



Architectural Heritage of Northeast India: A Case Study of Ahom Temples of Assam

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Abstract: Temple architecture in Assam predominantly conforms to the Nāgara tradition, while simultaneously incorporating distinctive regional features. In elevation, most temples are characterized by the śikhara or rekhā deul form, whereas their ground plans exhibit a wide range of geometric configurations, including square, rectangular, stellate, and polygonal forms. These temples are largely associated with Śaiva, Śākta, and Vaiṣṇava modes of worship. The earliest phase of temple construction in Assam may be traced to the Varman dynasty, contemporaneous with the later Guptas in the sixth century CE. Owing to the paucity of reliable historical and epigraphic sources, however, precise information regarding many early structures remains uncertain. Subsequent periods, particularly the Śālastambha and Pāla dynasties, have yielded comparatively limited archaeological remains. A significant expansion in temple-building activity occurred under the Ahoms, who established their authority in eastern Assam in CE 1228 and exercised political dominance over the Brahmaputra valley until their capitulation to British power in CE 1826. The nearly six centuries of Ahom rule witnessed profound political and socio-cultural developments, closely linked to their gradual assimilation into Hindu religious traditions. Numerous temples were constructed across Assam during this period, notably at Biswanāth, Sibsagar, and Kāmrupa. While several of these monuments survive in situ and are protected by the Archaeological Survey of India, others have deteriorated due to neglect. Ahom temple architecture may be broadly divided into two phases: the first extending up to the reign of Sulikpha (Lorārājā) in 1681, and the second from Svargadeva Gadadhar Singha to the end of Ahom rule in 1826. The present paper examines the architectural characteristics of Ahom-period temples in Assam and related dimensions. The objective is to systematically examine the architectural characteristics, spatial organization, and stylistic features of Ahom-period temples in Assam and to situate them within their historical and cultural contexts.

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Introduction

Temple architecture in Assam represents a significant yet comparatively underexplored dimension of the region's cultural and architectural history. The temples of Assam are predominantly associated with *Śaiva*, *Śākta*, and *Vaiṣṇava* forms of worship, reflecting the gradual consolidation of Brahmanical religious traditions within the region. Although temple construction in Assam can be traced back to the period of the imperial Guptas, the reconstruction of its early architectural history remains problematic due to the scarcity of reliable historical, epigraphic, and literary sources. As a result, precise information regarding the chronology, patronage, and architectural development of many early temples remains uncertain. In Assam, temples are designated by a variety of vernacular and Sanskrit-derived terms that reflect regional usage, sectarian affiliations, and historical contexts. In Upper Assam, particularly in the eastern districts, temples are commonly referred to as *dol*, a term closely associated with late medieval structures patronised by the Ahom rulers. The term *debaloy*, derived from *devālaya*, is widely used across the region, while *thān*, denoting a sacred place, appears frequently in Vaiṣṇava textual traditions. In Lower Assam, the more pan-Indian term *mandir* predominates. Other locally employed expressions include *ghar* and *gosainghar*, which draw upon domestic architectural vocabulary, as well as *matha*, a term commonly applied to brick-built *śikhara* temples, particularly within Vaiṣṇava contexts. Certain shrines associated with Śākta traditions are identified as *pīṭha*, commemorating sites linked to the mythology of Sati (Sarma 1988: 3). Additionally, region-specific terms such as *bāri* and *sala* occur in limited geographical and cultural contexts. This diversity of nomenclature underscores the complex interaction of linguistic practice, religious tradition, and regional identity in the temple culture of Assam.

The earliest known archaeological evidence of temple architecture in Assam dates to the late Gupta period and has been discovered at Da-Parbatiyā, near the town of Tezpur (Barpujari 2003:168) in the present Sonitpur district. Excavations at the site have revealed the remains of a stone temple complex, including a stone gateway and a *Śivaliṅga*. The most significant surviving component of this structure is its elaborately carved sandstone doorway, which constitutes the oldest extant temple architectural fragment in Assam. The doorway, consisting of ornamented door-jambs surmounted by a lintel, exhibits clear stylistic affinities with early Gupta architectural and artistic traditions. Its sculptural programme includes representations of the river goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamunā with attendant figures, a *lālāṭa-bimba* depicting a flying *Garuḍa* at the centre of the lintel, as well as subsidiary decorative motifs such as dwarfs, *caitya* arches, floral scrolls, rosettes, and other ornamental designs characteristic of late Gupta art.

Following the decline of Gupta influence, comparatively few temples remains have been securely identified from the Śālastambha and Pāla dynasties, indicating a phase of limited monumental architectural activity or poor archaeological survival. A decisive transformation in the temple-building tradition of Assam occurred with the advent and establishment of the Ahoms in the early thirteenth century. From their arrival in CE 1228 (Bhuyan 1933:17) the Ahoms gradually emerged as the dominant political power in the Brahmaputra valley, and over the course of nearly six centuries, temple construction assumed a central role in their architectural and cultural expression. The large-scale temple-building activities undertaken during the Ahom period not only reflect changing patterns of royal patronage but also underscore the Ahoms' increasing

engagement with Hindu religious traditions. It is within this historical and cultural context that the present study seeks to examine the architectural features of temples constructed in Assam, with particular emphasis on the Ahom period.

