

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background Concepts of the Study : An Outline

(a) About Iconography and Iconology-

Iconography of an Image or a Visual representation, in simple terms, means the meaningful and thoughtful arrangement of different visual symbols in that image or visual representation. The word ‘*Graphy*’ in Latin means a to describe, or a descriptive study. Iconography too, is concerned with describing images. But, this act or exercise of describing images have to be done in a systematic and scientific way. When the description of images or Iconography is systematized as a scientific, logical and critical discipline, as a subject of study, it becomes *Iconology*. ‘*Logy*’ in Latin refers to science, a scientific and logical discipline of study. We can also say in other way that Iconology is Iconography or the process of describing images in a detailed, interpretative and insightful manner, considering all the possible known and evident historical, socio-cultural, political, and even individual and personal contexts and issues that have directly or indirectly contributed to the conceiving, shaping and imparting meaning to the images. Iconology is none but Iconography as a branch of a study. D’Alleva (2005, 21) points out that “*Although the terms "iconography" and "iconology" are often used interchangeably, they actually refer to two distinct processes of interpretation. Iconology, in a way, picks up where iconography leaves off. It takes the identifications achieved through iconographic analysis and attempts to explain how and why such imagery was chosen in terms of the broader cultural background of the image. The idea is to explain why we can see these images as "symptomatic" or characteristic of a particular culture.*” Iconology has been included under different domains of modern academic study like Art History, Archaeology, Cultural Studies, Museology, Film Studies, Drama Studies, Literature etc.

In the context of Art History and Archaeology, particularly Indian/ Pan- Indian Art History and Archaeology, Iconology or the study of Iconography is mainly concerned with or centred around religious and cultic imagery. The prefix ‘*Icon*’ derived from the Greek *Eikon* in Iconology as well as Iconography refers to an image of great religious cultural and personal significance, as an image with which exalted and high

thoughts and meanings are associated in a culture. In other words, Icon refers to a revered image or representation, which in most cases, is a religious or cultic image- an image of a deity, saint etc. According to Banerjea (1941, 1), “ *An Icon means a figure representing a deity or a saint in painting, mosaic, sculpture etc. which is specifically meant for worship or which is in some way or the other associated with the worship of different divinities*”. Iconography or Iconology basically evolved from an intellectual exercise which concerned itself with exploring religious, sectarian or cultic imagery, knowing the details and thematic intricacies of religious icons. In the domain of Art Historical Study of Traditional Indian Art which include Art of Ancient, Medieval and Folk Artistic traditions, Iconography or Iconology has remained majorly the study of images or representations of religious and cultic figures and other representations belonging to different categories like deities/ gods, anti- gods, spirits, saints, seers etc. Apart from them, every other figure, motif, pattern and composition featuring in the context of visual culture of the religious and cultic spaces are also included in the Iconological study under the domain of Traditional Indian Art History or Ancient and Medieval Indian Art History.

(b) Hindu Iconography or Hindu Iconology

The study of Hindu Iconography or Hindu Iconology is a vast and complex area of study. Chiefly, Hindu Iconology includes descriptive, exploratory, historical and critical study of plastic images and representations, mainly sculpted images or icons of *Devatā-s* which include the major/ conventional and popular gods and goddesses of the various Hindu sects, systems and traditions. Apart from them, visual representations of several other lesser known deities, demi- gods, spirits are also the subjects of study in Hindu Iconology. The studies in Hindu Iconology concerns not only with deciphering and identifying the above categories of images , but also concerns itself with understanding the development, evolution of several religious sects, systems and cults, the texts and cannons of these sects and cults, the interactions between these and the numerous cultural variations that goes into visualizing and meaningfully rendering these images. In the context or tradition of Indian religious art, may it be Hindu, Buddhist or Jaina art, the prime terminologies for images and icons of deities are :

Bera- Image

Mūrti- anything which has definite shape and physical limits, an embodiment or incarnation.

Bīm̄ba- reflection or prototype — the original or model after which a thing is copied.

Vigraha- extension, expansion, form.

Pratimā- resemblance, similitude, representation.

Pratīka — symbol

Rūpa — form, aggregate, a sum total of form.

