

# **The Tamreswari Temple: A Historical Analysis of a Sutiya Religious Center in Medieval Assam**

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## **Abstract:**

The Tamreswari Temple, located in Sadiya, Assam, was a pivotal religious and cultural institution of the Sutiya (Chutiya) Kingdom (13th–16th centuries). Dedicated to the tribal deity Dikkaravasini (also known as Tamresvari or Kechai-khati), the temple exemplified the syncretic blend of indigenous Tibeto-Burman practices and Hindu influences in medieval Northeast India. This article reconstructs the temple's history, exploring its role as a spiritual and political hub, its architectural significance, and its decline following the Ahom annexation of Sadiya in 1524. Using a multidisciplinary methodology that integrates Ahom Buranjis, archaeological findings, and ethnographic data from the Deori community, the study situates the temple within the broader socio-religious landscape of the Sutiya Kingdom. The analysis highlights the temple's enduring legacy in Assam's cultural memory, despite its physical destruction, and underscores its importance for understanding pre-colonial religious dynamics in Northeast India.

**Keywords:** Tamreswari Temple, Sutiya Kingdom, Sadiya, Dikkaravasini.

## **Introduction:**

The Tamreswari Temple, situated in Sadiya, Assam, was a central religious site of the Sutiya Kingdom, a medieval Tibeto-Burman state that thrived from the 13th to the 16th century in present-day Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Dedicated to Dikkaravasini, a tribal goddess revered as Tamresvari or Kechai-khati, the temple served as a nexus of spiritual, political, and cultural life for the people of Sutiya Kingdom. Its destruction following the Ahom conquest in 1524 marked the end of Sutiya sovereignty, yet its legacy persists in the rituals of the Deori priesthood and regional folklore. Despite its historical significance, the temple has received limited scholarly attention, partly due to the scarcity of surviving primary sources and the site's physical obliteration.

## **Aims of the Study:**

This article aims to;

1. Reconstruct the history of the Tamreswari Temple
2. Examining its role in the Sutiya Kingdom
3. Its architectural and religious features
4. Its socio-political context.

## **Research Methodology;**

The study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to overcome the paucity of direct evidence on the Tamres

wari Temple. The methodology integrates three primary sources of data namely Texts like Buranjis, Archaeological evidences and Ethnographic data of Deori community that have been documented through various ethnographic studies. Secondary Sources for the study are works by historians such as Edward Gait (1905), S.K. Bhuyan (1968), and regional scholars like L.N. Dutta (1985) offer interpretations of Sutiya history and the temple's role. These are critically evaluated for bias and cross-referenced with primary data.

The study employs qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes in textual and ethnographic sources, such as syncretism, political patronage, and cultural continuity. Archaeological data are interpreted through comparative typologies of medieval Northeast Indian architecture. The methodology acknowledges limitations, including the destruction of the temple site and the Ahom bias in Buranjis, which are mitigated by cross-referencing multiple sources.

### Discussion:

Medieval Assam was characterized by the rise and fall of various dynasties. The political landscape of Assam was marked by warfare, alliance and cultural exchanges. The Sutiya Kingdom, established around 1187 CE by Birpal, emerged in the vacuum left by the decline of the Kamarupa Kingdom. Centered in Sadiya (ancient Sadhyapuri), the kingdom spanned present-day Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, and parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Under rulers like Gaurinarayan (Ratnadhvajpal, c. 1224) and Nityapal (c. 1524), the Sutiya developed a sophisticated polity, marked by advanced agriculture, trade networks along the Brahmaputra, and military innovations, including the use of firearms (Barua, 1994). The firearms must have been primitive gun-powder based artillery because more advanced firearms such as matchlock muskets was notably used by Babur at the First Battle of Panipath (1526).

Religiously, the Sutiya practiced a blend of indigenous Tibeto-Burman rituals and Hindu traditions. The Tamreswari Temple, dedicated to Dikkaravasini, was the kingdom's primary religious institution, presided over by the Deori priesthood. The temple's prominence reflected the Sutiya's matrilineal influences, as the goddess was revered as a protector of the land and its people (Dutta, 1985). The introduction of Vaishnavism in the 14th century, likely through Brahmin settlers, further enriched the kingdom's religious landscape, positioning the temple as a site of syncretism.

### The Tamreswari Temple: Origins and Function

The origins of the Tamreswari Temple are obscure, but historical accounts suggest it predated the Sutiya Kingdom, possibly as a tribal shrine that was formalized under royal patronage (Gait, 1905). Located in Sadiya, near the Brahmaputra-Lohit confluence, the temple was strategically positioned to serve both spiritual and political purposes. As the primary worship site of Dikkaravasini, it attracted devotees from the Chutiya and neighboring tribes, reinforcing the kingdom's cultural unity.

