



Architecture of Nandikeswar Temple, Jamugurihat, Sootea

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Abstract:

In the context of Assam, the development of Art and Architecture that began in the 5th century C.E. continued uninterrupted during the subsequent Ahom rule, especially from the later part of the fourteenth century C.E. to the late seventeenth century C.E.. This period marks one of the major milestones in the development of medieval art and architecture of Assam. In the context of the Northern part of Brahmaputra valley, Swargadeo Susenpha (reigned from A.D.1439 to A.D. 1488) constructed the Nagshankar temple. Historian Sarbananda Rajkumar mentions in his book titled 'Itihase Soaura Chasahata Bachar' that the Nagashankar temple is considered the first Hindu temple built under Ahom rule. The Nandikeswar temple was one of those temples built during the late seventeenth century, when the Ahom king Swargadeo Rudra Singha (1697 C.E.) was in power. After that time, Swargadeo Siva Singa, during his reign, the old items of the Nandikeswar temple were dismantled and replaced with new ones, which were then handed over to the priest Raghunandan and granted a copper plate inscription. Moreover, the architectural remains like sikhara, mandapa and garbhagriha of the temple signify the architectural development that began in the late 17th century. The Nagara temple architecture of North India is depicted in the temple elements such as the garbhagriha, antarala and mandapa. As a part of the methodology, this study has been prepared based on both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords:-Dol, Temple Architecture, Inscription, Late Medieval, Ahom.

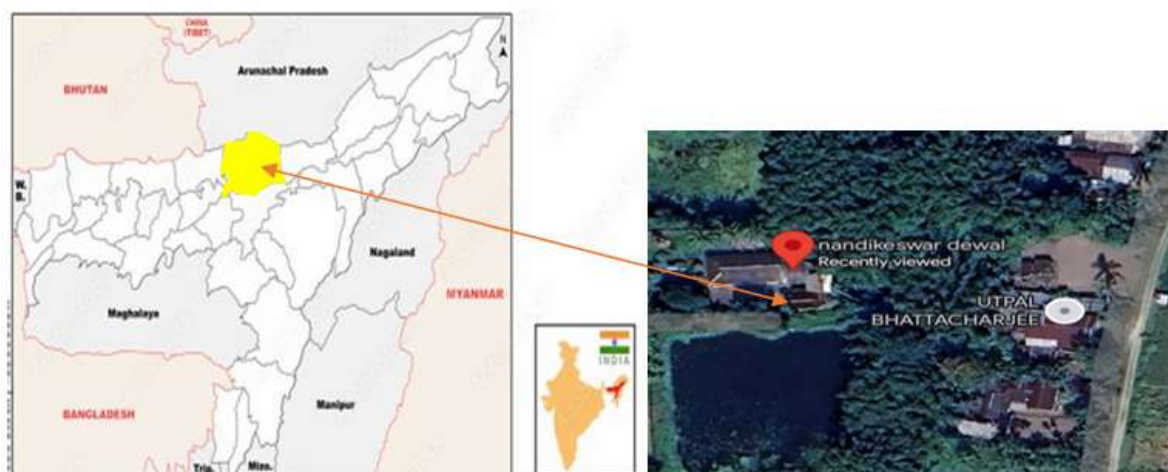


Fig 1: Location Map of Nandikeswar Archaeological site (Source: Google Earth)

I. Introduction

The Nandikeswar Devalaya is presently located in the village named Nandikeswar in the Sonitpur district. The temple is situated about 4 kilometres North-West of Jamugurihat. It stands as one of the finest examples of medieval Ahom architecture in Assam. The temple was constructed in 1697 C.E. by Ahom king Swargadeo Rudra Singha.¹ After Swargadeo Siva Singa, during his reign, the old items of the Nandikeswar temple were dismantled and replaced with new ones, which were then handed over to the priest Raghunandan.(Fig-3)².

