

Terracotta Art of the Ahoms: A Case Study of the Ghanashyam Dol in Sivasagar, Assam

Dipamjyoti Buragohain

Research Scholar, Department of History, Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh & Assistant Professor, Department of History, Bihpuria College, Assam

Abstract

Terracotta as a medium of temple architecture found prominence in medieval India. The architectural styles of terracotta temples vary across regions, reflecting local traditions and influences. The Ghanashyam Dol, also known as Nati Gosain Dol, is a terracotta brick monument located near Joysagar College in Sivasagar District, Assam. It was built during the Ahom period. It is a unique example of the development of terracotta temple architecture in medieval Assam. This study explores the architectural style, ornamental carvings, and historical context of the Ghanashyam Dol. By highlighting the significance of terracotta art in Ahom architecture, this paper seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of regional art history and cultural heritage conservation.

Keywords: Ahoms, architecture, temple, terracotta, sculpture.

Introduction

The Ahoms ruled the Brahmaputra Valley for nearly six centuries during medieval period. Their reign was not only known for political unification of the region, but also for cultural assimilation and expansion. They made significant contribution to the development of art and architecture. Their style was influenced by contemporary Hindu and Islamic architecture.

The Ahom rulers effectively mobilized vast amount of manpower for construction and maintenance of their architectural projects through the unique system of labour, known as the *Paik* system. Under this system, every adult male between the ages of 16 and 50 was required to provide personal service the state (Baruah, 1985). This mandatory service was utilized by the rulers to carry out various public works. The *Paik* system ensured a steady supply of labor for building and maintaining the state's infrastructure, including temples, palaces, roads, bridges, ramparts, etc.

The Ahoms left a lasting legacy in the form of temples, palaces, and other monumental structures. A large number of Ahom monuments are found in the form of temples. One of the earliest structural temples of the Ahoms was the Nagashankar Devalaya, built by king Susenpha in 1488 CE (Bhuyan, 1930). However, the earliest surviving temple of the Ahom period is the Garakhiya Dol in Nazira, patronized by king Pratap Singha (Neog, 2008).

Among the Ahom monuments, the use of terracotta as a medium for architectural and artistic expression stands out as a distinctive feature. One of the most exemplary sites showcasing Ahom terracotta art is the Ghanashyam Dol in Sivasagar District, Assam. The monument stands on the bank of the Joysagar tank, close to the Joysagar group of temples. It is known for its terracotta carvings and unique architectural

features. The elaborate terracotta decorations of the Ghanashyam Dol depict a variety of themes, including, religious narratives, mythological scenes, and daily social life.

Despite its historical and architectural importance, the origin and patronage of the Ghanashyam Dol remains a subject of debate. This paper aims to examine into the architectural elements and historical context of the Ghanashyam Dol, providing insights into its significance within the broader framework of Ahom regional architecture.

Historical Context

The history of the Ghanashyam Dol is shrouded in mystery and controversy. There are no direct references to the Ghanashyam Dol in the Ahom chronicles, known as *Buranji*, leading to differing opinions regarding its period and patronage. One theory suggests that it was constructed under the patronage of Rudra Singha (1696-1714 CE) by Ghanashyam Khanikar, originally named Ghansauddin, who was brought from Koch Bihar to serve as the chief architect to build the new capital city of Rangpur (Rajkumar, 2000). Some believe that Ghansauddin, initially a Muslim, converted to Hinduism. He played an important role in the construction of the Joysagar group of temples. After completing his task, Ghanashyam was allowed to return to Koch Bihar. However, he was captivated at Guwahati by Borphukan, an Ahom royal officer. He was accused of secretly carrying a map of the Ahom capital. During his imprisonment, Ghanashyam is said to have built a *dol*, which became known as the Ghanashyam Dol.

Another theory opined that the Ghanashyam Dol was built during the reign of Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769 CE) for Nati Gosain, the grandson of Parbatia Gosain (Neog, 2008). This theory is supported by the name Nati Gosain Dol. It is said that Siva Singha (1714-1744 CE) accepted initiation from Krishnaram Bhattacharya, a Sakta Brahmin priest from Bengal and established him at Nilachala Hills to look after the Kamakhya temple (Baruah, 1985). He was known as Parbatia Gosain. However, the main cell at Ghanashyam Dol is very small to be used as the resting place for Nati Gosain. Besides, the architectural and geographical proximity to the Joysagar group of temples suggests a higher probability of its construction during the reign of Rudra Singha.

