



SECULAR SCULPTURES OF THE TEMPLES OF SIBSAGAR IN ASSAM, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The temples of Sibsagar district, of Assam are centres of a rich sculptural heritage with countless images of divinities, celestial beings, myths and legends. Resplendently reliefs carved in stone, terracotta, stucco or wood are found here. These temples, built under the patronage of the Ahom kings, who established their kingdom in the region by the 13th century, follow a similar trend of associating religion in art forms. However, in Sibsagar or medieval Rangpur which was the capital city of the Ahom rulers, low relief motifs of fascinating foliage, creepers, geometric designs, local flora and fauna can be found profusely. Reliefs from the Puranas, scenes from daily life activities, contemporary manners of the nobility and the common people, hunting and war scenes have been carved along with the religious sculptures. This paper makes an attempt to provide an overview of the secular sculptures of the erstwhile Sibsagar district of Assam.

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Introduction

The town of Sibsagar is located at 26.9826°N, 94.6425°E in Sibsagar District in the state of Assam in north eastern India. It corresponds to the medieval city of Rangpur, the capital of the Ahom kingdom in the 18th century CE. The Ahoms ruled over a major portion of the Brahmaputra Valley from 1228-

1826 CE and patronised art and architecture. The temples of the Sibsagar region include those found in the town of Sibsagar and the outlying areas like Jaisagar, Gaurisagar and Kalugaon. The sculptures of Sibsagar are mostly found on the religious structures such as temples, as well as on secular structures like bridges, palaces and pavilions.

The sculptures of this period display a marked difference from those of the preceding period that had been influenced by the art of the Ganga valley. The sculptural art of Sibsagar reflect techniques that were borrowed from the art of Koch- Behar and Mughal art. The use of new symbols and mythical creatures are novel motifs that were very often fused with local elements.

The walls of the religious structures have images of Visnu, Sakti, Siva, etc. in their anthropomorphic forms. Secular sculptures from the *Puranas* and the Epics, combat scenes of animals both real and mythical, creepers, flora and fauna, symbols such as the flying dragon (the royal insignia of the Ahom government), stylized lions and the *makara or magara* are found extensively in the art of the Sibsagar region. The sculptures are found on a variety of materials, like stone, stucco and terracotta, but often resemble wood carvings. They are in a variety of postures, with faces generally in profile or facing front. While some sculptures have a rounded aspect most human figures display a sturdy physiognomy.

Like the *Mahabharata*, which is said to contain a reference to all things that exist, the profuse carvings outside Hindu temples were meant to represent all that exist in nature. The Ahom structures, following this tradition are not exclusively formed of religious imagery but also secular art. Men, women, mendicants, monsters, musicians and dancers, animals and vegetal world, especially creepers and lotuses were carved independently, or as adherent to deities are to be found on the temple walls.

General Features of the Sculptures

Among the temples of the Sibsagar region is the Jaidol, located at Jaisagar. This temple was constructed by the Ahom monarch Rudra Singha to commemorate his mother Jaimoti Konwari. It is profusely adorned with sculptures. We find stone figures depicted in niches upon the outer wall of the temple (Dutta: 1990:126). Numerous images both secular and religious are sculpted here. The initial stages of the sculptural art of Sibsagar can be traced from this site. The sculptors appear to be newly appointed and they did not show any new technique in their execution (Dutta: 1990: 123). During the

Ahom period the images were generally carved in low-relief and show only the profile and frontal view. However, the images which had numerous faces or the miniature sculptures do not fall in this category. The faces of the divine and human figures are square in shape, noses are broad and flat, eyes appear closed due to Mongoloid features, lips are thick and eyebrows deeply cut. The figures are static and they display a tough and angry look. Feet are shown in a straight direction and are abnormally longer, without any shoes and hands in a definite direction. However, waists are slender and hips sturdier. Chests were large and robust and guided by gliding lines. The bends of the limbs are angular (Barpujari: 1994:356).

At Sibsagar, the toughness of the facial expressions is partially avoided. Instead we find a graceful but insipid smile. The sturdy physiognomy has given way to slenderness but the faces are still square-shaped. However, the women figures have misplaced breasts which appear round but not voluminous. Some of the female deities have broad arms that appear unnatural. The images are heavily ornamented. Eyes are now half-closed (Barpujari: 1994:127).

