



“MAGHNOA DOL: A REFLECTION OF LATE MEDIEVAL TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE AND ICONOGRAPHY OF ASSAM”

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Abstract: Maghnoa Dol is a late medieval temple of Assam and stands as a testimony to the region's steady growth of temple building and image making. The structure belongs to the later phase of Ahom patronage. It stands as a point where belief, royal guidance, and local skill come together. The structure of the dol follows the usual Assamese late medieval temple architectural style. It has a central sanctum called the garbhagriha, an antarala that links the inner and outer spaces and a mandapa that opens the approach for worship. The building stands on an elevated base. It is made mainly of brick and shows small changes that respond to Assam's climate. The temple carries a full range of sculptural icons which include figures of Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, Surya, Ganesha, Kartikeya, and Indra. The sculptures show the religious choices of the local society and also show small local variations that mark the region's taste. The icons present mythic scenes and ritual meaning and it points to the active cultural life of the medieval period. This paper studies the temple's history, architectural plan and sculptural designs and attempts to locate its place in the cultural life of the Ahoms. The present work is based on field observations and written sources. Here, the author tries to highlight how this particular monument reflects regional style, royal support and the subtle practice of image worship.

Keywords: Maghnoa Dol, Ahom period, Assamese temple form, iconography, cultural heritage.

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Introduction

Temple architecture in Assam reflects an amalgamation of belief, culture, and visual form. Assamese temples grew as local types. They did not follow the large northern or southern styles. They used regional materials, weather-friendly plans, and symbolic layouts (Choudhury 1987).

Maghnoa *Dol* holds a distinct place within these monuments. It stands as an example of late medieval temple building. This research uses both primary and secondary materials. Primary source has been collected through field visit to the temple site. Secondary data includes published works of various scholars who have written on this region. The objective of this paper is to study the architecture and sculptures of Maghnoa *Dol* in detail. By examining its history, its layout, its sculptural images, and its cultural role, the study shows the value of this monument in the field of art history in Assam.

Historical Background

The Ahom dynasty of Tai origin entered the Brahmaputra valley in the 13th century. They slowly established political control. They later accepted Hinduism, supported temple construction, and encouraged artistic work (Gogoi 1991). Maghnoa *Dol* belongs to this later stage of Ahom patronage. At this time, temple building became a tool of both worship and authority. The *dol* stands in Maghnoa village of Narayanpur block in Lakhimpur district. According to Changrung Phukan's *Buranji*, it was built in 1721 C.E. under the Ahom *Swargadeo* Siva Singha. The structure still survives and remains in good condition.

Architectural Features

The Ahoms tried to follow the older the building traditions that existed prior to their coming to power. They shifted to brick construction and moved away from stone and from temporary materials like wood, cane, and bamboo. During the reign of King Pratap Singha (1603 C.E.–1641 C.E.), the Viswanath temple was built. But this temple cannot be located today due to the absence of archaeological evidence. A major phase of Ahom architecture began under King Gadadhar Singha (1660 C.E.–1686 C.E.) and continued until the reign of King Rajeswar Singha (1751 C.E.–1769 C.E.). These rulers built

many sacred structures. Only a few remain on the northern bank of the upper Brahmaputrabravally. King Rudra Singha (1696 C.E.–1714 C.E.) built temples of many forms. He brought trained masons and building knowledge from Bengal. He supported construction in several places. He was likely the first Ahom ruler to turn the Assamese cottage model into the *do-chala* form and to use it both as separate buildings and as *mandapas* for temples. The remains of Dhandi *Dol* and the Nandikeswar *Devalaya* show the architectural character of that stage. Rudra Singha's son Siva Singha (1714 C.E.–1744 C.E.) also encouraged temple building. Many temples were created then. In this area, Maghnoa *Dol* is the only surviving structure of his time. King Rajeswar Singha (1751 C.E.–1769 C.E.) built the largest number of temples in late medieval Assam. After Laxmi Singha, Ahom building activity declined. Events like the Moamaria uprising and the Anglo-Burmese war contributed to this decline.

The ground plan of Maghnoa *Dol* has three parts: the *garbhagriha*, the *antarala*, and the *mandapa*. The *garbhagriha* is octagonal. Its circumference is 30.5 meters. It has one doorway leading to the *antarala*. This doorway is 1.45 meters wide. The *antarala* is 2.1 meters long and 1.2 meters wide. Its internal height is 2.25 meters. It links the *garbhagriha* with the *mandapa*. The *mandapa* is 7.8 meters long and 6.75 meters wide. Its internal height is 4.2 meters. The interior walls of all three units, i.e., *garbhagriha*, *antarala*, and *mandapa* carry no decoration.

