

HERITAGE OF ARCHITECTURE OF ASSAM – NEED FOR CONSERVATION

DR. R.D. CHOUDHURY
Director General, National Museum, New Delhi

Summary

Assam is the easternmost State of India having a good number of monuments belonging to the medieval period i.e., 6th century A.D. to 19th century A.D. It maintained cultural relation with the main land. The present Bangladesh and the erstwhile West Pakistan was a part of India before the partition of the country and hence all cultural contacts with India Assam maintained with this part. It also maintained cultural contact with Burma. Hence, the influence on Assam's architecture from outside.

1. Pre-Āhom period

The history of architecture in Assam on the basis of the material available can be pushed back to the Gupta period i.e., the Varman dynasty of the Kāmarupa. Not a single temple belonging to the Pre-Āhom-Koeh period i.e., 13th century is in standing condition. Wherever temple existed in that period, we see only heaps of ruins over which in the Āhom-Koeh temples were constructed. The heaps of ruins are full of various broken parts of the stone temples. The scattered components of the temple and palacial remains on stylistic ground are assignable to a period ranging from Gupta period to C.13th century. Standing temples, however, can be seen all over the State, which are datable to the late medieval period i.e., 16th to 19th century.

The reasons of the total damage of the temples belonging to the Pre-Āhom period are more than one. Firstly, there must have been some large scale earthquakes to crumble down the beautiful temples. It is possible that in the great earthquake of 1896, some buildings and

monuments fell down making them irreparable. Entire North Eastern India is in earthquake zone. Secondly, damp climatic condition of Assam helped in the growth of vegetation over the monuments which helped in decaying the monuments and falling to the ground. There are quite a few inscriptional references to the erection of temples in the Pre-Āhom Assam. The first reference occurs in the Nilāchal inscription of Surendra Varman (Mahendra Varman) datable to 5th century A.D. It refers to the existence of a cave temple in Kāmākhyā hill, which is also called Nilāchal hill. ¹

But, strangely, there is no trace of any cave temple at the site of the Nilāchal inscription. Only the trace of a disturbed natural cave can be found. It is possible that the natural cave was improved to be used as a temple in the line of Udayagiri cave temple of Central India.

The existing temple ruins cannot prove that Assam in the beginning developed an independent architectural style. But we have proof to show that architectural style in Assam was very much influenced by the Gupta architectural style of the mid India. Dr. P. Sarma rightly says that the bold scroll floral design seen at Kāmākhyā is the proto-type scroll of 4th/5th century of Bhumra². However, we do not have any proof to show that the scroll is over the plans of that period. At Da-parvatī near Tezpur the ruined temple gives us a clear picture of the plan, which has striking similarity with the Gupta temples found in central India. The dvara (doorframe) of the ruined temple at Da-parvatia. With the beautiful sculptured figures of Gangā and Yamunā, bearing Gupta characteristic feature is a priceless art work. However, this masterpiece was in all probability, an import from the Gangā-Yamunā valley.

In Assam, i.e. Kamarupa, three dynasties flourished in the Pre-Āhom period. These are Varman, Salastambha and Pala dynasties. Some Varman rulers were contemporaneous of the Gupta Kings. When the Gupta dynasty, due to the inner conflicts amongst the kings, started falling, the art activities also had to face obstacles. Kamarupa, the bordering Kingdom of the Gupta Empire under the Varman rulers, however, continued the Gupta art style. Some influence of Gupta art or architecture even could be seen in the work of the days of the Salastambha rulers. For instance, the Majgaon temple dvāra (Gharpora cuburi), Tezpur, depicts the figures of Gangā and Yamunā, the river Goddess, so popular in the Gupta art and architecture. However, the plinth of the Da-parvatia ruined temple which consists of garbhagriha and mandapa is very simple and depicts Gupta architectural style clearly.

From almost the beginning of the Varman dynasty i.e., 5th century to the end of the Salastambha dynasty i.e., 10 century the architectural activities can be traced systematically in and around Tezpur. This observation of Dr. P. Sarma holds good. The ruined temples at Bamuni Pahar, Majgaon, architectural components preserved in the Cole Park, Tezpur bear testimony to this fact.

