history such as, Lachit Borphukan in the battle field of Saraighat, the inhuman atrocities inflicted on *Satee Jaymati*, recollection of her memory etc., have also been vivified through oil paintings and water- colour pictures. Photographs of important temples, palaces and sculptures of the state have been displayed in rows in the said gallery. Painting is a powerful media of communication which comes under Art History. One can study art, architecture, culture, flora and fauna, ware fare, social justice and various aspects of human behaviours of a particular period with the help of the paintings. The gallery exhibits modern painting done by the local artists having

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<sup>9</sup> Sarharuddin Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p.6.

<sup>10</sup> Sarharuddin Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p.6.

considerable merits on the subject. This section houses with some oil and scroll paintings on different aspects including mythological and historical events. The portraits of Edward 7 and Sir Henri cotton are very interesting in terms of its painting and farming techniques. The gallery has been able to portray the paintings in chronological order<sup>11</sup>.

The North Eastern India is a land of myriad culture, having multi lingual, multi ethnic and racial groups. It has more than 100 tribal communities. The people of the whole region are expert in handicraft. The textile gallery of the Assam State Museum attempts to portray the rich traditional weaving practice and skills of the whole North East region. The textile gallery of the museum also exhibits the traditional Assamese dresses some of which are no longer in practice now.

Village life in Assam can be observed in the village life gallery with pleasure and joy. The model of Assamese weaving system, village assembly, traditional Assamese house with specifications, household equipments, instruments for amusement, utensils for household and public use fishing items etc. are exhibited in the gallery<sup>12</sup>. Here an attempt has been made to preserve and exhibit the village culture and heritage of the region.

Assam is one of the seven states of North East India, bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in the north; the Mizoram and Meghalaya in the south while Manipur and Nagaland in the south east and west Bengal and Bangladesh in the west. The river Brahmaputra is flowing through the heart of Assam with its tributaries nurturing not only the folk cultures in valleys, but also tribal culture in relatively isolated hills as well as in plains. The ethnographical exhibits on view bring together the distinctive elements of the tribal cultures under one roof. These art objects are utilitarian in nature. Nevertheless, the indigenous creativity is seen in its totality. The relationship between man and ecology could be understood through the material life of the people.

The Museum also has a regular publishing programme, which includes scholarly and well researched publications like *Sculptures of Assam*, *A Source book of Numismatic Studies in Northeast India*, *Catalogue of the Inscriptions in the Assam State Museum*, besides the bulletin of Assam State Museum. The Publication of museum also helps in creating awareness among the people regarding the museum.

Since 1973, the Museum authorities have been arranging some lectures by scholars in the Museum. Prof. R. N. Bernier of Colorado University, and the Director of centre of Asian Art, Colorado, U.S.A. delivered a talk on the 'Temple architecture of Nepal'. Subsequently, A.K. Das, Curator Arunachal Pradesh Museum, delivered a talk on 'The progress of Anthropological research in Arunachal Pradesh' and L. N. Chakravarty, Director of Research Department, Arunachal Pradesh spoke on 'The Archaeological excavation at Malinithan'. Dr. D.C. Sirkar, visited the Museum on the 12<sup>th</sup> January 1974 and delivered

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

lecture on 'The Origin and development of Tantricism in Eastern India'<sup>13</sup>. The North-East India Museums Association organized an exhibition of rare books of *Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti* in the State Museum Campus. Between the year 1976 and 1981 several small scale exhibitions were organized by R. C. Das, Guide Lecturer-cum-Exhibition officer at the Annual Conference of the 'Assam Sahitya Sabha' at several places viz. Tihu (Feb.1976), Abhayapuri (Feb.1977), Golaghat (March 1978), Sualkuchi (Feb.1979) and Tinsukia (May,1981)<sup>14</sup>. At the suggestion of Hiteswar Saikia, the Chief Minister of Assam a large scale of exhibition was organized in a huge pavilion during the *Medam-me-phi* at Joysagar, which attracted a large number of visitors<sup>15</sup>. Dr. Choudhury in his article *Pavilion Depicting Monuments in Exhibition*<sup>16</sup> discussed about various exhibitions organized by the Assam State Museum. Such varied activities- exhibitions, seminars, etc. created awareness among the people about their rich cultural heritage. The national and state level seminars organised by the Directorate of Museums, Assam in the last few years have helped the scholars and researchers to exchange the knowledge and it is definitely a firm step towards national integration. Moreover the museum authority arranged lectures on the topics related to the art and culture of India for better understanding of the public. Holding exhibitions at different levels have resulted not only in popularising the museum objects but also enabled the people in the better understanding of the culture and heritage of the region. By arranging exhibitions and talks at different level and different places the museum authority encourage the common people to preserve their ancestral and rare valuable materials like old coins, garments, manuscripts, etc., and ask them either donate or to sell them only to the museum or the Archaeological departments.

The programme of Cultural Exchange through Museum was a scheme taken up by the Directorate of Museums, Assam to bring museum education nearer to the student-community for the first time in India. The purpose of this programme is to give an opportunity to the students, studying in different institutes of hill Districts to visit various museums, monuments and other cultural centres in the districts of plains of Assam<sup>17</sup>. Through this programme an attempt has been made by the Assam State Museum to unite the diverse culture of the region.

In a museum we generally receive four categories of visitors, such as common visitors, students, researchers and V.I.Ps. Each category of visitors has its own expectations in so far as the benefit of museum visit is concerned. Average visitors coming from rural areas

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<sup>13</sup> R.C. Das, 'New Acquisition and activities of The Assam State Museum', *Bulletin of Assam State Museum* Vol.1, 1975, (ed)R.D. Choudhury, p.67.

<sup>14</sup> R. D. Choudhury, *Fifty years of Assam State Museum*, Directorate of Museums, Guwhati, 1990, p .2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>16</sup> R. D. Choudhury., *Museums of India and their Maladies*, Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 1998, p.28.

<sup>17</sup> R. D. Choudhury, *Museum and their Melodies*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-6.

simply feel amused when they look at the exhibits. Students take the exhibits from a different angle. They try to add to their knowledge to the extent of their level of comprehension. Researchers try to gather much more information hitherto unknown about the culture and the history of the country. Generally stereo-type display does not help much in getting education or information inherent in these exhibits. As a result, visitors just cursorily look at the exhibits and move on without enlightening themselves. They do not evince much interest in them. Since the expectations of the different categories of visitors differ from one another, museum professionals must evolve methods to display the exhibits in a way which may by and large satisfy all categories of visitors, so that exhibits may become more meaningful and educative.

In conclusion it can be say that in the present time the role of museum is not only confined to give amusement to the viewers. The notion of a museum gradually changed. It ceased to be just a collection of objects- what we today called *vastu-sangrahalaya* (treasure of objects). It began to be seen as an institution reflecting and imparting knowledge and education to the society. The Assam State Museum not only imparting knowledge by displaying various objects in its galleries but also organized seminars, lectures and exhibitions to popularize the importance of preservation and exhibition of cultural heritage of the reign. Besides the Museum has a regular publishing programme. The publication of any museum serves as the very important media of communications. Knowledge, in the trust sense of the term is transmitted from one individual to another or one generation to another. With these ethics, the Assam State Museum at Guwahati since last 76 years of its history has been rendering service to the people with best of its efforts and sincerities.

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