The temple rises to about 14.14 meters. Its elevation has four parts: the *pada*, the *jangha* or main body, the *varanda*, and the *mastaka* or *sikhara*. The *pada* or *pistha* is octagonal. The *jangha* stands above it. *Devakosthas* appear on the outer surface of the *jangha*. Each row holds five niches. Two rows are present on each wall. Stone sculptures of various gods and goddesses are placed inside these niches. Above the *jangha*, a well-balanced *varanda* runs around the structure.

A horizontal band of terracotta lotus designs, each with four full petals, appears in this *varanda*.

The *sikhara* follows the Northern or *Nagara* type. Its unusual trait is its octagonal dome form, unlike the usual conical shape. The outer surface shows a convex curve. Above the *sikhara* are the *beki*, the *amalaka*, the *khupri*, and the *trisula*.

The plan and the elevation of Maghnoa Dol resemble the Garakhia Dol of Nazira. The plans of the *garbhagriha* and the *mandapa* are similar. But the *jangha* of Garakhia Dol has four niches in each row, unlike the five niches of Maghnoa Dol. The *sikhara* of Garakhia Dol is conical, while that of Maghnoa Dol is dome-like. (Figures 4.1 and 4.2)

IconographicDescription

In India, deities have been worshipped in iconic forms since very early times. Iconic examples appear even in the Indus Valley period. The Rig Veda contains hymns that hint at iconic ideas. These ideas form the base of a long-lasting iconographic tradition. Texts on image making include the *Brihatsamhita* (ch. 58), *Sukraniti* (ch. IV), *Vishnudharmottara* (part III), *Matsya Purana* (ch. IV), and *Agni Purana* (ch. 49) (Kakati 2024: 29).

Icon of Vishnu

Within the Hindu pantheon, *Vishnu* is the protector of the universe. Descriptions of his form appear in many texts. These include the *Mahabharata*, *Brihatsamhita*, *Matsya Purana*, *Vishnudharmuttara*, *Narasimha Purana*, and *Kalika Purana* (Kakati 2024:32). All four Vedas—the Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva mention *Vishnu*. They speak of his three strides across the universe. The *Vishnu* of the Brahmanical tradition brings together three earlier concepts: *Vasudeva-Krishna*, *Vishnu*, and *Narayana*. The *Kalika Purana* mentions that Surya came from *Vishnu*'s eyes, the Moon from his heart, *Vayu* from his ears, and fire from his face.

Vishnu images appear in four attitudes: *sthanaka* (standing), *asana* (sitting), *sayana* (resting), and *anantasayi*. These attitudes are further divided as *Yoga*, *Bhoga*, *Vira*, and *Abhicharika*, based on the needs of the worshipper. Each category is again grouped into *uttama*, *madhyama*, and *adhama*, depending on the attendants and accessories shown. The *Vishnu* images of this locality do not always follow these full classifications. *Vishnu* has ten *avatars*. Some texts list twenty-four forms or *Caturvimsati Murtayah*, such as the *Padma Purana*, *Agni Purana*, *Rup Mandan*, and *Brihatsamhita* (Kakati 2024:33).

A *Vishnu* icon appears at Maghnoa Dol in Narayanpur. It is installed on the exterior wall of the *garbhagriha*. The figure stands in the *samapada-sthanaka* pose on a simple pedestal. Its height is 75 cm and its width is 55 cm. The deity has four arms. The upper right hand holds a *gada*. The upper left holds a *chakra*. The lower right holds a *padma*. The lower left holds a *sankha*. The figure wears a simple *kiritamukuta*, *kundalas*, *haras*, *valayas*, and a *vanamala* (*vaijayanti*). The *kativastra* is a long *dhota* reaching the ankles. There are no attendant figures. This image shows similarities with *Vishnu* sculptures made by Sena-period artists of Bengal. When compared with the *Vishnu* image from Sundarban in 24 Parganas, all these sculptures show the same standing posture. The four objects—*padma*, *gada*, *chakra*, and *sankha*—appear in the same clockwise order. It seems that the sculptors of the northern bank of the upper Brahmaputra valley followed the same working pattern used by the Sena sculptors.