Architectural Analysis

The Ghanashyam Dol is a brick structure having terracotta carvings. The Dol bears striking resemblance to the Bishnupur group of temples in Bankura district, West Bengal, built by the Malla rulers. The Bishnupur temples are categorized into three distinct styles: *deul*, *chala*, and *ratna* (Biswas, 2003). The architectural features of the Ghanashyam Dol closely align with the *chala* type of temples. The *chala* type features a curved roof, resembling the traditional thatched huts. This style is further divided into *ek-chala*, *do-chala*, *char-chala*, *at-chala*, etc.

Structure and Design

The Ghanashyam Dol complex comprises three independent structures surrounded by a partially intact brick boundary wall. These include the main shrine, a rectangular hall (likely used as a Kitchen House or *Bhog Ghar*), and an entrance gatehouse. The main shrine is a brick structure with terracotta carvings on its exterior. It features a square ground plan and a traditional Bengali *at-chala* type roof. The *at-chala* roof is formed by a *char-chala* roof crowned with a smaller *char-chala* roof. The height of the main shrine is about 25 feet. Despite being called a *dol*, it lacks typical Hindu temple characteristics and does not house any image of deity.

The façade faces south and includes three arched entrances. Each entrance measures about 6.90 feet in height and 3.49 feet in breadth. Each side wall (west, north, and east) has small arched windows. The main cell, accessible via an arched entrance from the corridor, contains a *mihrab* on its northern interior wall, a feature typical to Islamic architecture. The main chamber measures 7.18 x 16.69 x 18.30 feet. The entrance to the main cell measures 8.82 feet in height and 3.93 feet in breadth. The corridor measures 3.87 x 18.11 feet.

The rectangular hall or the kitchen house in front of the main cell is connected by a brick pavement. It is a sing-cell hall that measures 22.4 x 13 feet with a height of 7.64 feet. The roof of the hall is *char-chala*. The hall is accessible through three arched entrances. Each of them measures around 4.75 feet in height and 3.11 feet in breadth.

The entrance gatehouse is located in the northern corner of the complex. It measures 15.6 x 15.3 feet with a height of 13.2 feet. It also bears Islamic influence. Battlements, a key feature in military and defensive architecture is used in the gatehouse as decorative element. This blend of architectural styles reflects a unique fusion of Hindu and Islamic influences.

Ornamental Features

The exterior of the Ghanashyam Dol is extensively decorated with terracotta ornamentations, while the interior remains plain. The southern façade is adorned with terracotta panels arranged in horizontal and vertical rows above the arched entrances. These panels feature intricate designs, including linear geometrical patterns, scenes from the Ramayana and the *Puranas*, and various human, divine, and animal figures, as well as floral motifs. Decorative motifs were also found in other exterior walls of the shrine, though limited in number.

Depictions of Mythological Scenes

The terracotta panels above the arched entrance of the Ghanashyam Dol vividly depict various scenes from the Ramayana. Among these, one can observe Sita seated sadly below a tree in Lanka, capturing the poignant moment of her abduction. Another panel illustrates the fierce battle between Bali and Sugriva, showcasing the dynamic and dramatic essence of this epic encounter. The panel featuring Lankapati Ravana in *padmasana*, with twenty hands and ten heads, epitomizes his fearsome and multifaceted nature. Adding to this scene, monkeys are portrayed climbing trees and hurling weapons at Ravana, emphasizing the relentless conflict. Additionally, miniature forms of temples with *sivalingas* are scattered among these panels, symbolizing the pervasive spiritual undertones of the monument.

