



EARLY-MEDIEVAL TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE OF ABHAYAPURI–LALMATI: A STUDY OF THE GANESH TEMPLE

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Abstract: *The term ‘early medieval’ is applied in Indian history to the period extending from circa 600 to 1200 CE. It symbolises a phase of transition between the ancient and the medieval times that was not only marked by the emergence of distinctive regional entities but also witnessed the evolution of different regional temple styles in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The Nagara style of temple architecture saw its fully matured form in the temples of Orissa and Khajuraho and its influence spread across the temples of eastern India i.e. Bengal and Assam. Regional variations nevertheless marked the Nagara temple architectural style of Eastern India. In this regard, the region of lower Assam—especially in the undivided Goalpara district comprising of Goalpara, Pancharatna, and Abhayapur has provided evidence of several temples that were constructed in imitation of the temples of Odisha and Khajuraho. Among these, the Ganesh Temple of Abhayapuri–Lalmati stands out for its architectural and stylistic uniqueness. The present paper makes an attempt to identify the distinctive architectural features of the temple and also to examine its regional traits.*

Keywords: *Architecture, Sculpture, Temple, Regional, Medieval*

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Introduction

The archaeological landscape of early Assam has been largely marked by accidental discoveries that offer valuable insight into the artistic heritage of the region. Assam known as Prāḡjyotisha-Kāmarupain the Epico- Puranic times was

bounded by the river Karatoya in the west and the Dikkaravasini in the east. Prāḡjyotisha- Kāmarupa saw the rule of three main ruling dynasties namely the Varmans, the Salastambhas and the Palas of Assam. Unfortunately, there exists no

continuous or comprehensive documentation of the architectural development of Assam from the earliest times in a systematic manner. Although epigraphic evidence mentions about extension of royal patronage to temple building, temple ruins have been recovered from several sites with very few intact temples. Most of the temples built in the early phase have not survived owing to natural calamities like earthquakes or erosion. Despite these challenges, archaeological excavations conducted has made it possible to study certain important monuments of the period, one of these being the Ganesh Temple of Abhayapuri, situated in the western part of Assam. The temple is situated at a distance of 30 km from the district headquarter of earlier undivided Goalpara district. Natural disasters such as earthquakes may have caused severe damage to this temple in the early times. But the remnants of the temple stand as a testimony of its architectural glory.

The archaeological remains discovered from the site make this monument a vital subject for research in the domain of early medieval temple architecture of Assam. No concrete records exist about the nature of the presiding deity of this temple. Local traditions attribute the temple being dedicated to Lord Ganesha.

Ganesha Worship and the Abhayapuri Temple

The Ganesh Temple of Abhayapuri is located at Lalmati–Duramari village near present day Abhayapuri (Neog:1991: 304). The site holds historical importance as it has yielded a large number of architectural fragments dating from the 7th to 13th centuries CE. However, it is difficult to ascertain with certainty the original presiding deity (*adhishtatri devata*) of this temple. Due to the limited historical evidence of *Ganapatya* (Ganesha) worship in early medieval Assam, it cannot be stated decisively that the temple was originally dedicated to Lord Ganesha. Among the remains lies an exquisitely carved pedestal with a

cavity at its centre, suggesting that it once held an idol—possibly a lingam or some other deity. This pedestal is very similar to one discovered at Mikir Ati near Doboka. In Lalmati nearby, a Ganesha figure is still worshipped by the local population. Oral testimonies claim that the tradition of Ganesha worship prevailed among the Koch royal family of Bijni Estate in this very same site. As such, the site was associated with the Ganesha cult and is still locally famous and worshipped as the Ganesh Temple.

Although evidence of Ganesha worship in the early medieval times in Assam is scarce, the discovery of some sculptures such as the Ganesha figure at Basundhari Than near Chaparmukh, dancing figure of Ganesha at Haleswar in Tezpur, and the Mayong Ganesha sculpture—indicate sporadic cases of the worship of the deity. However, these do not establish any wide-spread or systematic *Ganapatya* cult in Assam. It is, however, possible to deduce that the Lalmati site had very high religious affiliation with Ganesha worship, although the original deity could have been something else.