Arca — object of adoration and worship (Ramanuja Achari, 2015, 5)

Out of the above, the most commonly used terms to describe or define the various sculpted images or iconographic representations/ icons of deities featured in the architectural space of a temple or other religious structure are found to be Bīm̄ba and Mūrti. Mūrti is commonly used for every visual or sculpted image, may it be of deities or other being in the tradition of Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina art. Mūrti is the limiting of the limitless, i.e. the deity or divine principle for our perception, because we have limitations, and the divine do not have any. Rather than understanding the Mūrti as a likeness of a particular deity, it must be understood as the form taken by the deity himself or herself for our pleasure, intellectual perception, and meditation.

The *Parama Samhitā* [3.7] states that it is impossible for the human being to worship, meditate or praise a deity without a form, and therefore the Lord or the chosen deity should be worshipped through an icon, may it be Mūrti, Vigraha, Arca or Bera (Ramanuja Achari, 2015, 6). The *Viṣṇu Samhitā* [29. 55- 57] also says that it is impossible to meditate on the formless or the Nirākārā aspect of the divinity without a form. It further points out that the human mind cannot fix itself if the divine principle is completely formless, it will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore, the wise will meditate on some form, remembering however that is an indirect method, a particularization or indication of that which is completely formless (5).

The terms Vigraha, Arca and Bera, have been specifically used for the sculpted images or iconographic representations or icons of deities that are consecrated, enshrined permanently in the sanctum sanctorum or *Garbhagṛha* of a Hindu temple

and offered daily and ceremonial ritual worship. According to Diana Eck, Vighraha is that form which enables the mind to grasp the nature of God or the deity. The various sculpted images/ icons of deities or Mūrti-s/ Bimba-s placed on different parts of the architectural body of a temple are described as the reflections, emanations, of the main deity worshipped inside the Garbhagr̥ha of the temple. The deities whose Mūrti-s or Bimba-s are featured on different parts of the temple architecture can be reflections, emanations, incarnations of the main deity enshrined in the Garbhagr̥ha and subsidiary or subordinate to the main deity.

The major deities or godheads in pan- Indian Hinduism whose numerous forms, conceptions and themes are found depicted in the pan- Indian sculptural imagery are Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śakti/ Devī, Brahmā, Gaṇeśa, Kārtikeya and Sūrya. Various traditions and sub- traditions are centred around the worship of each of these deities. Vaiṣṇavism includes the numerous traditions centred on conceiving and worshipping Viṣṇu as the supreme principle, Śaivism includes the various traditions that conceive, visualize and worship Śiva as the supreme principle. Śaktism includes in it a vast complex mosaic of traditions that conceive, understand and worship Devī/ Śakti or myriad emanations of a divine feminine principle or a great goddess or Mahādevī as supreme. Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śaktism constitute the mainstream of Hinduism. The discipline or study of Hindu iconography or iconology revolves around the numerous conceptions and images of deities and symbols categorized under *Vaiṣṇavism*, *Śaivism*, *Śaktism*, *Gāṇapatya* and *Saura*, appearing in the various dynastic and regional traditions of religious art, dating to different time periods in the Indian subcontinent , as well as in the Hindu and Hinduism influenced cultures of south- east Asia, far- east and central Asia.

(c) Śaktism or Traditions of Worship of Devīs/ Śaktis or Goddesses in the Indian Subcontinent

On the tradition of worship of Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses in Hinduism, and also in the other two Dharmic traditions, viz. Buddhism and Jainism, Kinsley (2005, 1) goes to say that “*No other living religious tradition displays such an ancient, continuous and diverse history of goddess worship.*” The Śākta tradition or Śaktism is, however, less clearly defined than the traditions of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism. It is not only the Śāktas or followers of Devī who worship Goddesses or Devīs. Flood (1996, 175) says

that almost every Hindu will revere her or the principle of Devī/ Devīs in some capacity, particularly at village level where her demands are very immediate as are her boons. Both Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism have incorporated the conception of Goddess or Devī within them as the consorts or energies (*śakti*) of their respective male deities or principles Viṣṇu and Śiva . Yet, it has been seen that, at its Tāntric heart, Śaivism is pervaded by feminized images of divinity and practice. With Śākta texts, this feminized religion becomes overt in both Purāṇic and Tāntric manifestations.