At present, a replica of the copper plate grant issued by Swargadeo Rudra Singha is still preserved by the chief priest (Borthakur) of the Nandikeswar temple. Also, a copper plate inscribed with the list of offerings made to the temple by King Siva Singha can still be seen (Fig-3). Ahom *Buranjis* say that Swargadeo Rudra Singha donated 523 pura *Nispikheraj* land to the dol.³ On the other hand, 1068 *bigha 2 kotha* of *Nispikheraj* land to the dol donated by the Ahom king Swargadeo Siva Singha.⁴The sculpted stones scattered around the

temple premises are estimated to date back to the 9th–10th century C.E.⁵(Fig-7). It can be assumed that Swargadeo Rudra Singha may have reconstructed this temple; however, this is not a well-established fact, but rather a matter of speculation. Yet, based on the architectural features, it can be stated that the temple was constructed during the Ahom reign. In the great earthquake of 1897, the spire (*shikhara*) above the sanctum (*garbhagriha*) of the temple was partially damaged.⁶ The temple was constructed in the characteristic Nagara style typical in Assam architecture. Notably, the temple is aligned in the East-West direction and is divided into three main sections: *garbhagriha* (sanctum), *antarala* (vestibule), and *mandapa* (hall). The temple was built following the *pancharatha* style, a common architectural form seen in Ahom and other Indian temples of the mid to late medieval period (Fig-4).

Architecture of the Nandikeswar temple:-

The existing structure of the dol still stands in good condition. The remains of the dol point that the dol was constructed based on the North-Indian style of architecture. It consists of three elements of the style, the *garbhagriha* (sanctum), *antarala* (vestibule), and *mandapa* (hall) (Fig-5). According to the chronicles of Changrung Phukan, the measurements of the

¹Gogoi, Nityananda., *Buranjie Porokha Biswanath Prantor*. Guwahati: Prithivi Publication,1990.Pg-98.

²Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴Rajkumar, Sarbananda., *Itihase Soaura Chasahata Bachar*, Makhan Hazarika, Banalata, Natun Bazar, Dibrugarh-I, 2023, Pg-216.

⁵Gogoi, Nityananda., *Buranjie Porokha Biswanath Prantor*. Guwahati: Prithivi Publication,1990.Pg-95.

⁶ Ibid.



Nandikeswar temple are as follows: the main temple measures 21 cubits in length, the sanctum (*garbhagriha*) is 4 cubits, the wall thickness is 2 cubits, the height up to the temple base is 5 cubits, and from there to the spire (*shikhara*) is 12 cubits. The *jagamohan (mandapa)* is 10 cubits long, 8 cubits wide, with the front wall being 3 cubits thick and the back wall 2 cubits thick.⁷

The measurement of the temple architecture is clearly brought out by Professor Dr.Swapna Kakati. The *garbhagriha* has a diameter of 7.0 meters, and its walls are 1.2 meters thick.⁸ The *antarala* and the main *mandapa* are significantly deteriorated. The roof of the *mandapa* has also suffered partial damage. The main entrance of the temple faces West and consists of two doorways— one leading to the *garbhagriha* and the other to the *mandapa*. The *mandapa* is rectangular, measuring 3.5 meters in length and 2.9 meters in width.⁹ The wall thickness is 0.9 meters.¹⁰ The entire temple complex is enclosed by an earthen embankment. The vertical elevation of the temple consists of the following architectural components: *pada* (base), *jangha* (main body), *varanda* (platform), and *mastaka* or *shikhara* (spire). The *jangha*, or the main body of the temple, rises slightly above the base (Fig-4). The *gundi* or *skandha* (shoulder) section of the temple features three plain horizontal bands. The *shikhara* is constructed in the North Indian or Nagara style. The most striking feature is the stone-built door-frame in the front of the sanctum. The upper central part of the door-frame is adorned with a lotus flower motif. Such types of door-frames can be seen at the Da-Parbatia and the Gupteswar Temple in Singri, Tezpur (Fig-7). This Nandikeswar temple is the only Ahom Structure in the entire Jamugurihat area of a stand portion. After the damage caused by the earthquake of 1897, the temple was in a sort of abandoned state, as a result of which dense vegetation caused further

deterioration. At present, it is preserved under the Department of Archaeology.