Avatars of Vishnu

Some of *Vishnu*'s *avatars* appear in Maghnoa Dol. The image of *Parasurama* is the only one now available. It belongs to the sixth *avatara*. Its description appears in several texts, including the *Mahabharata* (Chappekar: 163), *Vishnudharmottara* (Mankodi. 492; Hazra, 190),

Vishnu Purana (Rao:185), and *Agni Purana* (Banerjia: 420).

The *Parasurama* image at Maghnoa Dol measures 75 cm by 55 cm. The deity stands in the *samapada-sthanaka* pose. The figure has two hands. The right hand holds a *parasu*. The object in the left hand is unclear. The style resembles the images at Cole Park. It also resembles examples from Bamuni Hill. But the Maghnoa Dol images are larger in size.

Saiva icons

Siva is a major god in the Brahmanical tradition. He represents *samhara* or the act of destruction. He is the supreme deity in Saivism. Archaeology does not give clear clues about the early rise of Saivism in this region. *Siva* was worshiped here in many iconographic forms during ancient and medieval times.

One icon of *Siva* is seen at Maghnoa Dol of Narayanpur. It is placed on the outer wall of the *garbhagriha*. The image is 75 centimetres high and 55 centimetres wide. The god has four arms. The deity sits on his *vahana* which is the Nandi bull. The upper right hand holds a snake. The lower right hand holds a trisula. The upper left hand holds a gada. The fourth hand has no weapon. The headdress is a *kiritamukuta*. This headgear is unusual for *Siva* in the Assamese region. The figure has *haras*, *keyuras*, *valayas* and *kundalas*. The style hints at a tribal touch which may reflect a local variation like the Deopani image.

Icon of Devi

Gajalaksmi

Laxmi is the consort of *Vishnu*. She is known by names such as Sri, Padma, Gajalaksmi and Kamala. The *Vishnudharmottara* (Kauli: 143) gives her iconographic details. Gajalaksmi is one of the eight forms of the goddess. This motif has been common in Assam since early times.

An icon of Gajalaksmi is present at Maghnoa Dol of Narayanpur. It is set on the outer wall of

the *garbhagriha*. The height is 75 centimetres and the width is 55 centimetres. The goddess sits on a lotus in *padmasana*. She has two hands. One hand holds a lotus. The mudra of the other hand is unclear. She has a *karandamukuta*, *haras*, *kundalas* and *kangkanas*. Four elephants stand near her. Two elephants are on each side. Each elephant carries a vase in the trunk. They pour water over the goddess.

Surya icons

Surya is an important god in the Brahmanical pantheon. He appears as a major solar deity in Vedic and post-Vedic tradition. The *Mahabharata* (Chappekar: 195), the *Brihatsamhita* (Bhattacharya: 151), the *Matsya Purana* (Gopinath Rao: 185) and the *Agni Purana* (Bhattacharya :151) describe the rules for making his image.

One icon of Surya in asana form with a chariot is found at Maghnoa Dol. It is placed on the outer wall of the *garbhagriha*. It is carved on a stone slab. The height is 60 centimetres and the width is 55 centimetres. The deity sits in *padmasana* on a double-petalled lotus placed on the chariot. He wears a *kirita-mukuta*, *kundalas*, *haras*, *keyuras* and *kangkanas*. He wears a dhoti. The upper body is bare. The charioteer Aruna appears in front. He holds the reins. Seven horses are carved in running posture. One wheel of the *ratha* appears behind the central horse. The legs of Aruna are not visible. No attendant figure is shown.

Ganesha

Ganesha is a very important deity in Hindu worship. He is called *Ganapati*, *Vinayaka* and *Vighneswara*. He is the son of *Siva* and *Parvati*. The *Aitareya Brahmana* gives an early reference to *Ganapati*. Here, *Ganapati* is linked with *Brahma* or *Brihaspati*. The *Baudhayana Dharma Sutra* lists names such as *Vighna*, *Vinayaka*, *Sthula*, *Hastimukha*, *Vakratunda*, *Ekdanta* and *Lambodara*. Texts like the *Brihatsamhita*, the *Matsya Purana*, the *Vishnudharmottara*,

the *Uttarkamikagama* and the *Rupamandana* describe the icon of *Ganesha* (Kakati 2024). The *Vishnudharmottara* says that *Vinayaka* should have an elephant face and four hands. He holds a trident and a rosary in his right hands. His left hands hold a *parasu* and a vase of *laduka* sweets.