Architectural Features

From a careful scrutiny of the sources and the available architectural elements of the temple, it is seen that two fundamental features characterise the monument. The first is that it has a *pancharatha* plan of Indian temple architecture. The *pancharatha* plan is typically found in a majority of the temples of Assam belonging to 11th-12th century with the exception of Malini Than. The second characteristic of the temple under study is its base (*pitha*) which is rectangular in shape. In the field of architecture, the temple is particularly notable for being one of the earliest sites in Assam to exhibit a *pista* or *jagati*—a raised platform on which the main shrine stands. Such elevated bases are typical of the Nagara style, seen prominently in the temples of Khajuraho. In some of the more mature stage of the Nagara temples of Odisha, this

architectural element is rare, occurring only in a few temples such as the Mukteshwar and Rajarani.

At Abhayapuri, the platform was constructed using brick walls filled with earth to create an elevated platform measuring about 1.5 meters in height. The bricks measure between 27cm × 18cm × 6 cm and 19cm × 14 cm × 5 cm. The temple was likely to have been destroyed by an earthquake or a similar natural calamity, making the reconstruction of its original plan challenging. The side of the square *mandapa* is almost 6 metres and it could be assumed that the temple was a big temple like the popular North Indian structures. Some of the contemporary Pala temples from the Kapili-Yamuna valley region were relatively smaller structures on the other hand.

Among the excavated remains are door jambs and sculpted door frames featuring rich carvings. These include figures of Nataraja, *Kirtimukha*, dancing Ganesha, *Dvarapalas* (door guardians), dancing maidens, and Brahma. Stylistically, these sculptures correspond closely with those discovered in the Kapili–Jamuna Valley reflecting a shared aesthetic and technical tradition. Although the craftsmanship is of high quality, the facial features and ornamentation differ somewhat from those prescribed in canonical Indian *Shilpa Shastras*. While the sculptures of Kapili Jamuna valley follow the prescribed canonical norms as laid down in the *Shilpa Shastras*, it is likely that the sculptors of this temple drew inspiration from the sculptural conventions prevalent among the Sena rulers of Bengal. The presence of both Nataraja and Ganesha images together is significant as such depictions are rare in the temple art of Assam and generally found only in carved panels. A large number of stone slabs have been found that could have been a part of lintel or door jamb as well as *bada*, *jangha* or other elements related to an early-medieval temple. Moreover, the presence of a big *amalaka* in the site defines the presence of a big temple like that found at Madan-Kamdev or Deo Parvat.

From the surviving remains, it appears that the temple consisted mainly of a *garbhagriha* (sanctum) and a *mandapa* (hall). The sanctum and the hall stand intact. Scholars have also hypothesised the existence of a *torana* (arched gateway), supported by fragments resembling its columns. A notable discovery from the site includes a beautifully carved *chandratapa* (arched ceiling slab), measuring about 2 meters in length and 40 cm in width, with a large *Vishwapadma* (cosmic lotus) motif of about 1.1 meters in diameter at its centre. This structure provides insight into the probable dimensions of the sanctum. Door lintels measuring 2.2 m × 42 cm, adorned with carvings of Vishnu, Ganesha, *Kirtimukha*, and Brahma, further affirm the temple's rich iconographic heritage as well as cultural glory (Sarma: 1988: 36). Another square stone, 2 m × 2 m × 40 cm, likely served as the ceiling of the *mandapa* due to its similarity in thickness and design with the *chandratapa* of the *garbhagriha*.

A noteworthy feature is that part of the door frame bears carvings of entwined serpents—an extremely rare motif in the temple sculpture of Assam. While anthropomorphic representations of a male and female serpent are seen on the door jambs of the Dah Parbatiya stone gateway in Assam, entwined serpents are less common. This suggests a link between the temple and ancient serpent cults or *Naga* veneration (*Sarpa Puja*) traditions (Nath:2015: 28). The ground plan also suggests the *panchayatana* layout—five shrines dedicated to five deities arranged in a specific geometric order, a pattern seen in North Indian temple architecture.