Mainstream Śaktism can be said as of two types : *Paurāṇika/ Smārta Śaktism* and *Tāntrika/ Āgamic Śaktism*, or in other words- Purāṇic tradition or system of Śaktism and Tāntric tradition or system of Śaktism. Tāntric Śaktism is known as the original or actual form of Śaktism. Tāntric Śaktism and Śaktism can be used interchangeably in several contexts. There are several theories and thoughts regarding the origins of Śaktism. One theory says that Tāntric Śaktism is one of the several traditions or paths which are being classified as Tāntric which have the same origin and primary ideologies as the Vedic traditions, but have sharp differences in their forms, ways, modes and codes. It has been also said that Tāntric Śaktism evolved as an esoteric development within Tāntric Śaivism (Olesen, 2016, 1). May be because of this, significant Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses in Śaktism are conceived to be the various ramifications or aspects of the consort of Śiva/ Paramaśiva/ Īśvara who is Pārvatī/ Durgā. The Tāntric texts/ traditions and its practitioners further say that any goddess or goddess form or Devī can be addressed by the name Durgā. In other words, in Tāntric systems, Durgā is a generic name for every goddess. In the Śākta culture of Assam, there is found a practice of addressing or identifying any goddess as Durgā and as only a part of the supreme personality Durgā.

On the evolution of Śaktism as a canonical system within Śaivism or Śaiva texts, Alexis Sanderson's analysis of the Śaiva traditions and how the concept and cult of Śaktis or female deities evolved within it can be discussed here in brief. Sanderson (1988, 664) says that the Śivaśāsana or mainstream or canonical Śaivism is divided into two main branches or streams : *Atimārga* (the Outer Path) and *Mantramārga* (the Path of Mantras). The *Atimārga* is accessible only to ascetics, while the *Mantramārga* is open both to ascetics and to married householders or Gṛhastha-s . The *Atimārga* is entered for salvation alone, while the *Mantramārga* promises both salvation and, for those that so wish, the attainment of supernatural powers or merits

known as *Siddhis* and the experience of supernal pleasures or in the worlds of their choice or *Bhoga*. The Atimārga Saivism is sometimes called Raudra rather than Śaiva. This is because it is attributed to and concerned with Śiva in his archaic Vedic form as Rudra, the god of wild and protean powers outside the Sruta or Vedic sacrifice. It has two principal divisions, namely the *Pasupata* and the *Lākula*. One of the primary differences that differentiates the Atimārga from the Mantramārga is that in Atimārga, Rudra/ Śiva is solitary and celibate whereas in Mantramārga, Rudra associates himself with bands of protean and predominant female deities or spirits taken from diverse traditions and systems. In the course of history, in the fully developed and diversified Mantramārga, this association became to be conceived as Śiva- Śakti or Śiva/ Rudra as not a solitary existence or reality, but with a Śakti or a feminine power. The concept of Śakti or a feminine power or goddess got developed and diversified in the system of Mantramārga, and through the Mantramārga.

According to the model given by Sanderson (1988, 669), the scriptures or texts of Mantramārga are divided into two systems : Śaiva Siddhānta and the Bhairava Tantras/ Tantras of Bhairava or Kapālika Śaivism. Bhairava Tantras are further divided into Mantrapīṭha and Vidyāpīṭha. Vidyāpīṭha further gets divided to Śakti Tantras and Yāmala Tantras. Śakti Tantras are again divided into Trika Tantras and Tantras of Kālī.