One icon of *Ganesha* is found at Maghnoa Dol of Narayanpur. It is placed on the outer wall of the *garbhagriha*. The height is 60 centimetres and the width is 55 centimetres. The god sits on his *vahana* which is the rat. The deity has four hands. The right front hand holds a snake. The left front hand holds a *trisula*. The objects in the other two hands are unclear. The trunk and tusks are damaged. The dress and ornaments are also unclear.

Kartika

Kartikeya is the son of *Siva* and *Parvati*. He is known as *Skanda*, *Kumara*, *Murugan* and *Swaminath*. He is popular in South India as *Subramanya*. He is the Hindu god of war. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* narrate accounts of his birth. Texts like the *Vishnudharmottara* and the *Brihatsamhita* (Kauli: 143) describe his icon. The *Vishnudharmottara* mentions four forms which are *Kumara*, *Skanda*, *Visakha* and *Guha*. *Kumara* has six faces. His *vahana* is the peacock. He wears red cloth. *Kartikeya* may have two, four, six, eight or twelve hands.

The icon of *Kartikeya* at Maghnoa Dol is unusual because it has six heads. This form is rare in Assam. The deity holds a *bana* and a *dhanu*. This feature matches the icon near the Viswakarma temple at Nilachal foothill. The number of hands varies in different sites. The icons at Da-Parbatiya and Basudev Dol have two hands. The icons at Maghnoa Dol and Biswanath Ghat have four hands. The icon at Urvasi Island also has two hands like those at Biswanath Ghat and Da-Parbatiya. The icons of Nagaon district resemble those of Da-Parbatiya and Malinithan. All are shown in *ardhaparyankasana*.

Indra

Indra appears in Hindu mythology as the king of the gods. He guards the eastern direction. The *Mahabharata* (Chappekar: 122), the *Brihatsamhita* (Banerjea: 523), the *Matsya Purana* (Mankodi: 115), and the *Vishnudharmottara* (Banerjea: 523) give his iconographic form. The *Agni Purana*, the *Rupamandana*, the *Silparatna* and the *Agamas* describe more features (Kauli: 128). *Indra* holds a *vajra*. His *vahana* is *Airavata*.

An icon of *Indra* is found at Maghnoa Dol of Narayanpur. It is placed on the outer wall of the *garbhagriha*. It measures 60 by 55 centimetres. The icon is made of sandstone. The god sits on his *vahana* which is *Airavata*. The left hand holds a *vajra*. The deity wears a *kiritamukuta*, *kundalas*, *hara* and *valayas*. The usual ornaments are present. His consort *Indrani* does not appear here. He wears a long *kativastra*. *Airavata* is carved neatly on a plain pedestal. No attendant figure is carved.

Cultural and Religious Significance

Maghnoa Dol served as a sacred space and also as a cultural centre. Festivals, music and dance formed part of its devotional setting. The structure and images convey the worldview of medieval Assamese society. Religion and artistry moved together in this space. The temple also shows the Ahom rulers' plan to affirm their authority through acts of piety and cultural support. (Fig. 5.3)

Conclusion

The study of Maghnoa Dol demonstrates the maturity of late medieval Assamese temple architecture and iconography under Ahom patronage. The monument brings together structural planning, regional aesthetic choices, and a strong devotional framework. Its architectural scheme, with the *garbhagriha*, *antarala*, and *mandapa*, reflects a coherent understanding of sacred spatial organisation. The elevation, material use, and adaptation to local environmental conditions

show the technical competence of the builders. The sculptural programme, which includes major deities of the Brahmanical pantheon, illustrates the dynamic religious life of the period and the capacity of local artisans to respond to established iconographic norms while retaining regional features.

Maghnoa Dol also represents the cultural direction of the Ahom state during its later phase. The temple expresses royal support for sacred construction and reflects the integration of political authority with religious practice. The icons of Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, Surya, Ganesha, Kartikeya, and Indra demonstrate the wide devotional horizon of the community and the continuity of ritual traditions. As a surviving example of its time, Maghnoa Dol holds considerable value for understanding the artistic, religious, and social history of the northern bank of the upper Brahmaputra valley. Its sustained scholarly engagement will not only secure its preservation but also reposition it as a critical reference point in the broader cartography of South Asian temple studies.