However, it is noteworthy that the stone ruins lying near the sanctum of the temple indicate the presence of a beautiful stone temple at this site during the 9th to 10th century C.E. (Fig-7).¹¹ Among these stone remnants are intricately carved temple pillars and their upper portions. It can be assumed that this stone temple, possibly destroyed either by natural causes or external invasions, was later replaced by a brick temple constructed during the Ahom Period.¹² It is noteworthy that a brick wall is also observed at the very backside of the temple's sanctum. This brick wall was likely constructed for the protection of the temple. At present, only a portion of the wall is visible. The sanctum's inner chamber contains a sacred pit (*Kunda*), which is the main worship area of the temple where lord Siva is revered (Fig-6).

Inscriptions and Nandikeswar temple:

Primarily through three copper plate inscriptions, the Nandikeswar temple preserves its entire history. The first inscription was granted by Swargadeo Rudra Singha (1699 C.E.)¹³ and the other two were granted by Swargadeo Siva Singha (1714-15 C.E., 1723 C.E.)¹⁴.

Copper plate inscription by Swargadeo Rudra Singha (1699 C.E.)-

According to this inscription, in the year 1621 Shaka (1699 C.E.), Swargadeo Rudra Singha granted land to Bagish Bhattacharya and appointed him as the priest of the Nandikeswar temple.¹⁵ The language of this inscription is Sanskrit. Its translation and explanation have been mentioned

⁷ Baruah, Bhimkanta, (ed.), *Changrung Phukanar Buranji*. Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarium Studies, Assam, 1992. Pg-18.

⁸ Kakati, Swapna. *Archaeology of the Northern Bank of Brahmaputra Valley: A study of the Monuments, Sites and Ancient Remains*. PhD Thesis. Dibrugarh University, 2020. Pg-148.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gogoi, Nityananda., *Buranjie Porokha Biswanath Prantor*. Guwahati: Prithivi Publication, 1990. Pg-95.

¹² My own opinion.

¹³ Rajkumar, Sarbananda., *Itihase Soaura Chasahata Bachar*, Makhan Hazarika, Banalata, Natun Bazar, Dibrugarh-I, 2023, Pg-216.

¹⁴ Gogoi, Nityananda., *Buranjie Porokha Biswanath Prantor*. Guwahati: Prithivi Publication, 1990. Pg-215-216.

¹⁵ Rajkumar, Sarbananda., *Itihase Soaura Chasahata Bachar*, Makhan Hazarika, Banalata, Natun Bazar, Dibrugarh-I, 2023, Pg-216.



by historian Sarbananda Rajkumar in his book titled “*Iihase Soaura Chasahata Bachar*”.¹⁶ (Photo not available)

Copper plate inscription by Swargadeo Siva Singha (1714-15 C.E.)-



Historian Nityananda Gogoi has provided the translation and explanation of this inscription in his book titled “*Buranjie Porokha Biswanath Prantor*”.¹⁹

Copper plate inscription By Swargadeo Siva Singha (1723 C.E.)-

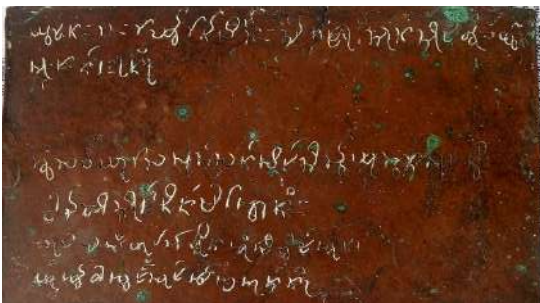


Fig. 2:- Inscription of Nandikeswar temple granted by Swargadeo Siva Singha (1714-15 C.E)

Swargadeo Siva Singha granted this copper plate inscription to Raghunandan, the son of Bagish Bhattacharya.¹⁷ The language of the inscription is Tai-Ahom. The dimensions of the plate are 31.1 cm by 11.2 cm.¹⁸ The inscription is written on both sides, one side contains 9 lines and the side contains 6 lines, making a total of 15 lines.

