

# Archaeological Remains of Sadiya: Exploring the Easternmost Frontier of Assam

Ms. Satabdi Buragohain

Independent Researcher

## Abstract

Sadiya, located in the Tinsukia district of Assam, was an eminent political, cultural and commercial centre during the medieval period. Once serving as the capital of the Chutiya kingdom and later emerged as an important frontier under the Ahom rule. The ancient territory of Sadiya extended into parts of present-day Arunachal Pradesh, and the districts of Tinsukia, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji in Assam. The region contains numerous archaeological remains, including ancient shrines, fortification, and tanks, which provides an insight into the region's past from the prehistoric settlement upto the medieval polity. Significant remains include the Bura-Buri Thaan, Padum Pukhuri, Pratima garh etc. This study highlights and analyses these remains through literature review, exploration, on-site observation and documentation of the material evidence. The findings offer an understanding of urban design, habitation patterns, the integration of sacred spaces into socio-religious life, as well as the chronology, cultural interaction and evolving socio-political dynamics of the region. The study underscores the historical significance of Sadiya in the broader history of Assam.

**Keywords:** Sadiya, Chutiya dynasty, Ahom rule, archaeological remains, Eastern Assam

Historically, the region of Sadiya has always found an important place in the history of Assam since the ancient times. It has been associated with many myths and legends. One of the famous myths is its association with the legendary king Bhismaka (a prominent figure in Hindu mythology), father of princess Rukmini. The episode of Krishna marrying Rukmini is also believed to have taken place in Sadiya. This story is narrated in the Bhagavata and Vishnu Purana and also in the Rukmini-Harana by Sankardeva. The Chutiyas who came to power during the 12<sup>th</sup> century trace their descent from this legendary king Bhismaka.

The Chutiyas came to power in the Upper Brahmaputra valley after the disintegration of the Kamarupa kingdom. Among the various capitals of the Chutiyas, Sadiya was one of them. It was established as the capital of the Chutiyas during the reign of king Ratnadhvajpal who cremated his dead son in this very place and so does the name suggest Sa-diya (Sa meaning 'dead body' and Diya meaning 'to cremate'). There is another tradition regarding how the place came to be known as Sadiya. The locals believe that when Shiva was carrying the lifeless burnt body of Sati around the world, a part of her body fell in this region and therefore the place came to be known as Sadiya.<sup>1</sup>

The Ahoms annexed Sadiya in 1524, during the rule of the last Chutiya king Nitipal and placed it under the administration of the officer Sadiya khowa Gohain. With the history of being ruled by different dynasties over different periods of time, we find many archaeological and historical remains spread over the region. The following remains are mentioned below-

- a. **Bura – Buri Thaan** – The Bura – Buri Thaan (shrine) is located in the Bura – Buri Deori Gaon of Sadiya. Among the four important shrines of Sadiya namely Tamreshwari thana, Boliya baba thana, Paator haal, it is one of them. The deities of this shrine, Bura – Buri is also known as Girasi – gira. In Hinduism, they are associated with Mahadev and Parvati. This thana is worshipped by the Dibongia khel of the Deoris (a tribe in Assam). A detailed report on this shrine is stated in the journal of Hannay (1848), ‘Notes on Ancient Temples and other remains in the vicinity of Suddyah, Upper Assam’. Inside the premises of the shrine, remains of the ancient temple in the form of stone pillars, bricks, ramparts etc are found. It is an important place of worship and people from different corners of Assam offer their prayers to the deities.



Figure 1. Google Earth map locating the Bura – Buri Thaan.



Figure 2. Broken stone fragments of the ancient temple.

- b. **Paator Saal** – The Paator Saal (shrine) is dedicated to goddess Pateswari who is associated with goddess Parvati. It is located in Nasai gaon of Sadiya. This shrine is considered the chief shrine among the other four shrines. It is worshipped by the Paator Gaya Deoris. This shrine is still in practice till date and people from different places travel to offer their prayers in the Assamese months of Magh, Bohag, Aahar and Kati. Inside the premises of the shrine, no ancient remains are found and the shrine at present has been built in the recent years. Even though no specific ancient remains are found, this shrine carries a great historical legacy as it has been worshipped from decades by the people of the region and holds century old heritage.



