

Maghnowa Dol: A Historical Study of Ahom Architecture

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Abstract: Maghnowa Dol, located at Padampur near Narayanpur in Lakhimpur district of Assam is a monument associated with the architectural history of the Ahom period. The temple is notable for its plan, dome-shaped sikhara, brick construction, image-bearing niches and surviving enclosure and gateway. Its historical interpretation is significant because scholars have associated the monument with the Phulbari Devalaya mentioned in records although the available evidence gives different chronological possibilities.¹ The architectural relationship between Maghnowa Dol and Garakhiya Dol of Nazira provides another basis for examining its development. This article studies the monument through architectural and comparative perspectives. It discusses the setting of Ahom temple construction, the structural organization of Maghnowa Dol, its architectural details, the possible connection with Phulbari Devalaya and its relationship with Garakhiya Dol. The study argues that Maghnowa Dol represents a stage in the development of regional Assamese temple architecture, where wider Indian architectural traditions were adapted to local materials, techniques and aesthetic preferences.

Keywords : Ahom Dynasty, Assam, Garakhiya Dol, Temple Architecture etc.

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Introduction

The architectural heritage of Assam provides evidence for understanding the cultural history of the Brahmaputra valley. Among the categories of historical monuments found in the region temples occupy a particularly important position. They were constructed as spaces but their significance extended beyond religious functions. Temple buildings expressed the beliefs of their patrons, the skills of craftsmen, the availability of building materials and the architectural ideas

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circulating within the region. Consequently the study of a temple can contribute to the reconstruction of political, social, religious and artistic developments. The Ahom period is particularly important in the history of Assam. The Ahom kingdom, which developed into a political power in the Brahmaputra valley, witnessed considerable activity in the construction of religious and secular structures. Temples built during this period reveal a process of interaction, between established architectural traditions and local Assamese practices. The influence of the Nagara tradition can be observed in monuments while indigenous building techniques and regional forms gave Ahom architecture a distinctive character. In the architectural environment of the period Indo-Islamic elements were also encountered.²

Ahom temple architecture did not emerge as a completely uniform style. Its forms changed over time. The development of temples was influenced by requirements, royal patronage, technological knowledge and the experience of local craftsmen. The temples associated with Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism illustrate the religious environment of the kingdom. Temple construction consequently became a means through which religious and cultural ideas were expressed in material form. The classification of Ahom architecture into two phases by P. C. Sarma proves very useful in tracing this development. The first phase starts from the beginning of Ahom rule till the reign of Sulikpha, better known as Lora Raja and the second one starts from the reign of Gadadhar Singha till the end of Ahom rule.³ This clearly shows that Ahom architectural tradition has undergone some transformations throughout the Ahom period. Taking all this into consideration, there comes the issue of Maghnowa Dol. Located at Padampur in Narayanpur of Lakhimpur District in Assam, this monument has certain unique features of its own. Its octagonal plan, dome like sikhara, garbhagriha, antarala and mandapa makes it architecturally different. The presence of rows of niches on the exterior walls, brick enclosure and gateway makes it important for its historical significance. There has been a lot of ambiguity regarding the historical significance of this monument. There have been questions about the exact date of construction of this monument and its relation with Phulbari Devalaya of the Ahom period. Comparison of this monument with Garakhiya Dol of Nazira helps us in examining its importance within the development of Ahom architecture.

Objectives

To study the historical background and development of Maghnowa Dol in the Ahom period.

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To study its unique architectural features and make a comparison with Garakhiya Dol.

To find out its significance in Assam.

Methodology

This research employs the methodology of a historical, descriptive and comparative analysis using secondary sources. This research is focused on the design, construction, dimension and decoration of Maghnowa Dol.

Architectural History of Ahom Temples

The architectural history of Assam was formed under complex conditions of interaction between culture of the region and outside world. There were close ties between Assam and the cultural world of India. Yet the geographical and local traditions made a particular impact on the formation of unique architectural forms. Thus temple architecture is a combination of traditions and adaptation to specific regional conditions. The Nagara style had an important role in the development of Assam temple architecture. However, the presence of elements of Nagara style cannot be interpreted as the borrowing of northern Indian models by Assamese architects. On the contrary, the craftsmen adjusted architectural forms taking into account materials, construction methods and regional peculiarities. This process resulted in the formation of temples which have clear regional features. The use of brick material was especially important for the architectural development of Assam. In this area, where the stone used for architecture was not always available, bricks became one of the most widespread materials. The craftsmen were able to erect large walls and complex superstructures using bricks. The decorative treatment of brick surfaces was also possible.⁴

The political history of the Ahom state served as an important background for this process. The patronage of kings and other rulers supported the building of temples and other religious structures. The temples served as centers of worship and also expressed authority, interests and aspirations of patrons.

