UNIT 13 : ARCHITECTURE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will able to-

- understand the material-cultural condition of ancient and early medieval Assam
- trace different types of architectural remains of early Assam
- locate the centers of the architectural remains
- understand the relations of architecture and socio-political religious aspects of the period under study.

13.2 INTRODUCTION

Assam has yielded several architectural and sculptural remains of the ancient and early medieval period. Literary and epigraphic sources indicate the presence of vast range of architectural remains of Assam. But none of them survived in their original condition to provide complete information about the material life of the period. Several reasons i.e., climatic, natural, and political led to the spoilation or denundation of these earlier monuments. However, from the study of a large number of sources of ancient and early medieval period we can have a fair idea of the region's architectural remains of the period under study.

Architectural remains belonging to periods from early medieval days can be found in scattered historic ruins and ancient temples in many places of Assam including Goalpara, Nagaon, Guwahati, Tezpur, Hajo, Bongaigaon, Golaghat etc. The earliest evidence of architecture in Assam dates back to the Gupta period, during the rule of the Varmans in Kamarupa. The Gupta style is visible in most of the architectural works belonging to the Varman dynasty as it shared a close connection with the Gupta empire of the center. Buildings with exquisite Gupta carvings have been found in the areas near Guwahati and in the city of Tezpur. The architectural heritage of Assam can be easily perceived when seen through the lens of how various royal dynasties ruled over the region. There are several literary and epigraphic records which refers to architectural activities related to the construction of various types of buildings in pre-Ahom Assam. From almost the beginning of the Varman dynasty in the 5th century to the end of the Salastambha dynasty in the 10th century, the architectural remains can be traced in and around Tezpur. Another historical marvel from the Salastambha period is the rock-cut caves in Bongaigaon. The five rock-cut caves have a brick and mud masonry made platform, which was built during a later period. Although not much is known about these caves, one of the best-preserved caves has a length of 1.90 meters and comes with a rounded verandah with a flight of steps, unlike the other caves.

13.3 TYPES OF ARCHITECTURAL REMAINS

The architectural remains of Assam can broadly be divided into two types- secular and religious. In the category of secular architecture references can be made to a number of fortified cities in various parts of Assam. The religious architecture on the other hand includes a large number of temple and temple ruins scattered in various parts of the region. These religious architectures belong not only to Brahmanical Hinduism but also Buddhism as well as Jainism. Moreover, the remains belonging to Hinduism catered to different sects i.e., Shaktism, Saivism, and Vaishnavism. These factors show the development of various religious aspects in different periods under the rule of three major dynasties of early Assam.

13.3.1 Secular Architecture

As already mentioned above, the category of secular architecture includes fortified cities of Assam which were built by the royal authorities of early Assam. The **Kalikapurana**, a 10th century indigenous text provides information about some important cities of the region. In this text mention could be found of 6 types of forts namely- *jala-durga* (water fort), *bhumi-durga* (earthen fort), *vriksha-durga* (fort encircled by closely knit thorny trees), *aranya-durga*(forts surrounded by dense forest), *bala-durga* (fort manned by properly equipped army) and *sailaja-durga* or *giri-durga* (mountain or hill fort). Regarding planning of a city, the Kalikapurana describes again four types- *trikonakriti* (triangular), *dhanurakriti* (semicircular), *vartula* (circular) and *chatushkona* (quadrangular) and says that any deviation from these four is not advisable. Literary sources also record about a few cities of ancient and early medieval Assam. In this regard mention can be made of Pragjyotishapura. Apparently Pragjyotishapura was the most ancient city in Assam. It was situated in the middle of Kamarupa and was well protected by a giri-durga of sarvatobhadra design that was unassailable even by the gods. The city is described to be adorned with tall and beautiful buildings and encircled by high walls. The Kalikapurana mentions several other cities of ancient Assam, such as Alaka, Chandravat, Bhogavati, Varasana and Sonitpura, the city of Bana. Sonitpura has been identified with modern Tezpur of the Brahmaputra valley.The Bargaon inscription of Ratnapala of the Pala dynasty refer to another fortress city named Durjaya or Sri Durjaya which the ruler claimed to construct and beautify. There are different opinions about the identification of this site. Several inscriptions also refer to Haruppesvara or Hatappesvara and Kamarupanagara, which were the seats of administration during long periods under different political dynasties i.e., the Salastambhas and the Palas respectively. Apart from these, the **YoginiTantra**, a 16th century literature gives description of a

sacred tirtha called Apunarbhava. This Apunarbhava has been identified with modern Hajo where the Hayagriva-Madhava temple is situated.