The Gaurisagar sculptures again return back to sturdiness and tough. Facial expressions are rigid, bodies are sturdier, and the eyes are half-closed. Necks have almost disappeared from the images presenting a severe and compact picture of the deity. However, dresses are vividly decorated and ornamented with heavy jewellery. Thus, it can be said that the evolutionary features seen in the Sibsagar group of temples was not a permanent one.

From the Kalugaon group of temples built in the eighteenth century, when the prosperity of the Ahom kingdom was at its peak, numerous sculptures of a finer quality appear. Besides the deities on their mounts, the images are also shown in different settings. The images appear slender, clad in dresses and lighter jewellery than those of the Gaurisagar group. They show movement of the contour.

The characteristic features of the sculptures commissioned by the Ahoms can be first observed at the Keshavrai Vishnu temple or the Jai Dol, which is a massive sculpture in itself. Among the secular

human figures of the Jai Dol, can be seen men and women portraying numerous activities. Among the larger images is a depiction of mother-and-child. It is mutilated but shows the mother nursing or holding the child on her arm and caressing it (Fig. 9.1). The sculpture however is not sensitively articulated and the facial expressions of the image are missing. A long *antariya* covers the lower body of the mother and a cloth runs down from her hair tied in the *kuntala* style. The feet are positioned outward while the hands are disfigured. Reflecting the body of a new mother of child bearing years, her body is rounded and her full breasts are emphasized. Though the precise meaning of this figure is not known, the figure may depict maternity and fertility. The head is bent expressing her fondness and love for the child. It may symbolize woman as the bearer of healthy children. It may also be an image to commemorate Jaimati, the queen mother for whom the temple was built and also to depict her maternal love. However, there does not seem to be any indication that it was a royal figure. Use of woman and child figures in Assam in the temple sculptures express the traditional notions of beauty of motherhood. The motif of a mother with her child can also be seen in the famous Kamakhya temple at Guwahati.



Figure 9.1: Mother and Child Jai Dol, Jaisagar

Another image of a woman is more two-dimensional, appearing quite flat, but is adorned with ornaments. The woman is shown with minimal jewellery with a long *hara*, with round hanging *kundalas* in her ears called as *kankamalas* but with a variation and her hands are shaped like a palm-shoot. She is seen wearing a big sized bangle, probably the *gamkharu* which was popular hand jewellery among the royal dignitaries, and also a flat, circular band or armband (*keyura*) just above the bicep muscle (Sivamurty: 1956:112). She is engaged in *prasadhana* (Rao: 2012: 118). She seems to be tying her long hair, with her left hand at the top of her head and the other hand is held at the base of her neck trying to lift the hair up to tie it into a bun. She wears a *thoyyham*, worn along the central parting of the hair with a pendant at its end. An *antariyavastra* is shown with some vertical carvings running down the legs which may have been worn like a dhoti held tight at the waist. The use of elaborate jewellery may indicate that the figure depicted a royal personage.

A panel shows women offering *anjali* with folded hands standing next to one other. They are wearing *antariya* with a single unstitched undergarment (*paridhana*) and a circular headgear which held an *odhani*. Some of them are shown wearing hand and neck jewellery but most of them have become weathered.

Along with the sculptures of women, two equestrian figures of the Ahom monarch Rudra Singha are found which depict his horse-riding skills. Ascetics performing yoga are also seen in numerous panels. Most of them are shown in the *satvik* position meditating, wearing *rudraksha malas* and a bun. Numerous other panels show men performing dance with musical instruments like the *dhol*, *sitar* etc. Miniature figures sporting *chajjeddar pagris*, chariots drawn by horses, war scenes where soldiers are carrying bows, arrows, swords, shields and guns are shown in the lower panels of the temple. This testifies that the Ahom arsenal was well equipped. Wide use of fire-arms had begun from the days of Turbak's invasion in 1532 CE and even earlier (Bhuyan: 1960:14). The use of infantry and the elephant corps in warfare is perhaps being depicted in this sculptured panel. However, the

sculptures of camels are quite surprising. Camels are not found in Assam, but the precision of the artists by visualizing it is remarkable. Perhaps the artist who executed this animal came from a region where camels were commonly found. The animal sculptures are appealing in contrast to the larger human images. In the Borpatra Dol we find an image of human-animal encounter. The animal is shown to be a huge boar and it has been beheaded by the man who is of short stature.