2.2. Origin of the Ahoms and Temple Architecture

The Ahoms belonged to the *Shan* branch of the greater *Tai* or *Thai* ethnic family of Southeast Asia. According to traditional accounts, the *Shans* derived their name from an early homeland known as *Tyai Shan*, situated near the banks of the river Tarim to the north of Mongolia and China. From this region, they migrated into China around the fifth century CE and subsequently moved into *Mungrimungram* in *Yunnan*. Over time, they expanded across the *Hukong Valley* and established several political units, of which the most powerful was ruled by the *Mau* branch of the tribe and came to be known as *Mung Mao*. *Mungrimungram* was regarded as their original homeland, and Ahom tradition traces their lineage to Khunlai, considered the younger progenitor of the dynasty. During the reign of the third ruler of Khunlai's line, the kingdom was divided between his two sons into *Mungrimungram* proper and *Maulung* on the banks of the Sheuli River in Upper Burma, where Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley, was born (Baruah 1986:220) (Barua 1930:5-23).

The Ahom chronicles or *buranjis* further record that Prince Sukapha, bearing the title Chao lung, left Mong Mao Lung around CE 1215 following a dynastic dispute with one of his brothers (Barua 1930: 25) (Baruah 1986:220-221). Accompanied by a group of nobles, several hundred followers, Sukapha undertook a prolonged westward migration in search of new territories (Barua 1930: 34). In CE 1228, he crossed the Patkai range (Bhuyan 1949: 2) and established his first territorial unit in the Khamjang Valley near Nongjang Lake. From there, the Ahoms advanced through the Buri Dihing or Namjin, and the Brahmaputra and Dikhow valleys, finally settling at Charaideo in CE 1255, which emerged as the permanent capital of the Ahom kingdom (Dutta 1982: 65). This gradual process of migration and settlement laid the political foundations necessary for the later development of monumental architecture in the region.

With the consolidation of Ahom authority in the Brahmaputra valley, temple construction gradually assumed an important role in the articulation of royal power and religious affiliation. Ahom temple architecture represents a continuation of the North Indian *Nāgara* tradition, while simultaneously incorporating distinctive regional adaptations. In elevation, most temples are of the *śikhara* or *rekhā deul* type, though considerable variation is evident in the form of superstructures, including *rekhā deul*, *ratha*, hut shaped, barrel vaulted, bulbous, rounded, pyramidal, and polygonal types. The ground plans similarly display a wide range of geometric configurations, such as square, rectangular, stellate, polygonal, composite *caitya* type, and multi angular *ratha* forms. In several instances, the internal and external plans of the same structure differ, reflecting experimentation within a shared architectural idiom.

In terms of spatial organization, temples constructed during the Ahom period were generally single chambered, centred on the *garbhagriha*, though more complex layouts were also developed over time. These could include an *antarāla*, *mandapa*, *mukhamandapa*, or *ardhamandapa*, arranged axially, diagonally, or along cardinal directions. Multi chambered temples typically share common walls between successive chambers, except where an *antarāla* intervenes to separate the *vimana*

from the rest of the structure. Architectural layouts such as the *dvikula vimana*, exemplified by the Siva temple at Chatrakar in Gauhati, and the *pañcāyatana* plan, as seen in the Negheriting temple near Dergaon in the Sibsagar district, further illustrate the diversity of Ahom temple planning. While elevated *jagati* platforms of the Khajuraho type are not a defining feature of Assamese temples, their limited presence indicates indirect external influence on Ahom architectural practice.

With regard to the materials used in the construction of the temple structures, bricks and stones were mostly used (Sarma 1988:7). In the processing of bricks in ancient times, the clay was first kneaded and purified by removing pebbles and other impurities. The clay was then well mixed with water and trampled several times until it was soft and homogeneous. After being properly processed, the clay was moulded into bricks of the desired size and shape, such as elongated, square, and flat bricks. Prescriptive techniques also included the need to soak the clay well and mix it well before shaping it into bricks to make it strong. The processing of the surface of some bricks shows a significant aesthetic element. The floral designs, leaves, creepers, human figures, and pictures of animals were carved or impressed on the clay before firing. These designs show that bricks were not only used for their functional purposes as construction materials but also as a means of artistic expression.