¹⁶ Ibid- Pg-215.

¹⁷Gogoi, Nityananda., *Buranjie Porokha Biswanath Prantor*.Guwahati:Prithivi Publication,1990.Pg-215.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹Ibid, Pg-215-16.

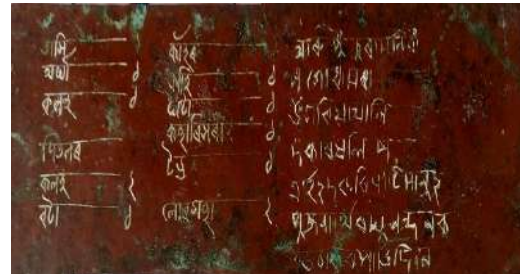
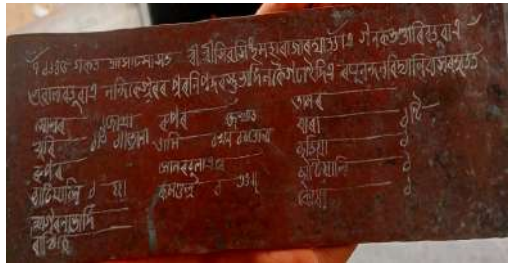


Fig. 3:- Inscription of Nandikeswar temple granted by swargadeo Siva Singha (1723 C.E.)

In the year 1645 Shaka, the old items of the Nandikeswar temple were dismantled and replaced with new ones, which were then handed over to the priest Raghunandan.²⁰ These included many valuable items made of gold, silver, copper, brass and bronze. The dimensions of the plate are 24 cm by 7.5 cm. Notably, the reverse side of this plate also mentions the grant of land.²¹ At present, the plate is preserved at the residence of the temple priest. The language of this inscription is Assamese.

Temple's significance as Shaiva Pilgrimage site:

Shaivism, a major sect within Hinduism, venerates Lord Siva as the supreme deity, embodying the dual principles of destruction and regeneration within the cosmic cycle. The worship of Lord Siva in Assam, deeply rooted in the region's history, is a vibrant part of its spiritual and cultural life. Known as Shaivism, this tradition sees Siva as the supreme God who destroys evil and brings new beginnings. Assam, once called Kamarupa in ancient times, with many temples built along the Brahmaputra River, has been a hub for Siva worship for centuries. The Ahom kings, who ruled for nearly 600 years from the 13th century, further spread Shaivism by building grand temples. For example, the Siva dol in Sivasagar, built in 1734 by Queen Ambika, is a stunning temple with a golden dome, showing the Ahoms' devotion to Siva.²² The Negheriting Siva dol in Golaghat, another ancient site, was first built by the

Kachari people in the 8th century and later rebuilt by Ahom king Rajeswar Singha in 1765.²³ These temples show how rulers made Siva worship a big part of Assam's culture. It is noteworthy that the Nandikeswar Temple is also an integral part of the development of Shaivism in Assam. It stands as a prominent example of the growth of Shaivite traditions during the Ahom reign in the region. In this temple, lord Siva is worshipped in his aniconic aspect. The lower part of the sanctum of this Shaiva Peetha is built with stone, while the upper part is constructed with bricks. About 2 meters of the stone-built lower section lies underground. This part is rectangular in shape. At the centre of this rectangular sanctum, there is a circular pit, and inside this pit, a large stone, along with numerous smaller stones, can be seen. It appears that all these stones are worshipped as representations of the Siva *linga*. Upon close observation, it becomes clear that the pit is man-made and not naturally formed. The entire pit area is worshipped as a symbol of Siva. The pit is connected to a nearby pond through a brick pipe, allowing the water and milk offered in the pit to flow directly into the pond through it. The name of this temple directly associates it with the worship of lord Siva. This is because 'Nandikeswar' means lord Siva mounted on his vehicle Nandi, is referred to as Nandikeswar. However, the local people refer to this temple as the 'Budhagosain Devalaya' instead of Nandikeswar. Shivaratri is the main festival celebrated here.