As in many cases plinth area is not traceable, we are to depend on the style of architectural components, such as, dvarasirapatti, dvarasakhas, dehali, sikhara, angasikara, stambha sirsa, amalaka etc. to determine their age. The depiction of miniature sikhara depicted in some sakhas of dvaras of broken temples also help us in this matter.³

Sarma has said that the Post Gupta architectural developments in Assam are more akin to central India than Orissa. The sikhara of this period was domical like that of Khājūrah and not in Orissa, which are pyramidal in shape. It is, in fact, very risky to make a conclusive remark, as there is not a standing temple, of this period in the state. Sometimes, it appears, the sikhara of the temples of Assam bear similarity with eastern Orissa, Bengal or even northern Indian style, in addition to central Indian style. But certainly it has no relation with the southern Indian or Deccan style, in so far as the sikharas are concerned. Elsewhere, we remarked that the style of the sikharas of the temple of Assam resemble the sikharas of the Orissa (central Orissa) temple alone. Now, it requires revision. Because we do not find Orissan influence on the art of Assam. This can also be applicable on architecture too.

The use of raised platform for erection of a temple complex was not very popular. But there are some instances. For example, the main ruined temple at Bāmuni Pāhār has this element. Majority of the temples belonging to this period have garbhagriha with lower level, i.e., the floor levels of the garbhagriha is lower than those of the mandapas and a flight of steps are their for climbing down. Though there are instances of garbhagrihas of temples, outside Assam, yet their numbers are not many having lower level.

As in other parts of the country, in Assam too use of bricks and stones for temple construction were known. The temples of Assam belonging to the Pre-Āhom period certainly bear the clear Indo-Aryan style. But, because of its some peculiar styles, designs etc. Sarma⁴ wants to treat the style in question as “Separate group of the Indo-Aryan style”. Central Indian architecture style, no doubt, was the soul of the Pre-Āhom temple architecture style in Assam. But, in so far as Gajathara motif is concerned, Deccan influence on our temple style is noticed. R.D. Banerji even has noticed influence of western Chalukyan style, nay, Javanese influence or the architectur style of Assam.⁵ There may be influence of other architectural style including the indigenous additions in the Pre-Āhom architecture in Assam, but basically, it is the product of the Indo-Aryan style. But, we cannot agree with Sarma, who says that Pre-Āhom architectural style may be named as Kamarupi style⁶ For, regional variations in the style of art and architecture is not a new thing. It is bound to be there.

The Pala rule in Assam came to an end by the end of 12th century A.D. The Taies, came to be known as Āhoms later, entered into the Brahmaputra valley in the beginning of 13th century from upper Burma. They ruled the Brahmaputra valley from the second quarter of 13th century to the second quarter of 19th century. During this period besides Āhom, the Koch, Kachari, Chutiā and Jaintiā ruled different parts of Assam. Except the Jaintiā, who ruled in the Jaintia hills of present Meghalaya, others dynasties had their architectural activities extensively.

The Āhoms first established their capital at Caraideo under the leadership of Sukapha, the first Āhom ruler in the Brahmaputra valley. But in beginning of the Āhom rule, due to political instability, they could not concentrate on the art and architectural activities.

2. **Āhom dynasty**

The architectural activities of the Āhoms can be divided into two phases. Nothing remains of the first phase now, though we get literary references to their existence. The Garakhiā temple at Nāzirā town near Sibsāgar, built by Pratāp Singha (1603-1641 A.D.) is the only extant temple of this phase. This monument representing the early phase bear Islamic trait, which became so popular thought at the country by that time⁷ So, there is nothing to be surprised about on it.

The second phase of the temple architecture began with the enthronement of Gadādhara Singha in 1681 A.D. By bringing earthen image i.e., icon of Goddess Durgā, Pratāp Singha first introduced Durgā Puja during Āhom rule in Assam and showed his allegiance to Hinduism unlike his predecessors, who though believed in secularism, yet did not worship Hindu divinity. But Gadādhara Singha by erection of Hindu temples consolidated his inclination towards Hinduism – the example of whom was followed by his successors till the end of Āhom rule. But he did maintain a link with the Tāi religion and faith. There is no doubt about the Islamic influence over the architectural form during his rule. After him Rudra Singha followed the tradition of erection of Hindu temple and during his time temple architecture reached its standardization and his followers carried his ideals and adoption of the “Nilācala type”⁸ in the construction of Jai Dol. Though Islamic influence is seen, the indigenous do-cala type gained prominence.

