

## ABSTRACT

Stone Relief sculptures or Stone Relief Sculptural art of a Newly evolved Late Medieval Style or idiom began to make up an intrinsic part of the architectural programme of Hindu temples or Douls built by the Āhoms or Tāi Āhoms in eastern Assam, during the time period from late 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century CE. It was the time period in which the Āhoms, originally belonging to a branch of the Shan ethnic group, had completely come under the influence and fold of the mainstream Hindu sectarian Purāṇic and Tāntric systems. The major part of these architectural relief sculptures consists of representations of icons or images of various Hindu deities, including the different emanations or aspects of Devīs/ Śaktis. As per evidences, representations or images where Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses feature as central or dominant figures, solitary and independent divinities, are seen to appear for the first time in the Stone Relief sculptural art of the Douls built circa late 17<sup>th</sup> century CE to 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, by the patronage of Āhom rulers Rudra Simha/ Siu- Khrung- Phā, Śiva Simha/ Siu- Tān- Phā and his queen regents Bar Rajā Phuleśvarī Kunvarī/ Pramatheśvarī Devī and Bar Rajā Ambikā Kunvarī/ Draupadī/ Mādambikā Devī, and their chief courtiers. The appearance of images of Devīs/ Śaktis in their dominant and independent aspects/ forms only in the relief sculptural art of the Douls commissioned by the aforesaid rulers, reflect the influence Śaktism and Śākta ideologies began to expand over the culture of the Āhoms, particularly their ruling clans during the late 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century CE. The traditional Āhom historical chronicles known as Burañjīs give accounts of how Śaktism was raised to a dominant faith by the Āhom rulers and the court. Further, these texts document or hint towards the positive changes, conflicts, as well as several political and cultural repercussions the Āhom dynasty and rule had to undergo and face, as a result of the patronage and following of Śaktism.

Almost all the extant images of Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses featuring their dominant and independent forms, sculpted in the Newly evolved Late Medieval style of stone relief sculptural art, presently, are found as a part of the architecture of five major Douls built within the time period from late 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century CE. These five Douls are situated at different regions within the

administrative boundaries of present day Sivasagar and Lakhimpur districts of eastern Assam. These Douls are namely: Māghnowā Doul, Gaurīsāgar Devī Doul, Bar Pukhurī Śiva Doul, Bar Pukhuri Devī Doul and Jagaddhātrī Doul. The images in the sculptural programme of the architecture of these five Douls feature goddess forms that are formally identified, as well as formally unidentified. The formally identified ones like Gaja Lakṣmī, Maḥiṣāsūramardinī Durgā, Simhavāhinī Durgā, Vīṇāhastā Sarasvatī and the Saptamāṭrkās are pan-Indian and are common to the Hindu traditions of every region within the Indian subcontinent, as well as south-east Asia. The formally unidentified ones are found as unique to the art and imagery of the stone relief sculpture of the architecture of the Āhom built Douls, and no parallel or representations similar to them are found elsewhere, both in other religious artistic traditions within Assam, and in other parts of the Indian subcontinent. These unique and intriguing goddess forms featured in the relief sculptural art of the Newly evolved Late Medieval Style, adorning the architecture of the Āhom built Douls, are to this date, lacking proper study, exploration and attention by academics. A portion of the identified pan- Hindu goddess forms, in the relief sculptural art of the Douls, too, are found to be infused and associated with such visual motifs and themes, have such arrangements and style of portrayal, that completely differentiate them from their portrayals produced in the sculptural art of Assam during the pre- Āhom periods, as well as produced by other artistic traditions contemporary to the Āhoms. There is another portion of the pan- Hindu goddess forms in the relief sculptural art of the above five Douls, that can be understood as rare portrayals of them in the whole range of the extant free standing sculptural art, as well as architectural sculptural art of the Indian subcontinent.

The study in this Thesis titled “*An Iconological Study of the Representations of Devīs in the Relief Sculptural Art of the Douls of the Later Āhom Period ( Late 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century CE )*” will consider Forty- eight selected images featuring both identified pan- Hindu forms as well as unidentified forms of Devīs/ Śaktis in the relief sculptural art of the aforesaid five Douls. An interpretation of these forms and conceptions following the methods of Iconology and through an understanding of interconnectedness of distinct texts and ideas will be attempted in the study. As literature and extensive documentation regarding the symbolisms

and themes of these images are scanty, and no proper historical evidences of the traditions and texts followed in making these images have been found till date, the study will be based on possibilities and assumptions, various permutations and combinations of the collected data. The study will be an attempt to find a logical and systematic process to decipher the visualizations of the Devīs in the sculptural imagery of above five Āhom built Douls, which are otherwise being sidelined and neglected in the mainstream historical, archaeological and art historical studies. The understanding of the Iconographic details of the various conceptions of Devīs that have appeared as a part of the architectural stone relief sculptural art of the Āhoms is crucial for forming a complete idea of the form, intricacies and state of Śaktism and the Śākta traditions during the later part of the medieval period. In the modern studies on the religious history of the later medieval period in Assam, emphasis is seen to be laid on the neo- Vaiṣṇava traditions, and its myriad aspects. Studies of Śaktism and the Śākta institutions of the later medieval period are, in comparison, seen to be brief. A tendency towards vilifying and demonizing Śaktism can be seen implicit in these studies, mainly by those scholars who show an ardent devotion and leaning towards neo- Vaiṣṇavism. The following study in this thesis can be an attempt to understand through the images of Devīs in the relief sculptural art of the Āhom built Douls, the manners in which institutions of Śaktism of the later medieval period in Assam, interacted with neo- Vaiṣṇava institutions. The study is not about creating hierarchies or comparisons amongst sects or religious ideologies, it is about understanding cultural interactions, and a step towards finding out certain histories that have been forgotten or made to be forgotten, a hint towards certain missing links in the process of cultural evolution in Assam.