Symbolism and Artistic Value

The artistic expression of the Ganesh Temple at Lalmati reveals that early medieval temple architecture of Assam was deeply intertwined with spiritual philosophy rather than being confined to structural or ornamental concerns. The motif of the *Kirtimukha*—the ferocious

protective lion face often placed above the temple lintels embodies the idea of purification. Equally significant is the depiction of Nataraja, representing the perpetual cycle of creation and dissolution, a theme resonant with the Shaivite cosmology prevalent in the region. Also, motifs like *Kalpavriksha* defines the sacred element related to the greater Hindu mythology. Every sculptural fragment, as it depicts deities, flower arabesques, or geometric formations, is a visual hymn—an aesthetic expression of devotion inscribed in stone. Carvings at Lalmati thus go beyond mere decoration; they reflect intimacy between art, religion, and philosophy. Even in their fragmented state, these sculptures attest the exceptional aesthetic sensibility and technical competence of the sculptors of Assam who, although working on the fringes of the broader Indian artistic legacy, developed a distinct style of their own exhibiting regional traits.

Chronology and Structural Evolution

Archaeological analysis of the various elements of the temple indicates that the sanctum of this temple was constructed not earlier than the 10th or 11th century CE. Based on stylistic features, it is reasonable to assign the temple to the 11th–12th centuries CE. However, it appears that the *garbhagriha* (sanctum) and the *mandapa* (assembly hall) may have been built during different phases. Variations in the door decoration, stone texture, and craftsmanship between these sections suggest that the both these structures of the temple were not constructed simultaneously (Sarma:1988: 38). Similar architectural features belonging to the early medieval period in Assam is seen in temples such as the Gupteswar Temple near Singri and several shrines around Tezpur. Even in the temples of Guwahati, historical evidence points to multiple phases of reconstruction and renovation (for example the Kamakhya temple was rebuilt and renovated almost four times). In the case of Abhayapuri, however, determining the

exact time gap between the construction of the sanctum and the *mandapa* remains a complex and uncertain task in the light of our present state of evidence.

Contemporary Influences on the Architecture and Sculpture

The Abhayapuri Ganesh Temple (Fig.5.1) shows a clear combination of brick and stone, a hallmark of early-medieval temples of Assam. This kind of blending most likely reflects the influence of the Pala dynasty of Bengal, under whom brick architecture flourished. The stylistic parallels between the Abhayapuri temple and the temples of the Kapili–Jamuna Valley in Nagaon are remarkable (Nath: 2015:27). The architectural elements at Abhayapuri may even predate those of Kapili–Jamuna valley of Nagaon. As mentioned earlier, the use of a *pistha* or *jagati* appears here for the first time, a feature not common in the temples of the early period of Assam. While the temples of Khajuraho extensively employed such raised platforms, the temples of Odisha that stylistically resemble those from Assam used this feature sparingly. This difference may be attributed to geographical and cultural factors. The ground plan of the Abhayapuri Ganesh temple has an uncommon shape which is not usually seen in most of the North Indian temples; the ground plan of the temple also bears a close resemblance to that of the Parashurameshvara Temple of Odisha, built in the 8th–9th century CE (Brown: 1942: Plates LXXXI). It was in this temple that the *mandapa* or assembly hall was first introduced in front of the sanctum. Yet, judging by the surviving fragments, the ceiling and carvings of the Abhayapuri temple seem to display a more advanced artistic sensibility.

Culturally, the Lalmati–Abhayapuri site is representative of Assam's active engagement as part of a larger trans-regional cultural interaction of artistic and religious thought. In the 10th–12th centuries CE, Brahmanical religion in India

witnessed the growth of different sectarian cults. Among these, Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Shakta predominated. The rise of sectarian cults was simultaneously followed by a process of religious syncretism. The temple of Abhayapuri stands out as an example of artistic excellence and architectural uniqueness.

Conclusion

The Ganesh Temple of Abhayapuri–Lalmati stands as a silent witness to a vital chapter in the history of Assam’s architectural evolution. It demonstrates the existence of Ganapatya worship in the region,

the prevalence of unique architectural features such as the presence of *pista* or *jagati* and the existence of a rich collection of sculptural and architectural fragments. The site is invaluable for the study of Assam’s cultural and artistic heritage. Despite its historical and architectural importance, the site remains largely neglected by mainstream historians and archaeologists. Systematic excavations and scientific studies could in the near future unveil new and significant information about the development of temple architecture in early medieval Assam for reshaping our understanding of the region’s cultural landscape and rich historical heritage.

Illustrations



Fig. 5.1

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