

ART WRITING AND ART JOURNALS IN NORTH EAST INDIA: A BRIEF IMPRESSION

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Images of Art journals from North Eastern India

Abstract : Writing on visual arts can be useful for a better understanding of a work of art and its creative process, though what artists know about their creation has been often lost on writers. Although art writing is an essential genre as not only including sensory detail but also critically examine with art historical associations, time and context. In this way collecting of art writings in a journal, magazine or newspaper is a significant task or source of knowledge and history of mankind. My objectives of the paper are to access art writings in Northeast India since Pre Independence era in the context of its development of art pedagogy and practice.

Keywords: Visual arts, art writing, art journal, Northeast India and contemporary art.

Art writing is an evolving genre to study its cultural and literary forms, histories, content and contexts of local and global. Art writing encompasses creative, philosophical, critical methodologies to writing about, writing with, and writing as art. It also comprises drawing from disciplines including visual arts, art criticism, art history and literature, this interdisciplinary field about creative production as it is concerned with critical discourse.

Prof. Parul Dave Mukherjee (2015) writes in this context, "If we look at Bharat's *Natyasastra* (200 BCE- 200 CE) as an early text of codes for the cultural text of codes for cultural practices like drama, the visual arts viewed as an aid to the theatre. *Natya* or drama was understood in terms of *drsyā* and *śravyā* or visual and aural modes of representation. Again, the visual arts were subsumed under 64 arts listed in the *Kamasutra* as the accomplishments of a cultured man or a woman. It was in the early medieval period (8th-13th century CE.) that the writing of texts proposing design principles for the visual arts peaked. Many well-known *Silpasasras* or texts that describe arts, crafts and their design rules, principles and standards, like *Silpa sasras* carry prescriptive information about what is expected of the *silpi* or *citravid* (an expert in

painting). Art history come to in India under the protection of colonialism around late 18th century, but the cultural nationalists appropriate it and successfully challenge the colonial misinterpretations of multi-headed and multi-headed and multi-armed gods and goddesses as 'much maligned monsters'. The first decolonizing moment came before Independence and A. K. Coomaraswamy's defense of Indian art around the first quarter of the 20th century must be salient move to question this colonial legacy. However, the first art reviews emerged from Calcutta like *Modern Reviews*, *Rupam* and in journals of the Indian Society of Oriental Art (JISOA). Jaya Appaswamy, Stella Kramrisch, O. C. Gangoly others contributed regularly to them but today very few of their writings retain contemporary interest. Another important movement in the history of critical writing on the arts came up in the post colonial era with the publication of the journal of *Arts and Ideas*. J. Swaminathan ran the short-lived magazine *Contra 66* which GeetaKapur has called as 'an avant-garde gesture.' (Dave Mukherjee, 2017)

Art of Writing through *puthis* or manuscript was practised in the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa or Assam and their exploits and achievements have been recorded in the Hindu epics and puranas. As mentioned at Bana Bhatta's *Harsacharita* a sanskrit text and biography of emperor Harsha, "*King Bhaskaravarman, the ruler of Kamrupa in the seventh century and friend and ally of Harshavardhana of Kanauj, presented to the Emperor 11 Volumes of five writing with leaves made from aloe bark and hue of the ripe pink cucumber.*" (Bhuyan, 2009) During the medieval period, the Vaishnava (faith of Hindu supreme God Vishnu) revival doctrine expounded by Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciples instructed upon the placing of a grantha or a religious manuscript in an altar whether for community worship in *Namghar* or prayer hall or family adoration in a domestic altar. "*as mentioned Manipur Itihas, Ahanba p.9, GaribNawaj, the king of Manipur, is said to have taken the Bhagavata from the neighbouring state and popularized it in his kingdom.*" (Bhuyan, 2009)

