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TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE IN SIBSAGAR, ASSAM

(With special reference to the period of Siva Singha)

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Abstract:

The North-eastern state of India, with numerous temples and monuments from historical to the modern age stand witness to the great cultural heritage of the state. The art activities of Sibsagar during the Ahom period are mostly religious found on temple walls in nature although one also finds them on secular structures like pavilions, palaces and stone bridges. The Ahom kings followed a particular plan while building temples. They excavated a number of tanks and on its banks were constructed the temples which enhanced its beauty and grandeur. The art activities of the late medieval period were a deviation from the earlier traditions that existed in Assam. The downfall of the Pala kingdom in the beginning of the thirteenth century created a vacuum in the art activities of the region. Further, lack of patronage and the political changes that the region was witnessing created a hiatus in construction. The Tai-Ahoms had to conquer and consolidate their rule in the Brahmaputra valley and subdue external aggression from the Turko-Afghans and the Mughals. Religiously too, it was only towards the seventeenth century that Sutamla or Jayadhvaj Singha formally accepted the Hindu fold. Thus, construction in Assam suffered during these long years because of the political turmoil. When building activities was started under the rule of Pratap Singha (1603-1641 CE), the artisans and craftsmen were bought from Koch Bihar. In the absence of a traditional masonry-craft at that time, masons from the west skilled in the erection of Islamic buildings were engaged. The Garakhiya Dol constructed under the aegis of Pratap Singha was built on a simple plan with an Islamic influence. It has similar features with the Maghnowa Dol of the Lakhimpur district with a curvilinear *sikhara*. Construction activities especially those of the temples rapidly grew under the patronage of Siva Singha and his queens. This study is an attempt to study the architecture of the temples built under his reign and to trace the innovations that was initiated in them.

IndexTerms- Cultural, deviation, patronage, masonry, curvilinear

Sibsagar or erstwhile Rangpur was the capital of the Ahom rulers from 1699 to 1788 CE. The Ahoms were a part of the larger Tai- Ahom branch who established a state in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam and ruled for six hundred years. The name Sibsagar, alludes to the tank known as the Sibsagar *pukhuri* or the Bar *pukhuri* built in the capital. On its bank are three temple or Dols dedicated to Siva, Vishnu and Devi built during the reign of Siva Singha under the orders of his queen Ambika Kunwori.

Siva Singha (1714-1744 CE), the son and successor of Rudra Singha (1696-1714 CE), is regarded as one of the most potent phases of temple building in Assam. He had taken initiation under Krishnaram Nyayavagish, a learned Brahmana who was bought from Navadwip in West Bengal and was appointed as the chief priest of Kamakhya temple in Guwahati. Soon after, he abdicated the throne in favour of his queen, Phuleswari Konwori in 1722 CE. foreseeing the astrological prediction from his preceptor. The Konwori took the title of Bar-raja or the regent and changed her

name to Pramatheswari, thereby taking the command of the kingdom in her hands. She was a great devotee of the Devi and a strict follower of Saktism. Two of the grand projects at Gaurisagar, Sibsagar and Kalugaon not only produced the largest edifices of the period, but infused a rare discipline in the Ahom architecture. His predecessors had already experimented with all conceivable geometric patterns, he proceeded to undertake large complexes.

Under her orders, between 1715-1717 C.E. three temples and a tank of enormous dimensions were built in Gaurisagar. The extensive Gaurisagar tank was dug and on its north bank were constructed three temples, widely separated from one another with independent boundary walls, but all aligned in a similar vein. The architect selected three different models for the three temples which are devoted to Devi, Siva, and Vishnu respectively. Against the practice of placing the temples in an irregular pattern which was undertaken during the time of Rudra Singha, who built several structures in Rangpur. Siva Singha adopted a planned technique of placing the temples in a specific direction.

The Devi Dol is a temple of the *nagara* type having a *pancharatha vastupurushamandala*, partly brick built and partly stone built. It stands on an octagonal plinth¹ and is dedicated to Durga Mahishamardini (Fig.1) It has an *antarala* and a spacious *mandapa* of the Assamese *do-chala* type. There are three low offset projections on the plinth which are carried over the body of the *sikhara* up to the level of the *mastaka* which consists of a series of *amalakas*. The *bada* has three tier horizontal mouldings at the level of the plinth and cornice. The *bada* is constructed of stone and is beautifully adorned with various representations of deities. The *bhadra* projections of the temple are also carried beyond the cornice level in the form of *angasikharas* which are surmounted by *amalakas*, like the main *sikhara*, on all four sides. The main *sikhara* however, it is a gold-plated *kalasa* in decreasing sizes which is placed on a solid circular base made of bricks¹. All the *mandapas* attached to the temples of Gaurisagar are of this type. Of the three temples, this is the largest temple, the finest and the best preserved.



