

# ASSAM'S ARCHITECTURE AND SCULPTURES: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE AHOMS

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**Abstract:** In India, even though several strands of the Thai people live such as the Khamti, Turung, Phakiyal, Khamyang, Nor etc., the Ahoms are the most prominent of them all. The arrival of Ahom Swargadew Chaolung Sukapha in the year 1228 AD marks an important event in the history of North East India which ushered in the conception of the Assamese society as we know it today. From the day of his arrival till the Treaty of Yandabo, the Ahoms brought together seven princely territories as a part of one kingdom and ruled the region for nearly 600 years. Along with the concepts of generosity, secularism and cultural tolerance in their way of ruling, the Ahoms also brought with them their language, literature and culture. The foundation of the Assamese society as shaped by the Ahom rulers was strengthened by a practice of non-discrimination on the basis of caste or creed which further offered a similar character to its language and culture as well. Not just language and culture, the Ahoms had added immensely to every aspect of the Assamese society including the religion, education as well as its architecture and sculptures of the place. In this paper, amongst the various contributions of the Ahoms, we will be discussing about their contributions towards the shaping the architecture, monuments and sculptures of Assam, focussing primarily on the Dol – Devalayas and the palaces of the Ahom royals.

**Keywords:** Thai, Ahoms, Sukapha, Assamese society, architecture, sculpture.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Formed before 2500 BC, the Thai civilization is an old and a large civilization. The main areas where the Thai people live are the southern parts of People's Republic of China such as the Yunnan, Guanjia and Guandong Provinces, the north and north-west parts of Vietnam such as Quang ninh, Lang son Cao Bang, Bac Can, Hoang Lien Son, Lai Chav, Son La, West Thanh Hoa, Naghe Tinh provinces; almost the entire region of Lao Peoples Democratic Republic, The Royal Kingdom of Thailand=Muang Thai, Union of Burma, Northern Shan State and Southern Shan States, Khamti Long of Kachin State, Mugong, Bhamo, Myitkyina Mong Wong, Singkaling Khamti and Song Sup of the Sagaing division of Hukwang province along the banks of the Chindwin River till Ta Mu near the Manipur border as well as India's Upper Assam as well as Eastern Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>1</sup> In India, even though several strands of the Thai people live such as the Khamti, Turung, Phakiyal, Khamyang, Nor etc., the Ahoms are the most prominent of them all.

The arrival of Ahom Swargadew Chaolung Sukapha in the year 1228 AD marks an important event in the history of North East India which ushered in the conception of the Assamese society as we know it today. From the day of his arrival till the Treaty of Yandabo, the Ahoms brought together seven princely territories as a part of one kingdom and ruled the region for nearly 600 years. Along with the concepts of generosity, secularism and cultural tolerance in their way of ruling, the Ahoms also brought with them their language, literature and culture. The foundation of the Assamese society as shaped by the Ahom rulers was strengthened by a practice of non-discrimination on the basis of caste or creed which further offered a similar character to its language and culture as well. Not just language and culture, the Ahoms had added immensely to every aspect of the Assamese society including the religion, education as well as its architecture and

sculptures of the place. In this paper, amongst the various contributions of the Ahoms, we will be discussing about their contributions towards the shaping the architecture, monuments and sculptures of Assam, focussing primarily on the Dol – Devalayas and the palaces of the Ahom royals.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The word ‘analytical’ means examining things very carefully or involving the careful, systematic study of something. The approach taken in order to accurately discuss the subject of this research paper is analytical. Numerous history books, books, essays and magazines related to Thai language, literature and culture have been used as its secondary source of research.

## 3. SCOPE OF RESEARCH AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

In this essay “**Assam’s architecture and sculptures: the contribution of the Ahoms**”, we are attempting to discuss the sculptures along with the Dev – Devalayas and the royal palaces which were built during the 600 year rule of the Ahom Kings.

Art and culture are dynamic in nature. The growth of architecture and sculpture as a part of these dynamics intensified during the Ahom rule. Even though a lot has been said and done about it, there is still quite an amount of scope left for more discussion. Keeping in mind the limitations of this paper, we will be focussing principally on the architecture and sculpture of the archaeological palaces and monuments built by the Ahom Swargadews.