The Ahom temple reliefs are framed in rectangular panels with foiled arches on the top, which multiply as the number of figures multiply. This feature of depicting individual figures under separate arches can also be seen in the contemporary Neo-Vaisnavite manuscript paintings of Assam. Some of the pillars of the panels are ornately carved with floral designs, while the others are either plain or have been destroyed over time. Atmospheric actions, the heavy tropical rains of Assam and the porous and shale-like character of the stones used have led to the damage of many sculptures (Dutta: 1990:76). The figures are flat, the body facing front while many of the faces are in profile. Moreover, many of the human and divine figures have dresses that resemble the apparel of the monks and Sattriya dancers of the Neo-Vaisnavite monasteries of Assam. The temples and other structures were executed on the orders of the king and nobility. Therefore, the sculptures reflect the frame of mind of the royal court. Further, in dress and poses the images maintained a regal dignity similar to that of the monks. Rudra Singha had introduced Mughal dresses in the Ahom court and these too found their way to the miniature figures as well (Gait: 1926:186). They were draped with dresses and posed with a royal dignity with turbans (Dasgupta: 1986:77).

Animal Motifs

Scenes from the jungle were brought into life. Trees were shown to be the abode of numerous birds and animals. The latter were depicted roaming freely. There were hunting scenes too, one of them include a tiger being attacked from behind by soldiers with guns. This may show the growing power of the Ahoms as hunting a tiger was regarded as a sign

of bravery. Abundant variety of animals and birds like horses, camels, elephants, deers, boars, tigers, monkeys and gharials show the rich fauna of the region. Another image shows the tiger feeding on its prey, clamping down on the deer's neck. One of the deer images show a hunting scenes where soldiers mounted on horses holding spears are after a pack of deer and its babies, and one of them is looking back. The aesthetic beauty of the panel is remarkable.

The zoomorphic figures that appear as the mounts of different deities, and are larger in size have a unique style. Carved on a low-relief background, they appear in profile. In the case of hoofed animals, images maintain a standard. Feathered creatures too are appealing and accurately portrayed. An exception in this standard comes from the appearance of lions. They appear farcical with deformed anatomy. However the same cannot be said of the other feline creature, the tiger which appear widely in the secular sculptures are very realistic unlike the stylized lions.

The mythical animals like that of the *makara* image as the *vahana* of Vishnu in the Jai Dol are executed unnaturally. It evades all the iconographic norms and is carved with four legs and a pointed nose. Its wings are closed and it is somewhat similar to the Chinese dragon (Dutta: 1990:126). Numerous scenes from the Epics and the Puranas are also found on the temple walls of the Jai Dol at Jaisagar. An extant scene from the Ramayana has been executed on the outer wall which depicts three figures, that of Ram, Sita and Laxmana; they are shown standing under the shade of a tree (Fig.9.2). The images wear elaborate jewellerys and dresses, carrying bows and swords. A similar kind of image is also found in the Barpatra Dol.

From the Jagadhatri temple at Kalugaon, a scene from the *Mahabharata* has been depicted. Arjuna the Pandavas is shown aiming at the fish's eye by looking at its reflection in the water below, while Draupadi holding a garland, along with three attendants wait at the side, looking at him (Fig. 9.3). An image from the *Ramayana* depicted in the Borpatra Dol is a fighting scene between Bali and Sughriva, the two monkey brothers. At the Siva Dol at Sibsagar town secular images are prominent, but most of them are now destroyed. Figure carving became popular by this



Figure 9.2: Ram, Laksman and Sita Visnu Dol, Kalugaon



Figure 9.3: Arjuna at Draupadi's *swayamvar* Jagadhatri Dol, Kalugaon

time which made the figures prominent and exquisite. A scene from the Vishnu Dol portrays two women attending to a mendicant. The ladies and the monk are facing each other. Another secular image which is pleasing to the eyes is a hunting scene. This image shows a man, with a broad chest and arms standing in profile. He may have been a depiction of the royalty as he wears *kundala*, armlets and bracelets and also a crown. The figure is set in a jungle, with flowers, birds and trees surrounding him. An exemplary hunting scene is shown where the figure is shown poised just feet away from its prey.

Floral Designs

Flowers are natural and divine source of decoration in the universe. They denote soft and innocent expressions. Mughal artists have used this aesthetic symbol in abstract form and made their art interesting and beautiful. As Assam came into contact with the Mughals due to numerous invasions, Mughal art idioms also travelled to the region.