The archaeological records available from various sites reveal the use of bricks of various shapes, such as triangular, square, and circular. It is also clear that during certain phases of history, large-sized bricks were manufactured. The bricks were made hard by firing them in kilns. The bricks that are made hard by firing in kilns are resistant to rain and other climatic conditions to a great extent. This ensures that the buildings made of such bricks last for a long time. Excavations and archaeological discoveries at Tezpur and Jogighopa, as well as other places, have revealed many instances of such large burnt bricks. It has also been noticed that in certain cases, some signs or symbols were engraved on the bricks before burning, while in other cases, some inscriptions were engraved on the bricks after the burning process. Such signs not only helped in the identification of the bricks but also provide important epigraphic and cultural information about the period of their creation (Handique 1959: 35).

Timber was used selectively along with brick and stone, and for specific purposes in temple architecture. The oldest surviving architectural remains in the region, at Da Parvatiyā, are in brick masonry, while most pre-Ahom temples show a liberal use of stone as the primary building material. However, in the later medieval period, the growing use of brick seems to have been due to a variety of technical reasons. Brick, being porous and pervious, was not suitable for sub-structural work in a region like Assam, where there is heavy rainfall and consequently a high sub-soil water level. When laid below ground level, brick is prone to water absorption, which would further lower its already limited bearing capacity.

The continued use of stone in certain structural components must therefore be seen not only in terms of tradition but also in terms of response to environmental conditions. One of the characteristic features of many medieval temples of the later period is the design of the Cella in the form of a well, with the floor placed considerably below the level of the surrounding ground. Such a design necessarily presented problems of water-tightness. In view of the porosity of brick, stone was preferred in these subterranean portions in order to provide for durability and resistance to seepage. It is also possible that the foundations of earlier medieval brick temples were used as bases

for later brick superstructures. In brick masonry, lime surki mortar was used as the primary binding material. In certain cases, a more complex composite material was made by mixing lime surki with other materials like *Mati Kalai* or *Vigna Sinensis*, molasses, and tamarind or *Tamarindus Indica*. This is likely to have increased adhesive properties. Mud of sticky consistency was used for less important works, although mortar was also used to fill gaps, joints, and interstices as needed. Stone masonry involved Cyclopean masonry, rubble, and finely dressed ashlar masonry. The extensive use of iron dowels and straps to hold together stone slabs is apparent in almost all existing ruins of stone temples. This reflects a high degree of understanding of structural reinforcement and stability in medieval Assamese architecture (Sarma 1988:7-8).

The evolution of Ahom temple architecture may be broadly divided into two major chronological phases shaped by changing political and cultural conditions, while at the same time reflecting a continuous growth of technical skill in the use of brick, stone, and wood. The first phase extends from the establishment of Ahom rule to the end of the reign of Sulikpha or Loraraja in 1681. The earliest recorded instance of temple construction during this period dates to 1480, when Suchenpha (Sarma 1988:100) rebuilt a temple at Nāgaśankar in the present Biswanath district, although the original structure has not survived. Another early example is attributed to Suhungmung or Dihingiya Raja, who reportedly constructed a temple on the banks of the Karatoyā River in North Bengal in 1532 to commemorate his victory over the Sultan of Bengal, though no archaeological remains of this structure are extant. A more sustained and organized phase of temple building is associated with the reign of Pratap Singha, who is credited in the Ahom chronicles with constructing temples at Negheriting, Gargaon, and Biswanāth (Sarma 1988:100). Nevertheless, the period following his reign and preceding the accession of Gadādhār Singha was marked by prolonged political instability and internal dissensions, during which eleven rulers ascended the throne within approximately four decades, resulting in a decline of architectural patronage and neglect of earlier monuments.

A renewed and more productive phase commenced with the accession of Gadādhār Singha in 1681, inaugurating an era of relative political stability that continued, despite occasional dynastic intrigues, until the termination of Ahom rule in 1826. This second phase witnessed the most mature expressions of Ahom architectural patronage and increasing standardization in planning, elevation, and constructional technique. Early structures such as the Garakhiya Dol on the bank of the Dikhow near Nazira in Sivasagar reveal comparatively simple planning and certain irregularities in execution, but from the time of Gadadhar Singha onward temple architecture assumed a more organized and refined character. Temples attributed to his reign include the Maibelar Dol at Sibsagar and the Surya Madhava Devalaya at Biswanath, while fragmentary remains of the garbhagriha of the Chandi Mandir at Biswanath and references to numerous gotadols in and around Sibsagar and Charaideo further attest to the scale of his patronage, the latter possibly representing votive or commemorative shrines with affinities to stupa like traditions of Southeast Asia. Temple construction during this mature phase was a monumental and collaborative enterprise made possible through the *paik*¹ system, which mobilized a large labour force organized into specialized *khels*² such as the Chomar (lime workers), Kanhar (bell-metal workers), Komar (blacksmiths), Kumar (potters), Khanikar (sculptors), Teli (oil pressures), Bahoi (wood workers), and Silakuti (stone cutters). Overall supervision rested with the high official *Changrung Phukan*³.