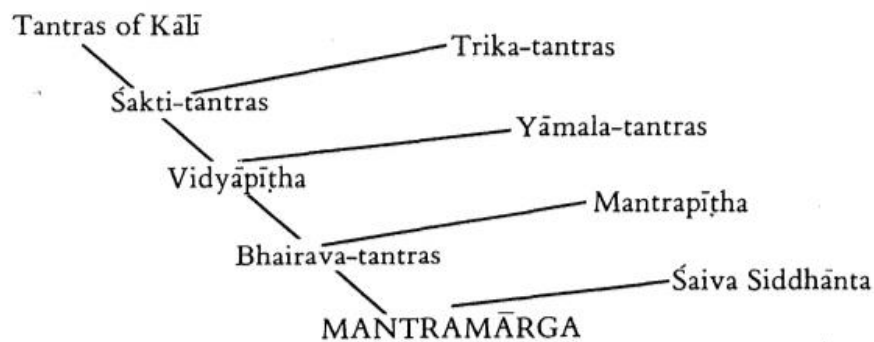


Fig 1.1 : The structure of Mantramārga as explained by Alexis Sanderson. The above figure is taken from the Essay by Alexis Sanderson : *Śaivism and the Tāntric Traditions* (page 669). [Sanderson, A. (1988). *Saivism and the Tantric Traditions*. In Sutherland et al., editors. *The World's Religions*, pages 660- 704. Routledge, London.]

In the above model, the arrangement of the branches of Mantramārga is said by Sanderson (1988, 669) to be hierarchical. Whatever is above and to the left sees or

interprets whatever is on the right and below them as lower revelation or systems. Ascending through these levels, from the Mantrapītha to the Yāmala Tantras, then to the Trika Tantras and the Kālī cult, one finds the feminine principle or Śakti/ Devī to be rising stage by stage from subordination to complete autonomy. It can be said that as the Bhairava Tantra system of the Mantramārga evolved or rose to more sophistication and diversification, the conception of Śakti/ Devī or feminine principle also grew as a powerful, autonomous and influential knowledge system.

There are other theories which say that the concept of Śakti or female energy has its roots or germs in the Vedas or the Vedic texts - the *Ṛg Veda* (Shastri, B., 1992, 1). The *Vāka Suktam* or the *Devī Suktam* of the *Ṛg Veda* composed by Vāk- the daughter of Ṛṣi Ambhṛni, has always been a foundational and text of Śaktism. It can be said that the primary or nascent thought of Śaktism which attained its completeness in and through the Purāṇas and Tantras is contained in the *Devī Suktam*. The Upaniṣads, particularly the *Mundaka Upaniṣad* of the *Atharvaveda* speaks of several female energies like *Kālī*, *Karālī* etc. (Sarma, K.C., 1994, 88). There is also class of Upaniṣads categorized as *Śākta Upaniṣads*, e.g. *Devī Upaniṣad* (Laskar, 2010, 34) which are said to have shaped Śaktism as an institution, as a well-knitted system. Having its early roots in the Vedic and Yogic systems, Śaktism might have parted from them, interacted, overlapped with and merged in it the non- Aryan texts- the *Sabara* and *Kirāta* texts, and traditions to attain the form of Tāntric Śaktism, Śaktism or Śākta Tantra. Śākta Tāntric traditions have inculcated and absorbed in them a network of several mainstream, folk, village and tribal traditions of mother and nature worship, rituals and concepts of fertility, magic, occult, trance etc. prevalent in different regional cultures (both within India and upto the far reaches of China and central Asia) across the course of its evolution. This intermixing and overlapping resulted in the creation of numerous sub- traditions, ritual practices, imageries, texts and symbolisms which got styled as or generalized as Śākta Tantra or Śākta Dharma or Śaktism as known today.

Tāntric Śaktism, having an amalgamation of Kirāta (Indo- Mongoloid) and Vajrayāna Buddhist imageries, conceptions and rituals has been the most dominant and mainstream in the culture of Assam as well as eastern India since the 10th century CE. This can be said from the theories put forward by scholars like P.J. Deka that goddess Kāmākhyā Kāmeśvarī- the major and the ruling goddess principle of Tāntric