Floral motifs were part of ornamental art and were used as common designs in ancient art. They were used in architectural ornamentation, and decoration of houses and public places. Floral and vegetation motifs were considered suitable for aniconic expression, repetitive patterns and for filling space. Plant motifs were either borrowed from earlier oriental designs or were imitations of local floral designs. Floral motifs include flowers in their abstract form. These motifs are repeated to make patterns more decorative and appealing. Artists use their imagination to make diverse patterns in various shapes. Sometimes these patterns appear to be imaginary or far from reality but still they are liked because of their elegance. They receive admiration and attention because of their beautiful form which look real and impressive. The temples of Sibsagar are full of decorative elements (Fig.9.4). This type of decoration may be found in the arches, the baluster pillars or as a part of a panel. But in all the cases it remains dominant, beautiful and varied.

The floral designs of the region began from mere engravings on the wall with the process of etching. These designs can be found from the 17th century Thowra Dol and are the only sculptures found from that temple. These eight petalled broad-disc lotuses



Figure 9.4: Floral Motifs Devi Dol, Gaurisagar

were carved on the outer walls of the temple. There was a large-scale inclusion of floral motifs in the Jai Dol meant to fill the gaps of the panels and also as an ornamental design. Perfection was achieved while designing the Gaurisagar Dol where lotus, creepers were stylised in different ways. Quatrefoil floral motifs as a decorative element were used to decorate the beams of the horizontal panels. Four partially overlapping circles of the same diameter were decorated with small leaves on the exterior. Replicas of baluster columns (Koch: 2001:39), which was introduced as a new architectural motif in the palace architecture of Shahjahan (1628-58 CE) as in the Red Fort can be found in miniature forms in the Jai Dol. It supports the representation of arcades and other decorative motifs on the walls. A close resemblance to the concept, though not to the style with stylisations in the shaft and lotus petals was sculpted on stone (Koch: 2001:40). The columns were ornate and floral elements were inserted between the column and the base. The Nazira Dol gives representation of the first functional columns of the Mughal baluster columns as found in the Agra fort, and reflects the decline in style. The temple, further, is decorated by mythical and native plants. Lotus flower, floral carvings and intricate vegetal carvings are simple, crude but with astonishing fidelity to nature. The lotus is a favourite subject in decoration and shows the taste of the artist. West

Asian (Egyptianised) lotus flowers and palms whose use can be found in the pillars of the eastern gateway of Sanchi have crept into the designs, and are remarkable for its richness (Koch: 2001:45). The broad disc of the full-blown flower is employed in all positions as a decoration, on the arched entrance of the temple and also in the brackets. It owes its resemblance to the wheel for which it is a favourite subject of the sculptor. The lower portions of the pillar and the underside of the beams are filled with numerous plants, leaf and flower patterns. The leaves are placed vertically, deeply cut and are a form of the acanthus plant (Lewis and Darley: 1986:118). Vertical forms of lotuses with buds are also used to fill the gaps between two panels, similar to the ones in Deoparvat but are different in shape. The nooks and corners are filled with small yet elaborate sculptures. From the Namti Vishnu Dol, an extant image of a vertical floral motif with leaves and flowers was found. It has many similarities with motifs used in Indo-Islamic buildings, be in mausoleums or palaces. The most famous examples of such decoration come from the Taj Mahal, Agra.

Niches appear to have been profusely used to decorate the wall surfaces of the Ahom temples. The rectangular, flat as well as arched shaped niches appear to continue from the formative period of temple building. Buildings constructed during the period have oval shaped and wedge shaped multi-foliated arched niches. Some of the multi-foliated niches are those whose middle portion is flat while the curved ones have foliations. These are carved on the wall within rectangular panels.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion we can conclude that the sculptural art of Sibsagar witnessed new trends in the art of Assam. It was influenced not only by foreign elements from the east and west, but also incorporated local traditions like dress, flora and fauna, etc. Thus, cross-cultural assimilations and inspiration from the Neo-Vaishnavite sculptures and paintings can be traced from the varied art-forms of the Ahom temples of Sibsagar. We also find Mughal floral designs, hunting scenes, depiction of foreign elements like the stylized lions, the realistic depiction of camels, and other animals, and birds,

etc. These portrayals, especially the floral motifs are reminiscent of the floral designs found on Mughal monuments like the Taj Mahal. Increased intercourse with other parts of India must have facilitated the adoptions of these artistic motifs which found a place in the temples patronised by the Ahom monarchs.

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