First Phase of Ahom Temple Architecture

There are several Ahom temples that fall within the first phase of temple construction during Ahom patronage, especially in the seventeenth century. This marks the developmental or formative stage of temple construction by the Ahoms, during which the structural temples were built. Although there were temples of earlier periods in Assam, it was during this period that the Ahoms started temple construction on a planned scale, experimenting with designs, roofs, ornamentation, and sculptures. Some of the most significant temples of this phase include the Biswanāth Temple, the Chaṇḍi Temple, the Garakhia Dol, and the Maghnowa (Phulbari) Temple. These temples, taken together, mark the transitional nature of the early Ahom temple architecture, during which native architectural practices were influenced by external factors, laying the groundwork for the more developed and sophisticated architectural style of the later phase, during which rulers such as Gadādhara Singha contributed to the development of the architectural style.

The Biswanāth Temple

Situated on the north bank of the Brahmaputra in the central region of the state, Biswanāth emerged as an important political and religious centre in early Assam. In ancient times, the region was ruled by Butu Pāla, son of Dharma Pāla of the Pāla dynasty. Subsequently, King Pratāp Chandra of the Jitari dynasty established Biswanāth as his capital and constructed large warehouses around the settlement to safeguard it from potential attacks. The Biswanāth temple (fig.1) is traditionally attributed to Bhaluk Pung, also known as Pratap Singh, the foster son of a Pala ruler. Much of the original superstructure of the temple has been lost, with the *sikhara* reduced to an irregular mass of bricks, although the *bada* has survived in relatively intact condition. The historical narrative of the temple becomes clearer after the expansion of Ahom authority into central Assam. Between 1615 and 1620, the temple was demolished and later reconstructed by the Ahom king Pratāp Singha through his minister Momai Tamuli Barbaruah, at the site where the ruins of the earlier structure are presently visible. Further reconstruction was undertaken by King Pramatta Singha in 1750, after which the temple came to be known as Khapona Dol. During the reign of Rajeshwar Singha, this structure collapsed and the site was submerged by the Brahmaputra. Consequently, a new temple was erected in 1774 under Ahom king Lakshmi Singha, approximately two hundred metres west of the earlier site, reusing stones and bricks from the ruined temple. The extant temple is a four *ratha* structure, notable for its terracotta decorative plaques. A significant sculpture discovered at the site depicts *Pancamukha Shiva*. The image has four visible heads and ten hands, indicating five faces in total, with one not clearly visible. The deity wears a *jatamukuta* and *rudrāksha mala* and is seated in *padmāsana* on a *padma pītha*, an unusual feature for Śaiva iconography. He holds serpents, an *ankusa*, a trident, swords, and other indistinct objects, while one hand is shown in *varada mudrā*. A third eye and crescent moon are present on the foreheads of the visible faces. The absence of *Nandi* and the syncretic elements reflecting both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava influences suggest a late medieval stylistic affiliation (Boruah: 2021).

Chaṇḍi Temple

The Chaṇḍi Temple (fig.2) is situated on a massive rock boulder along the bank of the Brahmaputra River, approximately three hundred metres south west of the ancient Biswanāth temple. In terms

of antiquity, the temple is contemporaneous with the Biswanāth temple and is identified as a *Śaktipīṭha*. According to tradition, following the death of Goddess Sati, the daughter of Prajapati Daksha and consort of Lord *Śaiva*, *Śaiva* carried her lifeless body across the world, during which her right hand and right breast are believed to have fallen at the site of the Chaṇḍi Temple. During the reign of Ahom king Pratāp Singha, the temple was known as Chaṇḍi *Deoghar*. After its destruction in 1685, the temple was rebuilt by Gadādhara Singha

The temple houses a finely carved image of *Umā-Māhesvara*, stylistically associated with the *Pāla Sena* School of Art of the Brahmaputra valley. The sculpture (fig.3) depicts *Umā* seated to the left of *Māhesvara* on a fully blossomed *padma*, with both figures embracing. *Māhesvara* is shown in *lalitāsana*, with *Umā* seated on his left lap. *Umā*'s right leg appears to be damaged, and both deities are represented wearing *paduka* on their feet. *Māhesvara* wears a *jatamukuta*, while *Umā* is adorned with a *karandamukuta*, and both figures are shown with *kuṇḍalas*. *Māhesvara* is depicted with four hands holding a *ḍamaru* and a trident, while one hand is broken and another touches *Umā*'s breast. *Umā* is shown with two hands, one resting on *Māhesvara*'s shoulder and the other holding either an *utpala* or a lotus bud. The goddess is rendered with a slender waist and prominent breasts.

Another significant sculpture discovered at the site is that of *Viṣṇu* (fig.4), positioned on the walls of the *garbhagriha* and stylistically datable to the late medieval period. The deity is depicted with four hands holding the *śankha*, *chakra*, *gada*, and *padma*, and is shown wearing a *kiritamukuta*, *caru* in each hand, and a *zappi*, the traditional royal attire of Assam. Additionally, a finely carved peacock (fig.5) motif displayed on the walls of the *garbhagriha* also belongs to the late medieval period (Boruah: 2021).