### A. Assam’s Architecture and Sculptures:

North-east India is renowned as the playground of peacefully co-existing people coming from various cultures, castes and creeds. The arrival Chaolung Sukapha to this region in 1228 AD brought about a wave of breakthrough changes in the cultural landscape of the place. The period of 600 years of the Ahom rule is known as the Ahom era which had brought about an entirely new dimension to the language, literature and culture of the Assamese people. Instead of being rigid in its old ways, the culture-literature of the area shone in the brilliance of the fresh fervour that was brought about by the offerings of the Ahom era. Along with it, the architecture and craftsmanship of the artisans here also gained a new height during the same time. Here, we need to mention that the sculptural monuments in Assam can be divided into two parts: pre-Ahom and Ahom. However, the pre-Ahom architecture and sculptures of Assam were of a higher standard. Even though the wet and humid weather of Assam, earthquakes, floods and other such natural disasters have destroyed many pre-Ahom monuments, yet, the Ahom sculptures and monuments have managed to withstand the negative forces of nature and still stand upright. The archaeological monuments of the Ahom era could be divided into the following categories: dol-devalayas, royal palaces, stone bridge, ‘Maidam’, ‘Garh’ and ‘Aali’.

Amongst the pucca monuments constructed during the Ahom era, dol-devalayas are the highest in count. The Naag Shankar Devalaya built in the year 1480 AD under the command of Swargadew Susenpha is the oldest of all the devalayas built during the Ahom reign. Additionally, there are the dols that were built at Sibsagar -- Siva Dol, Devi Dol, Vishnu Dol, as well as Ganesh Mandir and Sri Surya Mandir. At Joysagar also, along the west bank of the Joysagar Pukhuri, three dols, namely -- Joy Dol, Vishnu Dol and Siva Dol were constructed. Situated at Negheriting, Dergaon, the Siva Dol there has temples of Devi, Vishnu, Shri Ganesh and Surya in its all four directions. The Joy Dol situated at Joysagar is the best amongst these in its structure and make. The Siva Dol named Nati Gukhai Dol which is situated to the west of Gaurisagar Pukhuri is a small dol constructed in the distinctive Gauri style of architecture. This dol is a striking example of sculptural monuments made of burnt earth, which is a signature of the Ahom architecture.<sup>2</sup> The history books talk about the structure of the Dols in three parts – a) Naatghar, b) Jagmohan, c) Garbhankho.<sup>3</sup> Along with the above mentioned dols, a number of dols were also constructed in the districts of Jorhat, Golaghat, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Lower Kamrup. In the building of these dols, inspiration was taken from North India’s Naagar Shaili. In general, bricks and stones brought from Naga Hills were used for the construction of pucca monuments; in addition, paste made of Mustard Oil, Copal, jaggery, fish, limestone, Urad dal were used as mortar for the construction of these monuments.

There are three palaces that were built during the rule of the Ahom Kings. They are: Kareng Ghar located at Garh Gaon, the Rang Ghar situated at the Ahom capital of Rangpur and Talatal Ghar.<sup>4</sup> The method of construction of these buildings gives us an idea of the kind of architecture that was used by the people during those times. Furthermore, amongst these three buildings which were inspired by Mughal architecture, the Kareng Ghar and Talatal Ghar speak aloud the

craftsmanship and skills of the builders of that era. The Kareng Ghar and the Talatal Ghar both are seven storey royal palace complexes with three storeys each constructed below the ground, three storeys constructed above the ground and another storey running along the ground. Access to the three underground storeys of Talatal Ghar had been shut many years back. The shape of the bricks used in the construction of both these buildings is flat. To the west of the Talatal Ghar is situated the two storied Rang Ghar. The base of the monument has a series of arched entrances, while atop the roof sits a decorative pair of carved stone crocodiles.

The Ahom architecture holds a special distinction and specialty. Made of stones, bricks, wood and burnt/hardened earth, the walls of the monuments showcase a variety of creeper plants, flowers, leaves, animals, eminent personalities of various places as well as the general crowd and the gods and goddesses. Even though the conditions of many of these sculptures have deteriorated over time, the relics are still alive with the vestiges of their old artisanship. The splendour of the sculptures embedded in the walls of the Joy Dol is even more bounteous with the display of the stone art of the era, crafted in to the stone the life to a magnificent dream. Into the bargain, the statues made of burnt and hardened earth make the monuments even more spectacular; a special mention may be made of the statues of the Naati Gukhai Dol. Statues were also made out of the locally made mortar which were then given shape and pasted along the walls of these archaeological monuments.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The Ahom Era, which started with the arrival of Swargadew Sukapha in the Brahmaputra Valley after the end of his arduous journey from Mong Mao, via Myanmar through the Patkai Hills, brought about a tremendous change to the scene of the Assamese culture, literature, tradition by not only adding to what already existed but by also establishing the very foundation of what is known today as the Assamese society. Many of these fantastic Ahom monuments have been demolished because of the various reasons including man-made and natural disasters from the time of the Burmese invasions till the Indian independence. Despite this, there is a lack of consciousness in actively conserving and preserving these monuments. This urgent need for conscious efforts towards safeguarding of the monuments has to be created in order to preserve architecture and sculptures which together binds and creates the history and culture of Assam.

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