The temple architecture of the Āhoms reached its zenith during the period of Siva Singha. The Siva temple at Sivasagar is the tallest (40 metre high) amongst the existing historical monuments in Assam. After Siva Singha his successors, we notice secularism in architecture. But they are temples of smaller in stature and mostly work of renovation and restoration. In Guwahati or North Gauhati almost all the temples were constructed over the ruins of the temples built in the Pre- Āhom days. After Rajeswar Singha the temple architecture lost its reputation and started declining. The Chandra Sekhar temple at Umānanda and the Banerwar temple in Gauhati, which portray the declining picture of the art and architecture, were built by the Chandra Kant Singha (1811-1818 A.D.) the last Āhom ruler of Assam.

The temples of the Āhom period like the temples of the Pre- Āhom period have a Garbhagriha, Vimana, Sikhara and Mandapa, which were constructed maintaining the broad formula of Indo-Aryan in style, except for the case of Fakuwa dol of the period of Rudra Singha.

3. **Koch dynasty**

The Koch, who were very powerful enough and once conquered even Gargaon, the capital of the Āhoms, held sway in the lower part of Assam and North Bengal. During the days of the king Naranārāyana and his brother General Chilārāi, the glory of the dynasty, reached its zenith from all sides, including art and literature. Naranārāyana in 1565 A.D built the Kāmākhyā temple on hill of Nilācal hill. In fact, the temple was constructed over ruins and site

of the older pre- Āhom temple site with Koch expertise, which was followed by the Āhoms in building temples in the subsequent years. The architect of the temple put more Islamic element neglecting the Indo-Aryan style. Meghahumdum, the architect of the temple evolved a new architectural style, no where seen in India, which became popular in Āhom architecture later on. This style is named as “Nilacala type” by R.M. Nath.⁹ Kāmākhyā is the earliest dated monument in its complete form in Assam. The second and important temple was constructed at Hajo in 1583 A.D. Like Kāmākhyā temple it is also a renovation work but dedicated to Visnu (or Buddha?). It consists of garbhagriha, antarrāla and mandapa and the Vimāna above with numerous sculptures as in the case of Kāmākhyā temple. But it is smaller than Kāmākhyā temple.

4. Chutiā dynasty

The Chutiās ruled in the Sadiyā region in the Northeast corner of Assam on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The cultured tribe erected the Tāmresvari temple at Sadiya in the Dibrugarh district. This temple popularly known as Sakta Goddess Kesakhati is no more new. During the great earthquake it fell down and the Brahmaputra eroded the site completely so that we do not find any trace of this monument. However, we get a clear picture from the report of colonel “Hanny”¹⁰ and Dalton,¹¹ who visited the site in the middle of 19th century. Bloch¹² also reported it along with a photograph of the ruined temple. This simple stone temple must have lost its sikhara in some earthquake and later copper-sheets were put it. So, it was called Tāmresvari (tamrā=copper). Sarma¹³ wants to opine that the ruined temple at Malinithan was the work of the Chutiās. The architectural style of the ruined temple bear the Indo-Aryan traits and the sculptures bear the mark of the late variety of the eastern Indian medieval school, which was not known to the Chutiā artisans. Therefore, this temple erected at the foot of the hills near Likābāli bordering Arunachal Pradesh, must have been the work of the artisans from the Brahmaputra valley. Remnants of such a temple near Jonai were noticed by us few years back¹⁴. Though these temples were included in the Chutiā kingdom, they must have been built by importing artisans from the west of their kingdom. Stylistically, the ruins may belong to C.13th/14th century and not 12th century as said by Sarma.

Near Dhakuakhānā in the village of Bhāgharchuk was noticed a temple assigned to the Chutiā period by C.D. Tripathi. Sarma¹⁵ has not fully, however, supported Tripathi. The temple of Māghnowā in the North-Lakhimpur district fell in Chutiā kingdom, but Sarma has said that it cannot be conclusively proved to be the work of the Chutiā artisans, as there is no inscriptional or literary evidence. But it can be assumed to be so.