The Garakhia Dol

The district of Sibsagar derives its name from an ancient Siva temple situated on the bank of a large tank at Sivapur, the former Ahom capital known as Rangpur. Originally called *Sivapur*, the area was associated with a prominent *Śiva Dol* constructed beside the tank, and over time the name Sibsagar came to denote both the tank and the surrounding town. In the eighteenth-century CE, the region formed part of the medieval city of Rangpur, the capital of the Ahom kingdom. The temples of this region are distributed across present day Sibsagar town and its surrounding areas such as Jaisagar, Gaurisagar and Kalugaon. The Garakhia Dol (fig.6) is one of the several *dols* constructed by the Ahom rulers in the Sibsagar district and is known by multiple names including *Mai Dol*, *Māhesvara Ghar* and *Pujā Sil*. It is regarded as one of the earliest surviving temples of the Ahom period and is traditionally attributed to the reign of Swargadeo Pratāp Singha between 1603 and 1648 CE. The temple is modest in scale, measuring approximately eight metres in height, and consists of two structural units, the *vimāna* and the *mandapa*. The *vimāna* follows an octagonal plan in both its inner and outer walls, with each outer face measuring approximately 3.70 metres in length. The *mandapa* survives only up to the level of the plinth and is rectangular in plan. The doorways of both the *mandapa* and the *vimāna* are equal in span and measure 1.45 metres. The *śikhara* of the *Garakhia Dol* is shaped like an inverted cone with a circular cross section and appears proportionally smaller than the *bāda* that supports it. The outer walls of the *vimāna* are provided with deva-koṣṭhas arranged in two horizontal rows, with four niches in each row on every wall.

Within the broader context of early medieval Indo-Aryan temple architecture, octagonal plans were uncommon and did not gain widespread acceptance, a pattern that is also reflected in Assam where such forms are largely absent from surviving remains. This makes the presence of an octagonal plan in the *Garakhia Dol* particularly significant and calls for closer examination of its architectural origins during the first phase of Ahom temple construction. The decline of early medieval Hindu temple building activity following the advent of Islamic rule in North India introduced new architectural concepts, many of which influenced late medieval constructions in Assam. The octagon occupied an important place in early Indo Islamic architecture, especially during its formative phase.

It is therefore likely that Ahom temple architecture, particularly during the reign of Pratāp Singha, absorbed elements from Indo Islamic architectural traditions. In the absence of a continuous local building tradition, skilled artisans and architectural ideas may have been drawn from North India, resulting in features such as the octagonal layout of the *Garakhia Dol*. The rectangular deva-koṣṭhas on the *bāda*, designed as sunken niches and crowned with pointed arches, further reflect affinities with Islamic architectural forms. At the same time, the temple's disproportionate structure and relatively simple execution suggest the work of craftsmen whose technical proficiency and aesthetic refinement were still in a formative stage (Sarma 1988:102-3).

Maghnowa Temple

The Maghnowa Temple (fig.7) or *Dol* is situated in the Lakhimpur district of Assam, a region that formed part of ancient Pragjyotishpur during the seventh and eighth centuries. The earlier undivided Lakhimpur district included the present districts of Dhemaji, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia, which were subsequently carved out. The name Lakhimpur is traditionally associated with Lakshmi, the daughter of Monohar, who ruled over a portion of the north bank of the Brahmaputra.

Also known as the *Phulbari Devālaya*, the *Maghnowa Dol* was constructed during the reign of Ahom king Pratāp Singha, although no precise date of construction is known. Architecturally, it is an octagonal structure classified as a *Devī Dol*, and its outer walls are adorned with sixty finely executed sculptures placed within rectangular niches, along with serpentine and phallic shaped stones that continue to be worshipped by the local population.

In both planning and structural features, the *Maghnowa Temple* closely resembles the *Garakhiya Dol* at Nazira. The two temples share an identical ground plan, mandapas of equal span measuring 3.75 metres, doorways of the vimana measuring 1.45 metres in width, identical arrangements of *deva-koṣṭhas* on the outer walls and the use of bricks of similar size and quantity. Despite these similarities, the two structures differ in scale and superstructure. The Maghnowa Temple is larger in size and, unlike the conical *śikhara* of the *Garakhiya Dol*, it possesses an octagonal dome with a convex outer curvature. This feature contributes to both its greater height and its massive appearance. Additionally, while the *Garakhiya Dol* contains four niches on each wall in every horizontal row, the *Maghnowa Temple* has five niches in each row on every wall.