During Pre-Independence India, the printed book on collected manuscripts with description, done by great Assamese litterateur Pandit Hem Chandra Goswami entitled *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*, was first published by the University of Calcutta on behalf of the Government of Assam in 1930 and printed at the Calcutta University Press, Senate House, Calcutta. Worth to mention as then Director of Ethnography Assam, Shillong deputed as officer Hem Chandra Goswami for that mammoth task, and he compiled, collected manuscripts in both Assamese and Sanskrit from several parts of Assam. Those collected manuscripts presently kept in the collection in Historical and Antiquarian Studies Assam, Guwahati. According to Prof. Nilmani Phookan, Sarbeswar Kataki was the first person of writing on old painting tradition in Assam. Era-making journal *Abahan* during 1931 published Sarbeswar Kataki's article on *Anadipatanan* illustrated manuscript with two manuscript pages. (Phookan, 1998) During the thirties of last century Rupkunwor Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnu Prasad Rabha, two eminent cultural activists the more spirit and enthusiasm germinated for the trend of art writing and practice. Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, first Assamese film maker (Joymoti, 1935) arose to contribute in this regard. Verrier Elwyn (1902- 1964), a British born Indian anthropologist, Christian missionary and tribal activist, got inspired from ideology of Mahatma and wrote many valuable books on art culture of India especially Northeast India as books titled *The Art of North-east Frontier of India* (1959), *Folk Paintings of India* (1967), *The Nagas in the Nineteenth century* (1969). (www.wikipedia.org, 2020)

During later period, Dr. Maheswar Neog, Dr. Kapila Vatshayan, Jugal Das, Prof. Rajatananda Dasgupta, Prof. Nilmani Phookan, Prof. Birendranath Datta, Dr. Narayan Das, Dr. Rabindev Choudhury, Dr. Naren Kalita, Dr. Pradip Sarma, Dr. Shankar Roy, Sobha Brahma, Benu Misra, Prof. Jhanak Jhankar Narzary, Dr. Puspa Gogoi, Samiran Baruah, Prof. Desmond Kharmawphlang, Th. Tombi Singh, Prof. E. Nilkanta Singh, Dr. Kamaluddin Ahmed, Dr. Amalendu Bhattacharjee, Dr. B. Ruma Sharma, Dr. Nirmal Kanti Roy, Swapan Nandi, Prof. Kishor Bhattacharjee, Dr. Moushumi Kandali, Dr. Ganesh Nandi, Dr. Raj Kumar Mazinder, Dr. Rajesh Bhoumik, Dr. Pinak Pani Nath, Pratip Brata Bhattacharjee, Sandipan Bhattacharjee, Bhrigupati Hazarika, Rupanjali Baruah, Debashish Bezbaruah, Tridib Dutta, Nikhileswar Baruah, Ankur Deka, Samudra Kajol Saikia, Pranamita Borgohain, Phanindra Talukdar, Pramit Parna Paul are few names



of eminent personality from North Eastern India who contributed to grown up a lot with their writing at Newspapers, journals, online blogs and authored books in terms of art writing in both vernacular languages of North Eastern states and English.

Gauhati Artists' Guild, a premier art organization of Assam based in Guwahati has been engaged uninterruptedly in publishing catalogue, art journal and book on artist since its inception on 11th July 1976 for opening out cultural horizon of common mass and documentation for future generation. *Chihna*, a bilingual (English, Assamese) Annual art journal of Gauhati Artists' Guild, is publishing writings on ancient heritage, tradition, modern/ contemporary by authors from all over the North-East and beyond in both local/ global context for general readers and for artists' community since 1976. The name of *Chihna*, given by great Assamese litterateur Navakanta Baruah perhaps inspired from the play Chihnayatra by the great cultural reformer, an activist of Assam Srimanta Sankardeva. Eminent litterateur and art historian Dr. Moushumi Kandali writes, "While talking about art writing in North- East we would like to take such a holistic mode for mapping, as because, if at one hand English art writing promotes and propagates the modern art historical developments of a specific region to the outside world, the vernacular writing with a greater hold to the lay public or the local can create art awareness and bridge the gap between the somewhat elitist realm of modern art and the larger public domain who mostly cater to the expressions of popular culture." (Kandali, 2014-15) In this context, *Chihna* art journal has contributed a lot to the art writings and inspire other group/ organization to publish such publication in various places of North Eastern India for the last 45 years.