5. Jaintia & Kachari dynasties

The Kachāris who are known to be Dimasā Kachāris had their first capital at Dimāpur, and second capital at Māibong, while the last and third capital at Khāspur, in the Barak valley. In the first capital at Dimāpur in the Rājbari area, we see the remains of the brickwork with Islamic evidence. The 16th century capital (second) of the Kachāris, on the bank of the river Māhur shows a monolithic hut or rock-cut temple of the days of Harish Chandra Nārāyan (1721

A.D.). This monument resembles a typical Bengal do-cala structure. This is the solitary example of monolithic structure in Assam.

The Khāspur monuments includes two gate house and two storied Boro Duwari, which are secular monuments, and three temples dedicated to Siva, Lakshmi and Kāli (Ranacandi). All of these monuments bear the traits of do-cala Bengal type cottage. The temple at Sivatilā near Sonāi also bear the Bengal type do-cala roof. Sarma ¹⁶ says that Sivatilā was the starting point of the real Kachāri architecture formula under heavy Bengal influence, but because of the decline of the Kachāri rule, it came to an end. Recently, a Hindu brick temple of the same late medieval Islamic style has come to light near Dauki in Meghalaya. It was constructed during the Jaintia rule.

6. Secular architecture

It will be justified to mention about the secular building architecture of Assam in brick. Compared to the religious – secular buildings are quite small in number. Only three such monuments are worth mentioning. They are Rang ghar and Tolātalghar at Sibsagar and Kareng ghar at Gargāon. The Rang ghar, means pleasure house, where from the royal family members enjoyed games on important occasions. This two-storied brick building apsidal in shape bear Islamic style. The Talatal ghar is a garrison for army having secret passage at the time of emergency. It is also built in Maghal style. The Kareng ghar is a royal palace bearing South-Asiatic style. All these brick works were built by the Āhom kings.

7. Muslim architecture

Since apart from the Hindu monuments and secular buildings of the historical period, there are few Muslim monuments of antiquarian value in Assam, it will be aught to briefly notice them. It is a known fact that though the Moghal tried their best to conquer Assam, yet due to the strong resistance of the Āhoms, could not occupy Assam. But in Western Assam, through which they made constant efforts to advance towards middle Assam along the Brahmaputra, three Muslim monuments were constructed. One is Rangamati Mosque near Gauripur, datable to 15th/16th century. The other two are on the South bank of the Brahmaputra known as Pach Piran Durgah and Mirijumlar Masjid datable to 17th century. Mention must be made of the Mosque at Poa Mocca ¹⁷ (Hajo) datable to 17th century. The Dargah at Saraguri Cāpari in Sibsagar district is also taken as the Dargah of Ajan Pir, although the historicity of this legendary Eakir is yet to be conclusively proved. These monuments bear typical Muslim character.¹⁸

8. Conservation

The conservation of all these monuments has become a challenging task. The Archaeological Survey of India has declared some monuments in upper Assam as protected under the existing law. Subsequently, the Government of Assam, at the advice of the Central Government opened a Department of Archaeology with a view to protecting more monuments

in the State, as it was not possible for the Archaeological Survey of India to cope with the demand to conserve these monuments, as they require immediate protection.

The climatic condition of Assam is very humid. Compared to other parts of India, here rainfall is very high, which makes the climate wet. In this climate growth of vegetation becomes more. So, the conservator's first task is to clear the jungles from around the monuments and also from the body of the monuments. The roots of the vegetation that grows over a monument is the greatest enemy. After cutting the stem of shrubs and trees growing on monuments, chemicals, such as, Ammonium Sulfamate or other commercial tree killers available in market in different trade names 2,4 D (Sodium Salt & Ester), Di-uron and Tu-fflon are injected in the stem. After removal of lower plants, such as, algae fungi & lichen, it is preferred that the stone surface of monuments facing outer atmosphere be treated with 2-3% solution zinc silico floride or sodium penta chlorophenate in water or other commercial algicide or fungicide available in market in different trade names so as to avoid the re-occurrence of growth of lower plants. So, before the work of cement plaster and other methods of conservation are undertaken, the roots that penetrate into the body of a monument are taken out. After this major task is completed, other common restoration and conservation work starts. The silicon based technology is now gaining importance in the field of conservation of buildings and monuments. Hence, this technology is becoming more popular among the conservators in India. It may also be very useful to the conservation work in Assam.