The *Maghnowa Temple* is distinguished by the high quality of its craftsmanship and demonstrates a harmonious balance between structural design and decorative treatment. At the *baranda* level, a horizontal band of fully blossomed four petalled lotus motifs executed in high relief and bordered by thick lines enhances the visual appeal of the structure. This decorative band,

in combination with the double tiered *deva-koṣṭhas* containing images of deities and semi divine figures, imparts a richness of ornamentation that is unmatched among Ahom temples. The well-balanced proportions of the architectural components reflect the skill of the architect, while the precision of execution reveals the experience and competence of the masons. The *deva-koṣṭhas* and the decorative *baranda* further testify to the refined aesthetic sensibility of the designer, and the stone sculptures and terracotta elements indicate a significant development of sculptural art during this period. Following the reign of Pratāp Singha, Ahom architectural activity declined due to internal conflicts and political instability. A renewed phase of temple construction began only after the accession of Gadādhara Singha between 1681 and 1696, marking the most accomplished phase of Ahom architecture. Gadādhara Singha is regarded as the progenitor of a mature architectural tradition, as temple construction prior to his reign lacked a clearly defined typology or continuity. The building initiatives undertaken during his rule established enduring models that influenced subsequent architectural developments under the Ahom dynasty (Sarma 1988: 102-5).

Thus, the temples of the first phase of Ahom architecture as a whole mark an important phase in the evolution of temple-building in Assam. Through these temples, one can see the beginning of a certain structural and stylistic unity under Ahom patronage. Though characterized by experimentation and sometimes structural incongruity, these temples bear testimony to the establishment of new ideas in architecture and the mastery of various influences, and the growing expertise of the craftsmen. They thus represent the base upon which the later and more accomplished phase of Ahom temple architecture was erected.

Second Phase of Ahom Temple Architecture

The second phase of Ahom temple architecture marks the period of maturity and consolidation in the architectural history of the Ahom kingdom. This phase, which emerged as a result of the active patronage of Swargadeo Gadādhara Singha, marked the resurgence of temple construction after a period of political instability and neglect. In contrast to the exploratory nature of the first phase, the second phase of Ahom temple architecture shows a greater degree of structural confidence, proportion, and a cohesive decorative scheme. Some of the most important examples of this phase include the Thoura Dol, the Umānanda Temple, the Fakuwa Dol of Rangpur, the Sibsagar group of temples, and the Negheriting Shiva Doula. Taken together, these temples indicate a certain level of technical advancement, stylistic standardization, and syncretization of different religious traditions under one architectural tradition. This phase, therefore, marks the most advanced and mature phase of Ahom temple architecture.

Thoura Dol

The *Thoura Dol* (fig.8), located in the Sibsagar district of Assam, is one of the temples belonging to the second phase of Ahom temple architecture. It was constructed between 1683 and 1685 during the reign of Ahom Swargadeo Gadādhara Singha by Alon Burha Dehingia Borbarua. Along with the Siva temple at Umānanda near Guwahati, it is one of only two surviving structures from the period of Gadādhara Singha that remain intact and are available for architectural study. Architecturally, the *Thoura Dol* is a small but significant structure, as it represents one of the earliest extant examples of the second phase of Ahom architecture. The temple follows a square plan, and the principal

structure, the *garbhagriha*, is covered by a curved roof composed of four triangular segments, corresponding to the *chār chāla* style. The exterior walls are modestly adorned with plain floral motifs, reflecting the restrained decorative approach characteristic of early constructions of this phase (Sarma 1988:106-7).

The Umānanda Temple

The Umānanda Temple (fig.9), situated in the Kāmarupa district of Assam, occupies a small hilly island in the Brahmaputra River at Guwahati, recognized as the smallest inhabited riverine island in the world. It is the second best-preserved example of temple construction under Swargadeo Gadādhara Singha. Erected in 1694 CE by Bar Phukan Garhganya Handique under royal patronage, the temple stands on the hill known as *Bhasmācala*.

Architectural and textual evidence indicates that the Ahom-period temple was built over the remains of an earlier medieval stone temple, possibly preserving its cruciform ground plan. The site is cited as a prominent pilgrimage centre in both the tenth-century *Kālikā Purāṇa* (Khandelwal 2023:809), and the sixteenth-century *Yoginī Tantra* (Mishra 1950:276), reflecting its enduring religious significance. The rocky walls are richly adorned with sculptures of *Surya*, *Śiva*, *Ganesha*, and *Devi*, alongside representations of *Viṣṇu* and his ten incarnations in the surrounding precincts.

The temple follows a *pancaratha* plan with an elevation resembling the North Indian *rekḥā deul*, though it lacks *angaśikharas*. The brick masonry exhibits uneven alignment, indicative of the relatively early and formative stage of the second phase of Ahom architecture. The most notable feature is the *mastaka*, composed of three elements: a lower inverted drum with horizontal spokes, a slightly flattened hemispherical middle section also bearing spokes, and an elongated pear-shaped finial with vertical recesses. This *mastaka* is a unique early innovation in Ahom architecture and later developed into more elaborate decorative finials analogous to certain *chatras* atop Buddhist stupas in India and beyond.