There were many religions in Assam. Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism were popular in Assam. The diversity of religions was also reflected in the variety of temples built in this region. Therefore, temple architecture should be considered together with religious history. The period of the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries was very significant for the development of structural

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temples. During this period, the experience gained by many generations and the experiments with various forms were accumulated by the architects. Maghnowa Dol belongs to this architectural milieu. The design of this temple shows that it has reached a more advanced stage of adaptation of temple traditions to regional conditions.

Historical Context of Maghnowa Dol

Maghnowa Dol is located at Padampur in Narayanpur in Lakhimpur district. The significance of its geographical context lies in the fact that it shows temple building practices spreading even into different regions of Ahom culture. The problem with the historical evidence for the monument is its inconsistency. This presents a problem for determining its date of origin because of lack of definite epigraphic evidence in favor of any particular date and thus, relying on textual evidence. The process of determining the origin date for the monument requires comparing the monument with other monuments and measurements.

The question of the historical identity of the monument is connected to that of Phulbari Devalaya. Historical sources mention a temple called Phulbari. The geographical connection between the two places has encouraged the consideration of the question whether both terms refer to the same monument.

This becomes even more compelling when the architectural dimensions of the monuments are taken into consideration. Historical description of the Phulbari temple includes dimensions, which are similar to those of the existing Maghnowa Dol. These measurements have served as evidence in favor of this identification.⁵

Chronological data present difficulties in interpretation. According to one tradition, Phulbari Dol is dated back to the period of Rudra Singha and the year 1705.⁶ On the other hand, there is an entry about construction of Phulbari Devalaya during Pratap Singha reign (1643) in Chang-rung Phukanar Buranji.⁷

It is essential to pay attention to the difference in the dates mentioned above. It reveals the necessity to distinguish between documentary tradition and architectural evidence. The possibility of reconstruction and rebuilding could also be taken into account, however, such interpretation also requires independent evidence. Thus, the historical identity of the Maghnowa

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Dol remains a question to be researched and not something that can be solved with the help of just a single date.

Architectural Character of Maghnowa Dol

One of the most interesting temples of the Ahom period is Maghnowa Dol, situated in the city of Lakhimpur. The date of the construction of this monument is discussed among historians, however, its architectural elements allow us to conclude that it was constructed later than Garakhiya Dol of Nazira. Although these two temples have certain similarities in their planning and architectural design, Maghnowa Dol looks more balanced structurally. This monument has an octagonal form and eastern-western orientation.

The plan of the temple includes three major spaces – garbhagriha, antarala and mandapa. The octagonality of the temple is one of its most remarkable architectural elements, which is also reflected in the upper part of the building. The garbhagriha measures 19.65 feet in east-west direction and 19.47 feet in north-south direction and its height is 33.63 feet. Almost equal horizontal dimensions create balance in the proportions of the sanctum. The sikhara of the temple is also octagonal and dome-shaped, thus making the upper principal part of the building. The antarala of the temple serves as a link between the garbhagriha and mandapa. It measures 7.23×4.65 feet and has a height of 7.22 feet. The height of the roof of the mandapa is 12.04 feet. The combination of these three spaces makes the plan of the temple very organized, where the central space occupied by the garbhagriha represents the sacred center of the monument. In addition, the outer walls of the bada include five niches placed in a row on every wall, creating the special treatment of the exterior of the building. The principal entrance of the temple faces west and measures 7.57 feet in height, 4.59 feet in width and 4.80 feet in breadth.

Surrounding Maghnowa Dol was a brick enclosure wall, which remains intact partially today. The surviving part of the wall is about 5 feet high. The presence of such a wall proves that the monument was created not as an isolated building but as an architecturally arranged one. The original gateway of the temple has been preserved relatively well. It measures 17 feet in length, 13.47 feet in external width, and the internal width of the passage is 6 feet.⁸

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Architectural Comparison of Maghonowa Dol and Garakhiya Dol

In its architectural planning, Maghonowa Dol is extremely similar to the Garakhiya Dol at Garhgaon/Nazira. Firstly, the temples share nearly identical ground plans where octagonal garbhagriha (sanctum) is found both inside and outside the structures. Mandapa is built in front of the sanctum in both temples. The passage that leads to the sanctum is also similar in width, being about 1.45 meters. All these facts prove that the monuments belong to the same architectural school, as well as that the two temples must have been built approximately in the same period.

A similar thing can be said about the walls of the temples. There is no clear evidence that either of the monuments was built according to the traditional division of the wall into pabhaga, jangha, and baranda. However, Maghonowa Dol features a decorative band with a bloomed lotus in the place of baranda. It seems quite natural to refer this part of the wall to the category of decorative elements because it is small and simple. Both the temples feature two horizontal rows of devakoshtha or deity niches; the arrangement of niches is extremely similar.