Fig.1



Fig.2

For the Siva and Vishnu Dols, which are brick-built temples, *Nilachala* type-circular *sikhara* was chosen. The Vishnu temple in the extreme west is an imitation of the Jai Dol of Jaisagar, though it lacks the stature and grace of the former.

The Siva temple occupies the central position in the Gaurisagar group of temples and has vertical ridges on its *Nilachala* type *sikhara*. It has two prominent size *angasikharikas* on the *bhadra* projections above the cornice level. The *sikhara* is decorated with vertical ribs in plaster up to the *mastaka* which contains successive *amalakas*. It is built entirely of bricks rises on an octagonal plinth (Fig.2). It has four sets of *bhadra* projections which are carried right up to the cornice level. The *bada* has three tier mouldings at the plinth and the cornice level. The *bada* has niches accommodating iconographic representations of different deities.

The Vishnu Dol also stands on an octagonal plinth having offset projections and horizontal mouldings at the plinth and cornice levels (Fig.3). There are eight turrets above the *bhadra* projections which are currently in a very dilapidated condition. The *sikhara* is of the *Nilachala* type having decorated vertical and horizontal ridges in plaster. This resulted in a criss-cross pattern all over the body of the *sikhara*. However, unlike the other temples, the *sikhara* is surmounted only by a single *stupika*.

¹ The Ahoms had the notion that the universe is octagonal in shape and hence it was represented in their building, coins, inscriptions etc.



Fig.3

The next construction projects that were undertaken during this reign were that of the three temples at Sibsagar. After the death of Queen Phuleswari, her sister Ambika Kunwori succeeded as the chief Queen and under her direction the Sibsagar tank was dug covering an area of 257 acres. In this plan, the Siva Dol was kept in the centre and was flanked by two other temples Devi Dol and the Vishnu Dol. Unlike the Gaurisagar group, the order of the Vishnu and Devi temples were interchanged. The Siva Dol was called the Muktinath temple dedicated to Muktinath Siva (Fig.4). The temple stands on an octagonal plinth having projections between the *bhadras*, each being carried over the body of the *sikhara*. The *bhadra* projections are carried over along the *sikhara* in the form of *angasikharas*. The main *sikhara* has a number of *angasikhara* called as *Uramanjari*². The circular *sikhara* is ribbed and is typically a *ratha* type in construction. The *angasikharas* are placed at each *rahapaga* locally called as the *Kordoi siria* or ribbed like a star fruit. Like the two other temples of this complex, the *bada* of this temple is built of ashlar stone masonry. The *mastaka* of the *sikhara* is adorned with a golden *kalasa* and those of the *angasikharas* and *mandapa* are surmounted by successive *amalakas* as in the main *sikhara*. Another important feature of this temple is its *mukhamandapa* which is square in plan with a *do-chala* roof and is again adorned by an amalaka. This architectural feature of the *mukhamandapa* is one of its kind among the monuments constructed during the Ahom rule. The golden dome however was replaced in 1954 CE as the earthquake of 1950 CE damaged the ornamental stone work of the temple and the masonry super-structure stood imbalanced. On the old rectangular plinth, a permanent tin shed was attached which is presently used as the *sabhamandapa* of the Siva Dol.

The Vishnu Dol of this group is similar in style to the Keshavnarayana Temple of Jaisagar built during the reign of Rudra Singha, the exemplar of the Ahom brick-built temples. Its domical *sikhara* is similarly decorated in honey comb style with floral motifs embossed on the horizontal lines (Fig.5). These motifs with six petals are within a circular ring.

The Devi Dol of Sibsagar has followed the same vertical ridge for its dome as was done in the Siva temple of Gaurisagar, but its exterior layout is proportionate owing to its execution (Fig.6). Architecturally, as well there are similarities between the Vishnu Dol and the Devi Dol in dimensions and height, except for their *sikhara* decorations in plaster, built of stone up to the level of the *bada*. It is surmounted by a brick-built dome as the *sikhara* having a succession of *amalakas*. In both the case, the plinth has four off-set projections between the *bhadras* which are carried

up to the level of the cornice only. The *bada* has three tier horizontal moulding at the plinth as well as at the cornice level. Over the *bhadra* projections stands eight turrets on the four sides. The *mukhamandapas* are of the usual type, rectangular in plan with vaulted roofs.