According to *Yoginī Tantra* (Mishra 1950:276), Shiva resided here as *Bhayananda*. The *Kālikā Purāṇa* (Baruah & Murthy 1965:50), narrates that at the inception of creation, *Shiva* sprinkled sacred ashes at the site and imparted knowledge to *Parvati*. Another tradition recounts that *Kāmadeva* was reduced to ashes by *Śiva*'s wrath while disturbing his meditation, giving the hill its name, *Bhasmācala* (Sarma 1988:107-8).

The Fakuwa Dol of Rangpur

The *Fakuwa Dol* (fig.10), located in the Sibsagar District, is one of the most remarkable architectural achievements of Rudra Singha. Constructed between 1703 and 1704 CE at the new Ahom capital of Rangpur, it was built in memory of his mother, Queen Joymati Kunwari. The dol does not conform to traditional Indo-Aryan architectural types and is locally believed to function as a *Maidam*, or burial mound, for Queen Joymati. The temple is associated with *Viṣṇu* worship and is particularly significant to the Neo-Vaishnavite community, being used primarily during the *Deul Utsava*, the most elaborate festival of the sect.

The structure comprises a terraced octagonal plinth with a temple atop, though only portions of the walls survive today. Eight *angaśikharas* were originally positioned at the corners of the lowest

terrace. Distortion and decay prevent a full assessment of the original architectural details, though similar structures, excluding *angaśikharas*, appear at Hajo, Barpeta, and Mahdhowa, indicating a standardized form for certain ritual purposes.

While Assamese architecture was broadly influenced by Indo-Aryan styles, the *Fakuwa Dol* exhibits features reminiscent of Southeast Asian monuments such as *Borobudur* in East Java and the *Mingalazedi Pagodā* in Burma, suggesting cross-cultural influences. The octagonal plan is unique to the Ahoms and has no precedent in earlier Assamese structures, while its overall form has been likened to the pyramids of Egypt, emphasizing its singularity within the regional architectural tradition (Sarma 1988:111-14).

The Sibsagar Group of Temples

The Sibsagar group of temples in Sibsagar District, Assam, represents one of the most ambitious temple-building efforts by an Ahom monarch. Constructed by Śiva Singha between 1731 and 1734, the complex comprises three temples: the *Viṣṇu Dol* (fig.11), *Devi Dol* (fig.12), and *Siva Dol* (fig.13), also known as *Muktināth Temple*. The *Viṣṇu Dol* resembles the *Viṣṇu Dol* of Gaurisagar in ground plan but surpasses it in external decoration. Its most notable feature is the multi-tiered *chatra mastaka*, which later became a standard in Ahom temple architecture. The dome features a honeycomb pattern with six-petaled floral motifs embossed along horizontal lines, echoing the *Keshavnarayana Temple* at Jaisagar.

The *Devi Dol* closely mirrors the *Viṣṇu Dol* in plan and is modelled after the *Devi Dol* of Gaurisagar but demonstrates superior execution. Its proportions and decorative balance rank it among the finest *Devi Dols* in Assam. The site also contains evidence of a large *mandapa*, now reduced to its brick plinth, measuring 25 by 6.5 metres, with holes indicating timber posts for a thatched roof, suggesting an open *Nāmghar*. The *Śikhara* departs from the conventional *āmalaka*, instead featuring a tier of gold-plated *kalashas* on a solid circular base. Sculptural panels with niches adorn the outer walls, each niche housing an image, creating an elaborate decorative scheme.

The *Śiva Dol*, the centrepiece of the complex, rises roughly 40 metres and is among the tallest *Śiva* temples in India. Built of stone to the springing level and brick above, it follows a *rekhā-deul* outline with four *angaśikharas*. Its four-tiered *mastaka* resembles the Buddhist *chatra* and is capped with a brass-gilded cone. The *mukhamandapa* has a square layout with a *do-chāla* roof and *amalaka*. The temple plan comprises a *garbhagriha*, *antarāla*, and *mandapa*, with an additional open *mandapa* in front, now replaced by a modern corrugated iron sheet structure. The *antarāla* features a *do-chāla* roof while the *mandapa* has pyramidal roofing with curvilinear cornices akin to late medieval Bengali architecture.

A distinctive feature of the Sibsagar temples is their unconventional *ratha* projection. Entire sides of the walls are projected for the first projection, followed by shorter projections, resulting in asymmetrical *ratha* counts along cardinal points. This method produces variations such as *ekaratha-triratha* or *triratha-pancaratha* configurations. Śiva Singha's successor, Pramatta Singha (1744–1751), focused more on secular buildings but constructed the Ridongiya Temple, an octagonal structure with a polygonal *śikhara* and *angaśikharas*. Despite weak mortar, it has endured Assam's heavy rains and frequent earthquakes (Sarma 1988:116-18).