Saptaparna was a bi-monthly art bulletin in English, a short-lived venture by a group of artists and Saptaparna Publications, Jorhat, Assam. It was published three issues during the year 1997, covering Various art news from Assam and longer writings by Prof. Ratan Parimoo, Benu Misra and Prof. E. Nilkanta Singh with lots of visuals of works of art by artists from North-Eastern India. A forward written of that art bulletin in the first issue as, "Besides having a great cultural heritage of the seven sisters of North East India, works of artists of this region, in painting, sculpture and graphics are no less significant to the modern Indian art scene in particular and the International scenario of contemporary art in general. This belief is the motivating force behind conceiving of the idea to publish an art bulletin in English from Jorhat to project art activities of North East India in and outside the country." (Forward, 1997) Subsequently the third issue of *Saptaparna* art bulletin on Manipur Special (May-June 1997) include lead article/ editorial modern art scenarios in Manipur by Prof. E. Nilkanta Singh with an adequate number of colour images of paintings by contemporary artists of Manipur.

AHANA, a yearly & bilingual Bengali, English magazine (ISSN 2278 - 1994 - *AHANA*) on art & culture published by Government College of Art & Craft, Agartala, Tripura is a significant service towards art writing since 2009 onwards. *Ahana's* pages have been persistently explored, enrich not only art and culture of Tripura but also entire North-Eastern India. One specific issue as Special Rabindra number on the eve of 150 years of Birth Anniversary of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore has been published valuable articles of eminent writers and artists along with visuals regarding life and works by Rabindranath Tagore at *AHANA*, Volume III, 2009. As renowned art historian and Editor of *AHANA* Dr. Pramit Parna Paul writes, "Substantial essays encompassing diverse topics on visual art and culture, in either of these two languages- Bengali and English, are published in *AHANA*. Accomplished writers, scholars, art critics and artists from various corners of the country as Sherysi Chatterjee, Angsuman Dasgupta, Nanak Ganguly had contributed their write-ups to this publication. An artwork of one eminent artist of this state is selected for the cover page, for each volume. This is the only journal in Tripura that covers both academic and cultural fields simultaneously and reflects the ethnicity of the North-East." (Prospectus, 2019)

Shilpagan a premier art and craft institute of Silchar, Assam has published its quarterly Art Journal namely 'Art Echo' since its First issue release on dated 31st August, 2011. It has been published total 19 issues successively as numerous writers and artists contribute their writings and works of art generously for



the journal and wide range of readers. Art Echo is definitely serving as multitudes of talent that exist in Barak Valley in the visual art sphere and widening horizon of readers. In the praise of Art Echo eminent art historian Dr. Meghali Goswami writes, "Art echo...well it is indeed a landmark and an echo of this valley, and I do consider the serious newspaper on art will be a museum which will contain a rich treasure of the art world." (Goswami, 2011)

Sharma Arts & Crafts House of Imphal has published its Bulletin namely *SACH* since 2013 time to time. In the March 15, 2013 issue lots of eminent personalities as Dr. Sekhar Joshi, Jabeen Ghose Dastidar (Rahman), Thoidingiam Tombi Singh, Dr. Ruma Sharma, Raj Kumar Mazinder, Dr. Meghali Goswami, Dr. Laishram Imoba has contributed their valuable writing for the bulletin. Again Assam Fine Arts & Crafts Society, first art organization of Northeast India established in 1971 has been published the annual art magazine named *CHHANDA*, Bilingual Assamese, English version since 2010. *CHITRAPAT* another annual art journal in Bilingual version has been published by Nagaon Fine Art Society, Nagaon, Assam since 2012 onwards.

Thus publication of these numerous art journals, bulletin has definitely enhanced academic inputs in the researches and studies on traditional and contemporary arts of the country, with particular emphasis on the arts practised in the North East through the centuries. Art journals from North East India consider their primary responsibility to put forth the unparalleled work and unique talent of this region through these publications. We artists fraternity from Northeast region of our country use this opportunity to implore the readers and contributors to utilize the publications in disseminate their work to the hundreds of readers.

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