The temple functioned as:

1. **A Religious Centre:** It was the focal point for rituals involving animal sacrifices and tantric practices, presided over by Deori priests (Deori, 2002). The goddess, known as Kechai-khati ("she who eats raw"), was propitiated for prosperity and protection.
2. **A Political Symbol:** Sutiya kings, such as Gaurinarayan, patronized the temple to legitimize their rule, aligning themselves with divine authority (Bhuyan, 1968).

3. **A Cultural Hub:** The temple facilitated interactions between tribal and Hindu communities, evidenced by the coexistence of Vaishnavite and tantric elements.

#### Architectural Features:

No physical remains of the Tamreswari Temple survive, likely due to its destruction by the Ahoms and subsequent environmental factors. However, archaeological findings in Sadiya, including burnt-brick structures, suggest it followed the Sutiya architectural style seen at Bhismanagar Fort (Choudhary, 1987). Comparative analysis indicates:

1. **Material:** Burnt bricks, typical of Sutiya construction, with possible stone or wooden elements for the sanctum.
2. **Design:** A rectangular or square layout, common in Northeast Indian temples, with a raised platform for rituals, as inferred from Deori oral accounts (Deori, 2002).
3. **Orientation:** Likely facing east, aligning with Hindu temple conventions, though tribal influences may have prioritized river proximity.

The temple's copper-plated roof, referenced in its name (Tamreswari, from "tamra" or copper), suggests royal investment and aesthetic sophistication. Its location near the Brahmaputra made it a landmark for trade and pilgrimage routes.

#### Syncretism and Religious Practices:

The Tamreswari Temple epitomized the Sutiya Kingdom's religious syncretism. Dikkaravasini, a tribal deity, was worshipped through indigenous rituals, including sacrifices, which coexisted with Hindu practices introduced by Brahmins in the 14th century (Dutta, 1985). The Deori priesthood, drawn from the Chutiya community, mediated this synthesis, blending tantric and Vaishnavite elements. For example, the goddess was equated with Durga in some contexts, reflecting Hindu assimilation (Dutta, 2002).

Ethnographic data indicate that rituals involved elaborate ceremonies, with the Deoris maintaining sacred fires and chanting mantras, practices that persist in modern Deori worship (Deori, 2002). The temple's role as a tantric center is further suggested by its association with Kechai-khati, a name implying esoteric practices. This syncretism not only unified diverse communities but also distinguished the Sutiya religious identity from the Ahom's Tai-Shan traditions.

#### Decline and Legacy

The Tamreswari Temple's decline began with the Ahom conquest of Sadiya in 1524. Under King Suhungmung, the Ahoms defeated the Sutiya ruler Nityapal and annexed the kingdom, reportedly desecrating the temple to symbolize their dominance (Gait, 1905). The '*Assam Buranji*' notes that the temple was dismantled, and its priests were dispersed, though some Deoris continued clandestine worship (Bhuyan, 1968). The site's vulnerability to Brahmaputra floods likely contributed to its obliteration over time.

Despite its physical destruction, the temple's legacy endures:

1. **Deori Priesthood:** The Deori community, descendants of the temple's priests, preserve its rituals in relocated shrines, such as those in Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh (Deori, 2002). Their annual festivals, like Bihu, incorporate Tamreswari worship.

2. **Cultural Memory:** The temple is commemorated in Assam's folklore, particularly in narratives of Queen Sadhani, whose resistance against the Ahoms is tied to Sadiya's sacred landscape, including Chandragiri Hills (Dutta, 1985).

### Historical Significance:

#### Conclusion:

The Tamreswari Temple was a vital institution of the Sutiya Kingdom, encapsulating its religious syncretism, political legitimacy, and cultural richness. Through a multidisciplinary methodology, this study has reconstructed its history, highlighting its role as a tribal-Hindu nexus and its enduring legacy despite its physical loss. The temple's story enriches our understanding of medieval Northeast India, offering insights into the interplay of indigenous and external influences in shaping regional identities. The temple's syncretic model informs studies of Northeast India's religious history, highlighting the region's role as a cultural crossroads. Further archaeological and ethnographic research is needed to deepen this narrative, ensuring the Tamreswari Temple's place in South Asia's historical tapestry.

Limitations of the study include the reliance on Ahom-centric Buranjis, which may underrepresent Sutiya perspectives, and the absence of direct archaeological evidence for the temple in present times. Future research could employ satellite imagery or geophysical surveys to locate remnants in Sadiya, potentially near the Brahmaputra-Lohit confluence.

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