

The Temple Architecture of the Ahom Period with Special Reference to Sivasagar

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Abstract

The Ahom dynasty in medieval Assam ruled gloriously for more than six hundred years. From the beginning, the Ahom rulers played a crucial role in unifying Assamese society by integrating various indigenous peoples and tribes to create a cohesive Assamese identity. Their secular and liberal governance made them popular among the native population. The Ahoms successfully resisted multiple Mughal invasions and left behind an impressive legacy of architectural monuments, including temples, tanks, cemeteries, and buildings. These structures reflect the scientific and technological advancements of medieval Assam. This paper offers a brief exploration of temple architecture during the Ahom period, with a specific focus on the temples of Sivasagar.

Introduction

The Ahom rulers significantly shaped the history of medieval Assam. Sukapha, who led the Ahoms from Mong Mao, established the first capital at Charaideo. He skillfully organized his kingdom with affection and respect for the local population. Although he conquered neighboring territories, Sukapha displayed generosity toward the defeated rulers, securing their allegiance. Successive Ahom kings demonstrated similar administrative foresight and built multiple capitals, temples, roads, tanks, and other public structures throughout Assam.

Although no permanent architecture emerged in the early Ahom period (until the 16th century), significant structural developments began during the reigns of Gadadhar Singha and Rudra Singha. This later period saw the construction of several enduring buildings and temples.

Objectives

This paper aims to highlight the major temples built during the Ahom period and analyze their architectural styles and construction techniques, with particular emphasis on the temples located in Sivasagar.

Methodology

Both primary and secondary sources were consulted for this study. Books on the subject and personal field visits to Sivasagar provided valuable insights into the temples and their architectural elements.

Discussion

Sivasagar, a key capital city of the Ahoms, features several important temples and monuments. Among them are Joydol, Sivadol, Devidol, and Vishnudol.

Joydol

Built by King Rudra Singha (r. 1696–1714 CE), Joydol is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and stands on the northern bank of Joysagar Tank, also constructed by Rudra Singha. The temple is circular in shape and features a *garbhagriha* (sanctum sanctorum). Notable for its height of approximately 30.48 meters, the temple showcases depictions of Lord Vishnu's incarnations. Traditional plaster made from lime, jaggery (*gur*), black lentils, fish (*borali*), and egg was used in its construction. Two nearby shrines are dedicated to Surya and Ganesha. The temple follows the *Nilachala* style, resembling the Kamakhya Temple in structure.

Sivadol (Joysagar)

Also built by Rudra Singha, this square-shaped temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. It features a *garbhagriha* and a modest entrance. Devotional inscriptions adorn its outer walls.

Devidol (Joysagar)

Dedicated to Goddess Durga, this temple was built by Rudra Singha. It features a "two-*chala*" roof and rectangular layout, with a height of 7.74 meters. The entrance corridor is attached to the main structure. The temple was maintained by caretakers appointed by the Ahom kings.

Sivadol (Sivasagar)

Constructed by King Siva Singha (r. 1714–1744 CE), this is the tallest temple of the Ahom era, standing 104 feet high with a base of 195 feet. Built with bricks and stone, the temple features three primary structures: *garbhagriha*, *antarala* (a small corridor with a two-*chala* roof), and *mandapa* (outdoor hall). The outer walls display intricate carvings of gods and goddesses, particularly Durga in her many forms.

Devidol (Sivasagar)

Constructed by Queen Ambika during the reign of Siva Singha, the temple stands 19.56 meters high and is dedicated to Goddess Durga. Its *mukhamandapa* (entrance hall) features a domical roof surrounded by eight *angashikharas*. The temple's walls are adorned with divine images.

Vishnudol

Also built by Queen Ambika (1714–1744 CE), this temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu. With a height of 21.9 meters, it comprises a *garbhagriha*, *antarala*, and *mandapa*. It features a do-*chala* style roof, and its walls depict various deities. The *mandapa* faces east-west and served as an important religious site for royal worship.

Talatal Ghar

Talatal Ghar, one of the most significant secular structures of the Ahom period, was a seven-storey palace built by Rudra Singha and later completed by Rajeshwar Singha. It included three underground floors and four above-ground. Made of bricks and lime plaster, the palace featured secret tunnels connecting it to the Dikhow River, providing a safe escape route during emergencies.

Rang Ghar

Rang Ghar, a two-storey, boat-shaped pavilion, was used for royal entertainment, such as wrestling, buffa

lo fights, and Bihu dance. Initially built using bamboo and wood by Rudra Singha, its permanent brick-and-stone version was completed by Pramatta Singha (r. 1744–1751 CE).

Gola Ghar

Built during the reign of Chakradhwaj Singha, Gola Ghar (Magazine House) was a small, rectangular brick structure with a *do-chala* roof. It served as a storage facility for arms and ammunition.

Kareng Ghar

Located in Gargaon, 15 kilometers from Sivasagar, Kareng Ghar is a remarkable example of Ahom architectural advancement. Originally established by Suhenpha, it was expanded and fortified by Sukhrungpha (r. 1751–1769 CE). This seven-storey brick-and-lime palace includes numerous rooms for various royal functions and is surrounded by a five-kilometer-long brick wall.

Conclusion

Sivasagar, once the capital of the Ahom monarchy, holds immense archaeological and cultural significance. The temples and monuments of this region reflect the advanced science, engineering, and artistry of medieval Assam. These structures are vital not only for academic study but also for tourism and heritage preservation. It is imperative for government bodies and NGOs to take proactive steps in conserving these invaluable historical assets.

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