It is attempted by the Archaeological Survey of India and also State Archaeology Department to clear the jungles of the ruined temples of the Pre-Āhom period and put the architectural members in the probable places as far as possible in some sites, such as, Bamuni Pahar, Singri, Pingalesvar, Madan Kamdev etc. Due to effects of great earthquake that occurred in the historical period, these fallen lofty temples have created heaps of ruins. But to reconstruct these completely ruined temples will be huge task which will involve both money and skilled manpower. If some other organisations, such as, UNESCO can come forward to help, it will be excellent

9. Conclusion

Thus, architectural activities in the Pre- Āhom period were done in accordance with the Indo-Aryan formula with slight variation here and there. The Āhom architecture was also formulated in the same way i.e., in the Indo-Aryan style, but it was greatly influenced by the Islamic style. The Kachāri architecture also was influenced by the Islamic style to a great extent.

The Chutiā architecture, it appears, did not get chance to undergo Islamic influence. The Koch architecture borrowed many elements from Islamic formula. Likewise, both in the Pre-Āhom and in Āhom period, influence from SouthEast Asia did fall on the architecture of Assam. But compared to the influence from the West, the influence from the East appeared to be very less because of the communication and geographical factors. Proper conservation of these monuments is urgently necessary. Chemical treatment on these edifices in this humid zone should be on priority basis. Gardening and beautification around the monuments should

also be taken up simultaneously to attract more visitors. No other buildings near the monuments should be allowed to be constructed nor encroachment be allowed near these old structures.

10. Acknowledgement

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11. References

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- [5] *Ibid*
- [6] *Ibid*
- [7] *Ibid*, p.101
- [8] *Ibid*, p. 108
- [9] *Aspects of Heritage of Assam*, 1999, P.XXXVII. Also see Sarma, *Op.cit*. p.124
- [10] Sarma, *Op.cit*, p.135
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- [14] Choudhury, R.D., “*Cultural Background of Jonal region*” *Vajapeya* (K.D. Bajpai Cmm. Vol.), Ed. A.M. Shastri & others, 1987
- [15] *Op.cit*
- [16] *Op.cit*.p.-933
- [17] Choudhury, R.D. *Archaeology in Assam*, Guwahati, p.41.
- [18] Sarma, P.C., *Architecture of Assam* is the only published work on the subject. Though N.P. Choudhury in his work ‘*Archaeology of the Central Assam*’ and R.D. Choudhury in his work *Archaeology of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam*, Delhi, 1985, have accommodated each a chapter on the architectural remains of the Pre-Āhom period. But the period of enquiry of their studies is limited Pre-Āhom period. Thus, Sarma’s work is comprehensive. But he has dealt with only the Hindu temple architecture of Assam. Why he avoided the discussion about the Muslim architecture and secular architecture, though their numbers are few, as we have noticed above, is not clear to us. Amongst the Hindu temple ruins also he left out some sites, such as, ruined temple and half rock-cut temple of Bhuvan Pahar, ruined temple at Chaigaon and ruins of Chiknajhar, the first capital of the Koch King.

The do-cala and car-cala style of architecture can also be seen in Rajput architecture, Jaipur. Even it can be seen in the monument of Lahore Fort, Shish Mahal (about

1632 A.D.). Evidently, it was Islamic style. See, wheeler, REM, Five thousand years of Pakistan, London, 1950, Pl. I frontispiece.

It is heartening to inform you the art historians that Sri Lokeswar Gogoi, Retd. Teacher, Raha Higher Secondary School, Raha, Assam, has been working on the architecture of the Āhom age with great devotion. His manuscripts on this line, the *Architecture of the Āhom Period*, “*Tai Āhom Younger Sthapatya Ghar*” (Assamese), *Tai Āhom Younger Sthapatya Maidum* (Assamese), *Tai Āhom Yougar Sthapatya dol* (Assamese) and *Tai Āhom Yougar Sthapatya Pukhuri* (Assamese) are the result of his sincere studies on the subject. When published, certainly, scholars will be benefited.