The Negriting Temple

The Negriting Temple (fig. 14) located on Negriting Hillock near Assam Trunk Road in Sibsagar District, was constructed by Ahom king Rajeshvara Singha. Built of stone and brick, the temple follows the *panchayatana* style, featuring a central shrine dedicated to Lord Śiva in *linga* form, with four subsidiary shrines at the corners devoted to *Devī*, *Ganesh*, *Surya*, and *Viṣṇu*. This arrangement represents a rare achievement in Ahom architecture, integrating *Śaiva*, *Vaiṣṇava*, *Śākta*, *Saura*, and *Gāṇapatya* cults within a single complex.

The main shrine is octagonal, with offset projections between the *bhadrās* carried up to the *mastaka* and continued as *angāsikharas* each surmounted by successive *āmalakas*. The subsidiary shrines follow a similar pattern, though projections are absent in the *Viṣṇu* and *Surya* shrines. The *mukhamandapas* of both the central and subsidiary shrines are rectangular halls with vaulted roofs. The *garbhagriha* houses a large *Bana-Linga* set on a flat *vedī* carved with numerous *Śiva lingas*, while the exterior features niches containing exquisitely sculpted figures. Historically, the temple possessed extensive landed property and employed *Brahmanas*, musicians, dancers, and craftsmen, but much of this was destroyed during the 19th century Burmese invasions, leaving only a few acres of land associated with the temple today (Sarma 1988:120-21). Thus, the temples of the second phase of Ahom architecture as a whole represent the culmination point in the development of temple construction under the patronage of the Ahoms. From the efforts of Gadadhar Singha to the peak reached under the patronage of Siva Singha and Rajeshwar Singha, this phase represents maturity in terms of construction, ornamentation, and definition. The temples of this phase mark a technical sophistication, harmony of proportions, and a deliberate fusion of local and alien traditions. They mark the culmination point of Ahom architectural development before its eventual decline in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Conclusion

The architectural activity of the Ahom dynasty saw a considerable downturn after the full-blown second phase of temple building, especially after the reign of Rajeshwar Singha. The religious intolerance, which was identified with Siva Singha, in combination with the strong Śākta affiliation of Queen Phuleshwari Devi, distanced some sections of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavites, thus leading to the Moamoria rebellion. This turmoil continued during the reign of Lakshmi Singha and intermittently until the time of Kamaleswar Singha. The prolonged period of conflict, which lasted for almost three decades, had caused considerable weakening of the political and economic base of the kingdom.

During the era that followed the second phase, there was a limited number of temples erected, and these were indicative of a certain deterioration in quality and artistic skill. The construction of temples like the Na-Pukhuri Shiva Doul, built in 1773 during the reign of Lakshmi Singha, and the subsequent repairs or reconstruction of temples like the Negheriting Shiva Doul indicate the continued activity of temple construction, albeit on a smaller scale. These temples, although of great importance, lack the grandeur and skill of the previous mature stage.

However, despite this fall, the Ahom temple architecture as a whole is a remarkable achievement of the cultural and artistic prowess of the dynasty. The temples are a result of a blend of local skills with influences from other Indo-Aryan traditions. The temples served not only as places

of worship but also as a representation of the imperial power and culture. The Ahom temples as a whole are a legacy of architectural brilliance that provides an invaluable perspective into the historical development and artistic sensibilities of the Ahom state.

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Fig. 1: Biswanath temple (Source: archaeology.assam.gov.in).



Fig. 2: Chañdi temple (Source: IGNCA)



Fig. 3: Sculpture of Uma–Māhesvara
(Source: A. S. Boruah, 2021)



Fig. 4: Sculpture of Viṣṇu
(Source: A. S. Boruah, 2021)



Fig.5: Sculpture of peacock (Source: A. S. Boruah, 2021)



Fig. 6: Garakhia Dol (Source: archaeology.assam.gov.in)



Fig. 7: Maghnowa Temple (Source: archaeology.assam.gov.in)



Fig. 8: Thaura Dol (Source: archaeology.assam.gov.in)



Fig. 9: Umānand Temple (Source: archaeology.assam.gov.in)



Fig. 10: Fakuwa Dol (Source: archaeology.assam.gov.in)



Fig. 11: Viṣṇu Dol, Sibasagar (Source: ASI, Guwahati Circle)



Fig. 12: Devi Dol, Sibasagar (Source: ASI, Guwahati Circle)



Fig. 13: Śiva Dol, Sibasagar (Source: ASI, Guwahati Circle)



Fig. 14: Negriting Temple (Source: ASI, Guwahati Circle)

Notes

1. A *Paik* was a male subject of the Ahom state bound by hereditary obligation to render labor or military service to the king. In exchange, each *paik* received a portion of cultivable land (usually two *puras*). The *paik* system formed the backbone of Ahom administration, linking governance, economy, and defense through a community-based labor organization.
2. A *khel* was the basic socio-economic and administrative unit under the Ahom kingdom. It functioned both as a land and labor division, consisting of groups of *paiks* (peasants or laborers) assigned specific economic or occupational duties such as cultivation, crafts, or military service. Each *khel* had defined territorial boundaries and contributed revenue or service to the state.
3. Chief engineer or superintendent of public works under the Ahom administration.

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