13.3.2 Religious Architecture

As in other parts of India, in Assam too construction of temples goes back to fairly early times. Both literary and epigraphic sources testify to the existence of religious architectures. Hiuen Tsang, a 7th century CE Chinese traveler refers to around hundreds of 'deva' temples in Kamarupa. By 'deva' temples he meant those temples affiliated to the Brahmanical gods and goddesses. It is to be mentioned here that most of these temples are found as ruins, not in their actual shape.

The Kalikapurana listed a large number of sacred places associated with the worship of Shakti, Siva and Vishnu. Besides these the text has referred to a temple of Kubera on the Darpana hill and another of Vishnu on a hill called Agnimala. Most inscriptions among the 33 available inscriptions of early Assam follow a language religious in character with occasional descriptions of gods, goddesses, divine figures as well as temples dedicated to them. The Umachal rock inscription of Surendravarman is the earliest epigraphic record mentioning the consecration of a religious establishment in Assam. King Ratnapala of the Pala dynasty and his successor Indrapala are known to be great builders. In the Guwahati grant of Indrapala, Ratnapala is said to have constructed several temples dedicated to lord Siva. The Gachtal copper plates of Gopalavarman mentions the construction of white washed temples dedicated to Sambhu by king Indrapala. Similarly, inscriptions such as Parbatiya Copper plates, Bargaon plate, Doobi copper plates etc. refer to the worship of Vishnu. In the Guakuchi grant of Indrapala, there is a reference to a temple of Vasumadhava, which might be identified as an incarnation of Vishnu. In the Pushpabhadra grant of

Dharmapala, there is mention of a temple dedicated to Sri Madhusudana, which is again an incarnation of Vishnu. The Tezpur plates mentions about the temple of Mahagauri on the Kamakuta hills. In the Guakuchi grant of Indrapala, there are references to a land grant allotted to the deities Mahagauri and Kamesvara.

- **Temple**

Apart from the literary and epigraphic records, there have been discovery of considerable number of temple ruins which were dedicated to various gods and goddesses. In the city of Guwahati, North Guwahati and the nearby areas, several temple and temple ruins have been found dedicated to Shakti, Siva and Vishnu. Here mention could be made of the Kamakhya temple at Nilachal hills, one of the 51 pithas in the Shakti tradition.Although the goddess Kamakhya is mentioned for the first time in the 9th Century CE Tezpur plates of Vanamalavarmadeva, scholars suggest that the archaeological remains and the lower strata of the temple indicate an older structure that could be as old as 5th-7th century CE. The present structure of the temple was built and renovated many times in the period between 8th-17th century CE. It is generally believed that between 1553-1554 CE the temple was destroyed by the invading Muslim commander Kalapahar, but history says otherwise. Kalapahar invaded the Koch kingdom in 1568, and there is no historical record found anywhere that Kalapahar came to Guwahati. It again becomes even more controversial when the written records indicate that Koch emperor, king Naranarayan (Malla Deb) started renovating the temple in 1555 CE and completed in 1565 CE.

Kamakhya Temple



Source: Google

In the site of Surya Pahar of the Goalpara district, vestiges of three religions i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism have been found. SimilarlySonitpur and Darrang districts are equally rich in architectural heritage. One such site in Sonitpur is Dah-Parbatia. It is an ancient village near Tezpur has ruins of two ancient temples, one belonging to the 5th-6th century CE, on which another temple was constructed during the Ahom rule. This site is a major attraction with a well depicted Hellenistic style of sculptures and figurines that resemble Gupta style. In the Nagaon region too many temple ruins, located at MikirAti, Gochtal, Jugijan, Akashi Ganga, Kenduguri etc. have been found dedicated to both Siva and Vishnu. These temple ruins can be dated between 6th-11th century CE. At Singri there is a temple dedicated to goddess Durga which has been dated to 9th-10th century CE.