**Figure 3. Google Earth Map locating the Paator Saal.**

- c. **Bairagi Baba Math** – The Bairagi Baba Math or Bairagi Baba Thaan which is located in the Dokoani gaon, Sadiya, and represents a century old heritage of the region. Concerning the origin of the shrine several narratives have been recorded by Gogoi (2005) in his article titled “Sadiyar Bairagi Thaan”. This shrine is dedicated to a mendicant, locally known as a bairagi in assamese. This shrine is also revered as a namghar (a traditional prayer hall), where a namgharia (the caretaker of a namghar) performs and offers prayers regularly.



**Figure 4. The Bairagi Baba Math**



**Figure 5. A postal envelop stating the heritage of the Bairagi Baba Thaan.**

- d. **The Padum Pukhuri tank** – As the name suggest, this tank used to be filled with lotus flower, therefore was it named Padum pukhuri (pond). This tank is located in the Padum Pukhuri gaon of Sadiya. The unique feature of this tank than the rest of the others found in the present-day region of Sadiya, is its brick embankments. The embankments of this tank are made up of bricks which can be found lying across the tank. One can also find an exposed section of bricks lying to the westward direction of the tank. It is in its ruined state. If we look closely, it seems it might have been a flight of stairs which led to the tank. Also, an interesting feature one can find inside the premises, is a triangular stone block in the middle of the tank. The exact purpose of the triangular block cannot be determined. The locals believe that it was worshipped before. The tank is said to have been built during the reign of the Chutiya kings. Human incursions can be found and seen across the tank in the form of mud being dug up, animals grazing etc. This site is now under the Directorate of Archaeology, Assam.



Figure 6. Google map locating the Padum Pukhuri tank.



Figure 7. The exposed brick section to the westward direction of the tank.

- e. **The Chapakhowa tank** – The Chapakhowa tank is located in the Jaytish Nagar, Sadiya. At present, the tank has been converted into a stadium, Lachit stadium. The tank is of enormous size. There are two theories as to why the tank was built- first, it was used for entrapping elephants; and second, it was treated as a ‘Nauka Bahor’, in assamese which meant nauka – military boats and bahor- a place to stay. So, it meant it was a place where the soldiers rested the day before proceeding to war. The

exact time period when the tank was constructed is unknown. Some claim it was constructed during the reign of the Chutiyas and some claim it was built during the reign of the Ahoms.



**Figure 8. Google Earth map locating the Chapakhowa tank in Jaytish Nagar, Sadiya.**

- f. **The Borpukhuri tank** - The Borpukhuri tank is located in the Borgorah Deopani No.1 gaon of Sadiya. The tank is in the shape of an elongated rectangle. It is similar in shape to the Digholi pukhuri tank in Guwahati. Due to lack of evidence and records, it cannot be ascertained to one particular dynasty. It might have been constructed by the Chutiyas or by the Ahoms.



**Figure 9. Google Earth map locating the Borpukhuri tank in Borgorah Deopani No.1 gaon, Sadiya.**

- g. **The Rajgarh Ali road** - The Rajgarh Ali road is said to have extended from Sadiya upto Bhismanagar in Arunachal Pradesh and then upto Parashuram Kund in Arunachal Pradesh, which was a strong hold of the Chutiya rulers. It used to be a high mud road. At present, three sections of the road can be found, spread across the region. One section, stretches from the Sadiya-Roing Road upto the Dibang river in the west and the second section stretches from the Sadiya-Roing Road upto a tributary of the Kundil river in the east. The second section is the only remaining part of the high mud road. The first and the second sections used to be one high road which was cut down during the colonial period to be built the present Sadiya-Roing Road. The last or the third section is located along the Padum pukhuri in Padum Pukhuri gaon which is mentioned above. Khanikar S (1991) states that there is a saying that the Rajgarh Ali road was built during the reign of Chutiya ruler Ratnadhvajpal. There is no ample evidence that the road extended upto Bhismanagar because now what remains are the

broken sections of the road and due to human settlements and construction of new road the original trail of the road has disappeared. If the locations of the roads are plotted on a map, there is some probability that the road might have extended upto Bhismanagar, given the location of the roads and Bhismanagar.