Other Ornamentation and Decorative Elements

Surrounding the central panels above the arched entrance, smaller terracotta plates arranged in vertical, horizontal, and curvy rows embellish the façade. These plates feature floral motifs, criss-cross and zig-zag geometrical patterns, and a plethora of sculptures depicting deities, humans, birds, and animals. The array of deities includes different incarnations of Vishnu- such as Varaha, Narasimha, Kurma, and Krishna *avatara* in different postures. Krishna is depicted playing the flute with Radha seated or standing beside him. Other divine figures include Mahishamardini Durga, Shiva, and Shiva standing on Nandi, etc. These figures are complemented by representations of a mythical bird holding an elephant reminiscent of the puranic legend of Gajendra Moksha, and various human scenes, including a lady on a swing, an elephant

rider and a court scene. The depiction of the court scene is similar to the miniature paintings of Siva Singha in Hasti-Vidyarnava, a treatise on the elephants. The scene also resembles Mughal miniature paintings. The western and eastern exteriors of the Ghanashyam Dol are adorned with terracotta tiles each, albeit less elaborately than the frontal side. On the western exterior, the tiles present a diverse range of scenes such as a tiger seated below a tree, a lady standing with her hands upwards beside a seated sage, a standing figure with a headgear, a lady with her head reclining, another lady holding a flower, a male figure with a headgear holding a flower, and a sage in a yogic posture. These scenes provide a glimpse into the daily life and spiritual practices of the period.

The eastern exterior features equally intriguing sculptures including a male figure holding pots, two standing males of different heights (one covering his genital with his hands), three elephants in a row under a tree, a hunter targeting a bird with bow and arrow, a figure with a bird head holding objects, a seated demon eating flesh, a male in *padmasana*, a tribal man with a basket. These scenes, imbued with a mix of everyday activities and mythical narratives, reflect the rich cultural tapestry of the time.

The northern exterior of the Ghanashyam Dol has four terracotta plates having floral motifs in each.

Historical Significance and Cultural Influence

The architectural and ornamental features of the Ghanashyam Dol indicate a strong influence from the Bishnupur group of temples. This suggests that there were cultural and architectural exchanges between Assam and Bengal during the Ahom period. The design of the monument incorporates a unique blend of Hindu and Islamic architectural elements, reflecting the syncretic cultural milieu of the time.

The controversy surrounding its period and patronage highlights the need for further research and archaeological investigation. The Ghanashyam Dol stands as a testament to the architectural ingenuity and cultural richness of the Ahom period. It highlights the sophisticated artistry and cultural depth of the time, making it deserving of greater recognition and preservation efforts.

Conclusion

The Ghanashyam Dol is an exceptional example of terracotta architecture in Assam, reflecting a blend of local and regional influences. Despite the uncertainties regarding its origin, the monument's architectural and ornamental features provide valuable insights into the cultural and historical context of the Ahom period. Further research and preservation efforts are essential to uncovering the full historical significance of the Ghanashyam Dol and ensuring its legacy for future generations.



Front view of the main shrine of the Ghanashyam Dol



Main shrine and gatehouse of the Ghanashyam Dol



Kitchen House of the Ghanashyam Dol



Part of boundary wall of the Ghanashyam Dol



Scene from the Ramayana



Parrot and floral motifs



Sculptures of deities and royal figures



Floral and geometric motifs



Floral motif

References

1. Barpujari, H.K. (ed.). (2004). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol.III, second edition. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
2. Baruah, S.L. (1985). *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Pub. Pvt. Ltd.
3. Bhuyan, S.K. (ed.). (1930). *Harakanta Barua Sadar-Aminar Assam Buranji*. Guwahati: Dept. of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.
4. Bhuyan, S.K. (ed.). (1933). *Tunkhungia Buranji*. London: Oxford University Press.
5. Bhattacharjee, A. (1978). *Icons and Sculptures of Early and Medieval Assam*. Delhi: Inter-India Publications.
6. Biswas, S.S. (2003). *Bishnupur*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.
7. Biswas, S.S. (2011). *Sibsagar*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.
8. Bara, R. (1985). *Brihat Tai Jati*. Jorhat.
9. Borboruah, H. (1997). *Ahomar Din*, second edition. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
10. Buragohain, D.K. (2007). *Ahom Jugar Rajdhani*. Sivasagar: Kalanchu Prakashan.

11. Gogoi, P. (1968). *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*. Guwahati: Gauhati University.
12. Neog, M. (ed.). (2008). *Pavitra Asom*, fourth edition. Dhemaji: Assam Sahitya Sabha.
13. Rajkumar, S. (2000). *Itihase Soaura Chashata Bachar*. Dibrugarh: Banlata.
14. Sarma, P.C. (1988). *Architecture of Assam*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan.
15. Sarma, P. (2012). *Asomor Sesh-Madhyajugiya Mandir-Sthapatya*. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.