Dah-Parbatiya Temple



Source: Google

- **Stupa**

The Goalpara district of Assam was influenced by Buddhism in the 1st Century BC on the left bank of Brahmaputra near Pancharatna and Suryapahar proved beyond doubt that Hinayana Buddhism flourished from North Bengal to Brahmaputra Valley. In early medieval period Buddhism once again flourished in the Brahmaputra valley at least in the 9th-10th century CE. The monolithic rock-cut stupas found at Suryapahar are enumerable and of different shapes and sizes and on stylistic ground goes back to 1st century BC and continued thereafter. They are traditional stupas having prominent architectural characteristics i.e., vedi, medhi, anda, harmika and over harmika a groove or socket is made to haft or affix chatravali being carved out from a separate piece which are presently lost due to ware and tear of the ages.

Stupas at Surya Pahar



Source: Google

- **Jaina Cave**

Although Jainism could not flourish in the vast stretch of the North-Eastern region, two rock-cut figures of Tirthankaras have been found inside the natural caves at Suryapahar. From stylistic and palaeographical considerations the images seem to belong to the 9th century CE, to which period also the cave may reasonably be assigned. Apart from that the Umachal Rock Inscription of the 5th century CE records about the shrine of lord Balabhadrasvamin dedicated by the king Surendravarman.

- **Circular Shrine**

Apart from the above-mentioned architectural remains, there is interesting evidence of circular shrine found in Assam. This shrine is located at Chhaygaon in Kamrup District. This shrine is locally known as *'Medh'* and lies under the present ground level of the site. It is of circular shape with a rectangular projection on one side. The inside of the shrine is faced with stone; the outside lies buried under the accumulated debris. In the center of this circular shrine is now placed a stone image of Surya, of about 12th century CE, under a canopy. This image is now worshipped as the presiding deity of the Medh.



13.4 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt that-

- Assam like other parts of the Indian subcontinent, is also rich in her architectural heritage. A large number of architectural remains have been found in Assam which belongs to ancient and early medieval period.
- These remains are broadly divided into two categories- secular and religious. The secular architecture includes a number of fortified cities; and religious architecture category includes temple ruins, stupa, Jaina caves and the circular shrine of Chhaygaon.

- The religious architectural remains show the existence of various religious belief system in Assam.
- Some of the sites rich in architectural remains of Assam are- Guwahati, Goalpara, Tezpur, Nagaon, Biswanath etc., according to the findings of a large number of temple ruins.



13.5 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K., (2003) *The Comprehensive History of Assam Volume-I*, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati.

2) Barua, S.L., (2013) *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, MunshiramManoharlal Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi.

2) Gait, E. (2005), *A History of Assam*, LBS Publication, Guwahati.

4) Lahiri, N. (1991), *Pre-Ahom Assam*, Munshiram, Manoharlal Publishers, Delhi.



13.6 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions(Answer each question in an about 50 words)

Q 1: To whom the White Washed temple was dedicated?

Q 2: What are the two broad types of architectural remains of Assam?

Q 3: Who built the city of Durjaya?

Q 4: Name a prominent temple in the Guwahati region dedicated to goddess Shakti.

Q 5: What is the circular shrine at Chhaygaon locally known as?

Q 6: Name the most ancient city in Assam.

Q 7: Name the site where the monolithic rock-cut stupas have been found.

B) Short answer questions (Answer each questions in an about 150 words)

Q 1: What is secular architecture? Briefly discuss the secular architectural

remains of Early Assam.

Q 2: Write a short note on Dah-Parbatiya.

Q 3: Discuss the various types of religious architecture of Early Assam.

C) Long answer Questions (Answer each question in between 300-500 words)

Q 1: Write an essay on the architectural remains of ancient and early medieval period of Assam.

Q 2: Write a note on temple architecture of early Assam.

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