**Figure 10. Google map locating the first, second and third section of the Rajgarh Ali road in Sadiya.**

- h. **The Moidams** – The Moidams are the burials of the Ahom royals and nobles. The word Moidam has been derived from the Tai words Phrang-Mai-Dam or Mai-Tam. ‘Phrang-Mai’ means to put in the grave or to bury and ‘Dam’ means the spirit of the dead. These are high mounds which can be found in octagonal and circular shapes. They are largely found in the districts of Jorhat, Charaideo, Sivsagar, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia in Upper Assam. In Sadiya, there is the presence of two moidams, collectively known as the Juria (two) Moidam. They are situated at a distance of 300 m approx. from each other. There is lack of evidence to associate as to whom these moidams belonged. It is generally believed that the moidams belonged to the Sadiya-khowa Gohain and his wife. Human intervention can be seen in many parts of the moidams.



**Figure 11. Google Earth map locating the Juria Moidams.**

- i. **Pratima Garh** – Hannay (1848) in his journal mentions about an ancient place named ‘Prithimee’ or ‘Phoontook Nuggur’ in-between the Dikrung and the Dibang river. As the name, ‘Pratima’ and

‘Prithimee’ sounds quite familiar, it might have been the same place. But given the location of both the places, Prithimee is located in-between Dikrung and Dibang rivers, while the Pratimagarh is located in-between the Ghoomoorah river (east) and Dibang river (west), in Lakhyapur, Sadiya. Either both the places are two different locations or it might be the same one place with its location being recorded wrongly in the journal. The present structure of the remains is in the form of three rectangular ramparts. The innermost rampart has its four sides intact, but the second the third are in half-rectangles due to human encroachment of land. There is the presence of a huge mound inside the innermost rampart which is irregular in shape. So, the remains of this structure suggest it might have been some huge structure or a fortification. People assign it to either being built during the Chutiya rule or during the Ahom period.

Along with these remains, there is also the presence of three cannons which have been housed in the present Circuit house, Chapakhowa of Sadiya. One of the cannons has an inscription inscribed on it, which is in distorted form as the cannons have been painted black and white. One of interesting feature of one of the cannons is that it has an animal face towards the end of the cannon. An article published by The Telegraph ‘Confusion over origin of missing guns’, matches the description of the cannon with the animal face, states that it belonged to Sher Shah Suri and one of the other two belonged to the Mughal Nawara. It also states that the guns were among the 35 protected missing artefacts in India which were untraceable for a long period of time. Unfortunately, there is no record about who bought the cannons or how they ended up in Sadiya.

## CONCLUSION

As history is its witness, Sadiya has seen the migration of different races of people to the region at different periods of history, witnessed the rise and fall of different dynasties, advancement of the region etc., contributing to its rich cultural heritage. The region is diverse ethnically and culturally. Other than its history and heritage, the region also provides great scenic beauty and the role nature plays as its natural defence. The hills namely, the Mishmi hills, surrounding the region acted as a natural fortification and the violent rivers namely, Lohit and Dibang marking its boundary, and separating the region from the rest of the lands of Assam and protecting it from the invasion of enemies.

With its rich history, the region has archaeological and historical remains spread all over the region. The remains which have been discussed above are mostly found in the present demarcated Sadiya. The present demarcated Sadiya mostly includes the plain areas. So, the concentration of archaeological remains is less in the plains than near the foothills. Most of the remains, e.g.- Bhismanagar, are located near the foothills of the Mishmi hills in present-day Arunachal Pradesh, as it acted as a natural barrier and fortification in case of an invasion or an attack. And also, the foothills were safe, as the plains were flooded every year due to the turbulent rivers.

The region of Sadiya offers scope for different fields of studies, for e.g. Geography, Botany, Geomorphology, Potamology etc. There is a need for an extensive archaeological exploration and excavation in the region, to unearth the hidden remains and to provide a cultural sequence to the region. This study includes exploration and documentation of the remains in the region but it alone does not include every remains that are spread across as many are hidden or not known about, due to the smaller number of studies made into the region. One moidam was reported to have been located in the forests of Holou gaon in Sadiya, but due to its location and safety purposes, it was left unstudied and not approached.

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