

*An Iconological Study of the Representations of Devīs in the
Relief Sculptural Art of the Douls of the Later Āhom Period
(Late 17th to 18th century CE)*

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Chapter 6

Conclusion

Majority of the images discussed in Chapter 4 and 5 are partially damaged, and several of their symbolic attributes are seen to be missing. A portion of these, though mutilated or partially damaged, could be interpreted or explained from the remaining attributes. Still the interpretations are not conclusive. Several permutations and combinations, assumptions had been the part of the process of interpretation of these images. All these have been done through the knowledge contained in diverse types of texts that are available and accessible. The images have been read both in conventional and alternate ways for putting forward logical and justified identifications for them, though none of them can be established as final. The withered, mutilated and eroded conditions of these images, coupled with uncertain and unrecognizable shapes and designs of their certain intact attributes and motifs have posed a challenge in establishing definite identities for them.

In spite of the challenges, the interpretations of the forty eight selected images carried out in Chapters 4 and 5 have let out a space to revisit and rethink on the different aspects of the history and culture of Assam, to carry out an inquiry on the lesser known relations and interactions within the cultures of Assam as well as the greater eastern and north-eastern regions of the Indian subcontinent. All the images of Devīs, from the studies made in Chapters 4 and 5, have been seen as multi-layered texts that can contribute to a critical writing of Śaktism and its nature and evolution during the Āhom period. Their further studies can uncover further lesser known aspects of the Śākta symbolisms and narratives that developed, that were given emphasis by the Āhom royalty, their impact on the socio-religious structures of Assam, not only during the 18th century CE, but also from the 18th century CE to the present day.

The different images of Devīs discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 belong to both formally identified and unidentified types. The formally identified ones such as Gaja Lakṣmī, Mahiṣāsūramardīnī Durgā and Simhavāhinī Durga have been seen to portray such iconographic arrangements that are not known or found in the sculptural art of Assam as well as other parts of the Indian subcontinent, other than that patronized by, or

which flourished under the aegis of the Ahom dynasty. These iconographic arrangements or characteristics, as per evidences, can be called as unique to the imagery and conception of Devīs in the Late Medieval Style of Relief Sculptural Art which developed under the Āhoms from late 17th to 18th century CE. The reasons or factors that might have resulted in these unique iconographic arrangements must be the introduction of new codes and models of worship, mainly in Śākta worship, the most significant of being the Raghunandana Smārta introduced from Bengal, the interactions of the ancestral or original Āhom religion with the mainstream Purāṇic and Tāntric traditions of Hinduism, the possible following of new types of texts and methods of understanding and making religious/ cultic images, the conceptions and persuasions of the Āhoms who were newly introduced to the myriad traditions of Hinduism in Assam, a possible influence of the reformist neo- Vaiṣṇava traditions who were gaining stronghold in the society and culture of Assam from the 16th century CE onwards, a newly evolved cultural consciousness, the sectarian biases and conflicts, mainly between the Śākta and the neo- Vaiṣṇava traditions that became widespread during the 18th century CE, from the rule of Śiva Simha and Bar Rajā Phuleśvarī Kunvarī, the application of Śaktism and Śākta imagery to express or project political statements and decrees by the Āhom royalty, and a possible emphasis by the artisans on the numerous folk and sylvan conceptions of goddesses like Lakṣmī, Durgā and Sarasvatī which have been prevalent and in practice in Assam.

The formally unidentified images which feature goddess forms or representations that are totally unique to the Āhom temple relief sculptural art are being explained through the knowledge of selected mainstream and lesser known and less prominent texts. These images are being approached through the knowledge of certain belief systems and religious narratives that are both regional and pan- Indian. Even, these goddess forms are being understood and explained as possible expressions of personal events and preferences of the patronizing authority. In Chapter 5, a possibility that the forms, symbolisms and the attributes of the goddesses in these images were being applied as connotative devices for projecting different achievements, events, and subjectivities of the Āhom royalty, either individual or collective, has been mentioned. Specific deity forms applied as visual connotative devices in temple architecture for projecting individual and collective subjectivities of the patronizing authorities as well

as the artisans and craftsmen, can be a critical area of study, systematically combining distinct strands of knowledge, and ways of seeing.

The goddesses featured in the images taken up in Chapter 5 may be explained further, as belonging to some cults or traditions that might have newly evolved in Assam within the 17th to 18th century CE, or, cults, traditions and belief systems which were already in practice in Assam, but have received focus and following under the patronage of the Āhom dynasty.

The present state of the relief sculpted images in the architecture of the Āhom built Douls, including the ones taken up for study in this thesis is too vulnerable. It has been observed that with passing time, the condition of these sculpted images are getting more and more deteriorated. The methods carried out by the State Archaeological authorities for the preservation of these sculptures are not up to the mark. The preservation processes are not seen to be properly scrutinized. It has been observed that large chunks of these sculpted panels are being demolished and flattened in the name of preservation. Cracks and fissures are seen to appear in the sculpted panels in some of the Douls. Microbial activity and humid temperatures have also contributed to the erosion and chipping away of a large portion of these exquisite sculptures. Further, the ignorance, insensible attitude and unattentiveness of the local populace (residing in the vicinity of the Douls) towards these sculptures have been a major cause of their decay. There have been accounts of several local people engaged in vandalizing these sculptures and taking away parts of them for their personal household use. In the Māghnowā Doul, the sculpted images are also scribbled upon with some vulgar marks or deliberately deformed by some irresponsible youngsters coming from the nearby areas. Even though the Māghnowā Doul is a protected archaeological site, some people from its vicinity are seen engaged in trespassing its premises and have set up a temporary Nāmghar there by using tin sheets. If such misconduct and misuse continues, then at a point of time not a single inch of these sculptures will be left for future generations to study and explore; a whole artistic heritage will be lost.

The overall study in this study can also serve as an awareness for a scientific and meaningful preservation of the stone relief sculptures as well as the Douls built by the Āhom dynasty. A systematic preservation of the Douls and their sculptural art is

integral not only for the cultural heritage of Assam, but also for the cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent as a whole. The study can serve as an indispensable text, a reference for further in depth understanding and writing of history of cultural relations between India and south- east Asia, and also religio- cultural affinities established between Assam and rest of the Indian subcontinent during the 18th century CE.