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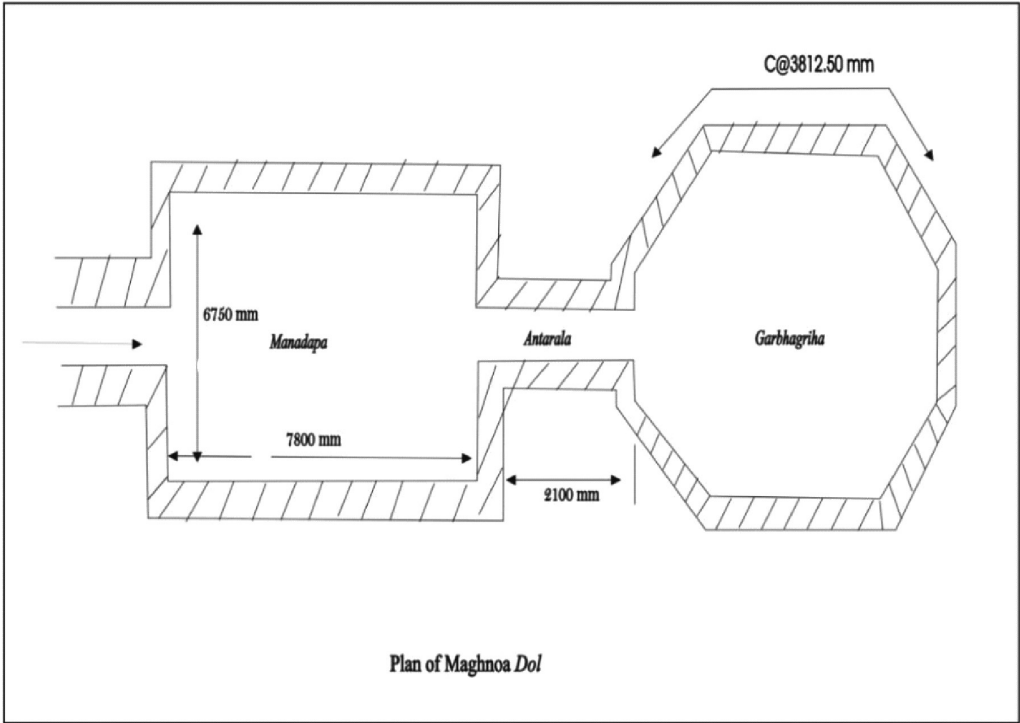


Fig. 4.1:

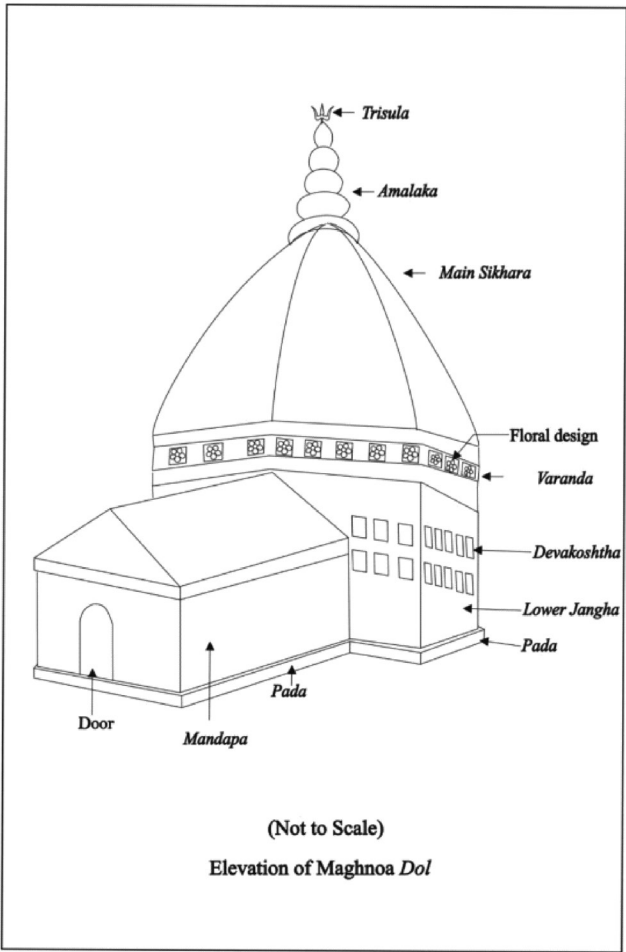


Fig. 4.2:



Fig. 4.3: Image of the Maghnoa Dol