Fig.4



Fig.5

During this period, two other Dols were built by Siva Singha's brother-in-law, Harinath Barpatra Gohain at Kalugaon, a minister of the cabinet rank along with the Burhagohain, Bar Barua and Bar Phukan, collectively known as the Patra Mantri. He originally hailed from Chinatali but migrated to Kalugaon and established his estate in this area after excavating the tank Lakshi sagar *Pukhuri*(tank). On its bank were built the Jagadhatri Dol or the Barpatra Dol as it was built under the supervision of the Barpatra and a Vishnu Dol.



Fig.6

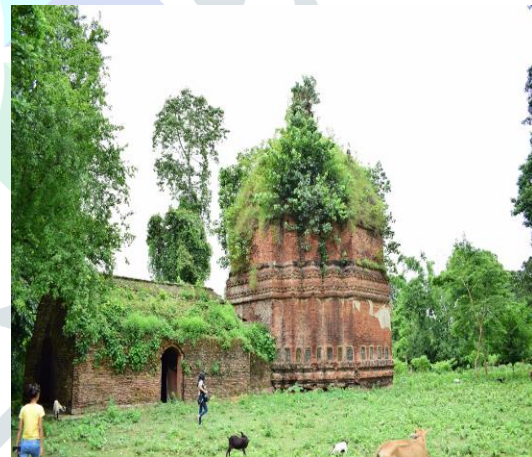


Fig.7



Fig.8

The Jagadhatri Dol is dedicated to Goddess Jagadhatri who is considered to be a form of Devi Durga and her worship gained prominence under Siva Singha (Fig.7) also called as the Barpatra Dol. The Jagadhatri Dol is larger than the Vishnu Dol of Kalugaon. The dome of the temple is intact; the *sikhara* and *angasikharas* rise to a considerable height with an imposing *amalaka*. However, its design could not be detected due to the outgrown foliage. The *bada* of the temple has three horizontal mouldings at the level of the plinth. There are five *bhadra* projections rising up to the cornice level. There are semi-circle geometrical designs in bands surrounding the temple wall in horizontal lines. The *mandapa* of the temple is a spacious *do-chala* type, the roof of which is in a dismantled condition covered with outgrowing vegetation. There are arched entrances on the north, east and west sides which leads to the *garbhagriha*.

The Vishnu Dol, on the other hand is a small temple which is plastered and built of stones and bricks with a dome shaped *sikhara* with an uncommon projection style (Fig.8). There are horizontal designs around the entire dome which rises up to the *mastaka*, surmounted by an *amalaka*. Further the *sikhara* is adorned by eight turrets, two of them being extremely near each other. The outward projections are a replica of the Siva Dol of Gaurisagar, in which the *bada* has three tier projection at the plinth and the cornice levels. Set on an octagonal plinth it has three off-sets in the *bhadra* projections which are carried up to the cornice level. The *mandapa* is a *do-chala* type with an arched opening. The walls have niches in which numerous sculptures depicting deities and scenes from the Epics and Puranas are engraved.

Siva Singha's constructions were carried out in complexes and in a disciplined way unlike that of his predecessors. Each temple was surrounded by a masonry wall providing it with huge acres for large gardens. The *Chang-rung Phukanor Buranji* mentions that the Bor-Dol, the Gosain-Dol and the Devi Dol on the banks of Sibsagar were 831/2, 40 and 40 cubits respectively. The area covered by these temples with masonry walls was about 41/2, 3, 21/2 acres respectively³. Another change that he introduced was the age old *ratha* style in which, the plan gave rise to odd numbers of salient diagonal points resulting in *triratha*, *pancharatha*, *saptaratha* etc. but the monuments of Sibsagar show salient of even numbers. However, the modifications were introduced defied the rules of the *Silpasastras* but it was a ground-breaking style which was an inspiration for the next few constructions.

The period succeeding Siva Singha saw dwindling building activities not only in number but in the quality of productions as well. It marked the beginning of the upsurge from the Moamoriyas, the devotees of the Mayamara Satra. Hitherto, the Ahom monarchs had observed a policy of toleration in religious matters. But Queen Phuleswari who was a devout Sakta forced the Vaishnavites to bow their heads before the Goddess. This along with other insults which were heaped upon the Moamorias and were unleashed on the Mayamara Mahanta transformed them into a group of rebels during the reigns of Rajeswar Singha (1751-52 CE) and Lakshmi Singha (1769-1780 CE) and resulted in unrest till the reign of Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1811CE). The Moamoria rebellion lasted for more than three decades and shook the core of the Ahom kingdom. It resulted in a chaos in which the resources of the Ahom government were depleted, effecting the construction projects. During this period of civil war the temples under the Ahoms became small, without much grandeur and lacking architectural precision.

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