At the same time, there is a considerable number of architectural differences between the two monuments. One of the main distinctions concerns the treatment of shikhara. In contrast to Garakhiya Dol where the shikhara is bowl-shaped, the shikhara of Maghonowa Dol is octagonal and has a slightly curved profile. Furthermore, there is a difference in the arrangement of devakoshtha. Garakhiya Dol has four niches in each row of the temple wall while the wall of Maghonowa Dol has five niches. Finally, it is worth noting that niches in Garakhiya Dol were planned just for decoration while niches in Maghonowa Dol accommodated sculptural images.

Difference in scale accentuates the feeling of architectural development. The width of the external wall of Garakhiya Dol measures approximately 3.70 metres whereas Maghonowa Dol has the width of the external wall measuring approximately 4.20 metres. Similarly, the width of internal walls of Garakhiya Dol measures approximately 2.25 metres and that of Maghonowa Dol measures approximately 2.80 metres.⁹ Hence, Maghonowa Dol is larger and better developed compared to Garakhiya Dol in terms of dimensions and ornamentation. Therefore, it can be inferred from the above discussion that while the two temples have similar architecture, Maghonowa Dol is an example of a more evolved form of temple architecture and construction.

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Chronological Significance

The similarities in the two architectural styles discussed above lead to the assumption that Maghonowa Dol and Garakhiya Dol belonged to one and the same period. Since Garakhiya Dol belongs to the time of Swargadeo Pratap Singha (1603-1641), it is possible to place Maghonowa Dol in the first half of the seventeenth century. However, the differences in construction, craftsmanship, technical details and ornamentation indicate that Maghonowa Dol was probably constructed slightly later in the same period. It means that the two temples belonged to one architectural phase, but they were not constructed at the same time.

The long ruling of Swargadeo Pratap Singha can serve as the possible historical background for the development described above. As per the traditional history, prior to becoming the king, Pratap Singha was a Shaivite and worshiped Shivalinga. However, after becoming the king he removed Shivalinga and put it inside the temple which he got constructed on the opposite side of the bank of the river Dikhow from Gargaon.¹⁰ This tradition has been used to place Garakhiya Dol at the earlier part of the reign of Swargadeo Pratap Singha. Taking into consideration the long reign and interest in Hindu religious structures of Swargadeo Pratap Singha, the construction of several temples during his reign is historically justifiable.

The mandapa of both the temples can also provide some more comparative insight. The mandapa of Garakhiya Dol is no more there except for some traces on the ground level. Given the scarcity of the archaeological remains, it becomes very hard to identify its structure and roofing system. However, the mandapa of Maghonowa Dol is still in part preserved, which makes it easy to understand the structure of the mandapa. The evidence shows that its roof was built on the traditional Assamese du-chaliya or double-sloping form of roof.

This is especially important since this is an example of how the formal architecture of the temple interacts with the local building tradition. It might have been the same with the mandapa of Garakhiya Dol too, but it becomes impossible to say anything definite about the mandapa due to the present remains. Thus, the development of roofing and brick-building techniques is an illustration of improvement in the field of architecture in the Ahom period.

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Religious and Cultural Importance

Apart from its architectural features, the importance of Maghnowa Dol lies in its religious and cultural relevance. This temple building depicts the religious milieu of the Ahom era wherein Shaiva, Vaishnava and Shakta traditions had formed the sacred landscape of Assam. Construction of temples depicted religious patronage, royal supremacy, and the managerial skills involved in making skilled brick masonry. The possibility of associating Maghnowa with Phulbari Devalaya also points towards the importance of this temple in the local sacred landscape. Currently, Maghnowa Dol is dedicated to Lord Shiva and the temple remains religiously significant to the devotees and the surrounding community. The temple is still used for various religious purposes such as Shiv Ratri when devotees come there to pray and carry out other rituals. In such a way, it becomes clear that the temple is not only an architectural monument but also a place of active religious life. The visiting of the pilgrims gives the additional social significance to the monument and ties it to modern society. Thus, conservation should cover both aspects of its significance.

Conclusion

Protection of Maghnowa Dol should involve conservation through scientific methods and also the efforts of the community. It is essential that measurements, pictures, architectural drawings, and decorative records of Maghnowa Dol are preserved, while at the same time, efforts must be made to safeguard the brick edifice from water, vegetation, and weathering effects. Excavations carried out in the region would enable the discovery of more remains, which will assist in establishing the chronology of the monument. On the other hand, the consciousness of the people in Lakhimpur district should be developed, since their continued cultural and religious connection with the temple serves to protect the monument. Being a live place of worship especially during religious festivals like Shiv Ratri, Maghnowa Dol provides a link between the present community and the religious practices of the Ahom era.

Notes and References

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