II. Conclusion

The Nandikeswar temple is one of the prominent historical sites in Assam, particularly within the undivided Sonitpur district. Originally constructed in 1697 under the patronage of Ahom king Swargadeo Rudra Singha, the temple was later re-constructed during the reign of another Ahom

²⁰Rajkumar, Sarbananda., *Itihase Soaura Chasahata Bachar*, Makhan Hazarika, Banalata, Natun Bazar, Dibrugarh-I, 2023, Pg- 216.

²¹Gogoi, Nityananda., *Buranjie Porokha Biswanath Prantor*. Guwahati: Prithivi Publication, 1990. Pg- 216-17.

²² Neog, Maheswar., (ed). *Pravitra Axom*. Dhemaaji: Kiran Publication, 1990. Pg-90.

²³ Ibid.



King Swargadeo Siva Singha (1723). This temple exemplifies the strong royal support for Shaivism that prevailed during the Ahom era in Assam. Interestingly, the stone artifacts located in front of the temple have long puzzled historians. These carvings have led some to speculate that the temple might have originally been constructed in the 9th or 10th century C.E.. However, this view lacks definitive scholarly support. It is noteworthy that the lower portion of the temple's sanctum is built using stone bricks, while the upper structure is constructed with baked bricks. Most of the temple and religious structures built during the Ahom period in Assam were made using baked bricks, which aligns with this construction style. Taking all these aspects into consideration, it is my personal belief that this temple was most likely re-constructed under the patronage of Rudra Singha. The temple was constructed in the characteristic Nagara style typical in Assam architecture. Yet, based on the architectural features, it can be stated that the temple was constructed during the Ahom reign.

Illustrations-



Fig. 4:- Figure of Nandikeswar temple (source: Google, commons.wikimedia.org)

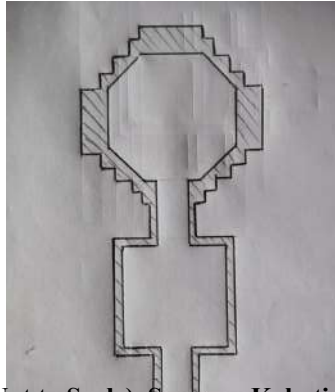


Fig. 5: Plan of Nandikeswar temple (Not to Scale), Source:- Kakati, Swapna. Archaeology of the Northern Bank of Brahmaputra Valley: A study of the Monuments, Sites and Ancient Remains. PhD Thesis. Dibrugarh University, 2020. Pg- xviii, (Figure Illustrations).

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Fig. 7: Door-frame of the temple and ancient remains of the temple.

Ratha



Fig. 6: Figure of Kunda (Nandikeswar temple)

- [1]. Baruah, S.L. A *Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1995.
- [2]. Gogoi, Nityananda., *Buranjie Porokha Bishwanath Prantor*, Guwahati: Prithivi Publication, 1990.
- [3]. Kakati, Swapna, Archaeology of the Northern bank of upper Brahmaputra valley: A study of the Monuments, Sites and Ancient Remains. PhD Thesis. Dibrugarh University, 2020.
- [4]. Rajkumar, Sarbananda., *Itihase Soaura Chasahata Bachar*, Makhan Hazarika, Banalata, Natun Bazar, Dibrugarh-I, 2023
- [5]. Neog, Maheswar, (ed.),. *Pravitra Axom*. Dhemaji: Kiran Publication, 1960.

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