Śaktism or Śaktism in Assam is also a three- faceted goddess synthesized across history from the Hindu Śakti Tantra and Bauddha or Buddhist Anuttara Tantra of the Vajrayāna path (Deka, 2004, 43). The Śmārta/ Paurāṇika tradition which is the propagator of the orthodox Vedic Brāhmaṇic narrative and doctrines exerted its influence on the Śaktism of Assam, but it ultimately had to compromise with the predominant Tāntric presence. The Paurāṇika/ Smārta Śaktism in Assam, like in most other seats of Tāntric Śaktism like Bengal and Odisha can be called can be called as nothing but an attempt to ‘consolidate’ or make the base of the original Tāntric forms of Śaktism ‘stronger’ and orthodox through amalgamating in it Vedic and Purāṇic principles, and to merge these traditions of Tāntric Śaktism with the dominant standardizing and generalizing Vedic Brāhmaṇical traditions. The inclusion of Tāntric rituals, imagery and ideologies in Purāṇic literature or Purāṇic tradition can be called as one of the several attempts at Brāhmaṇization of Tāntric systems like Tāntric Śaktism. In the Purāṇic tradition, various ritual and narrative systems of Śaktism and Śaivism both of which are ontogenetically Tāntric have been infused with Vedic Brāhmaṇical interpretations and coloured with the notions of orthodoxy and puritanism of the Brāhmaṇic Vedic/ Smārta systems. Though Śiva and Śaivism, in certain cases in Purāṇic tradition is seen to have de- Tāntrified successfully, the conceptions of Śakti/ Devī retained their Tāntric nature. Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses could never be de- Tāntrified. The actual and core ritual worship of Devīs/ Śaktis continue to be performed through Tāntric mystic diagrams known as Yantras and Maṇḍalas. Worship of Devīs/ Śaktis through Yantras and Maṇḍalas, is considered a higher level of worship than worshipping them through images of their anthropomorphic forms.

The traditions of Smārta/ Paurāṇika/ Brāhmaṇical Śaktism, in the context of Assam, Bengal and eastern India as a whole is a Bipartite system : Vedic/ non- Tāntric - Tāntric (Bhattacharya, B.K., 2003, X) or a network of Tāntric and non- Tāntric traditions . The numerous regional, village, folk and tribal practices, belief systems and imageries which constituted or were attached to Tāntric Śaktism in these regions could not be denied by the Brāhmaṇical or Smārta tradition and also went into acquiring the guise of Brāhmaṇism. They were though given a secondary position in the Brāhmaṇical system. *Devī Māhātmyam/ Durgā Saptaśatī/ Caṇḍī-* one of the very sacred texts of Śaktism and a part of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa clearly projects the

Vedic- Tāntric bipartite system. Its identity is a conventional text of the standardized Smārta Brāhmaṇical tradition as well as a Tāntric text. The Kālikā Purāṇa, Devī Purāṇa, Devī Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa/ Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa are several texts which have been styled as Purāṇas and called as Upa- Purāṇas or subsidiary Purāṇas. Kālikā Purāṇa composed around 10th to 11th century CE in Assam, in particular, has mention in it or have cited several (lesser known) Tantra-s, one of them being *Vaiṣṇavī Tantra*. The Kālikā Purāṇa has spoken of the supremacy of Śakti/ Devī or the divine feminine principle in the form of Kāmākhyā, whose temple presides over the Nīlācala or Nīlakuṭa hill in Guwahati, or the erstwhile Prāgijyotiṣpura. The Devī Mahābhāgavata or Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa has spoken of the Devī as Parā Prakṛti, Mūla Prakṛti as the source of every existence and the millions of universes. The 43rd chapter of this Upa Purāṇa further describes two main forms or Mūrtis of Durgā- one Paurāṇika and the other Tāntrika (Kumar , 1983, 181- 187). The Tāntric or *Tāntrikī Mūrti* of Durgā is described as the supreme form of hers and she resides in a realm that is higher than all the other realms of existence. Both the Kālikā Purāṇa and the Devī Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa are often claimed to be composed in eastern India and the Tāntric Śākta culture evolved in the different levels of the matriarchal societies in these regions are reflected in the contents of these texts.

In the context of the Hinduism of Assam as well as in each of the regional cultures of the Indian subcontinent , Tāntricism/ Tāntric Śaktism/ Śaktism can be divided into : i) the codified, classical and core *Śāstric/Śāstriya* form of Tāntricism or Tāntric Śaktism which constitute the mainstream and which is the Śaktism proper, and ii) Folk, clan, tribal and village systems of mother, female energy worship, procreative symbol and totem worship, occult and mysticism styled as Tāntra or can be called *Laukika* forms of Tantricism or Tāntric Śaktism/ Śaktism. The Śāstric form of Tāntricism or Śaktism proper can be said to be existing in close proximity to Brāhmaṇical/ Smārta systems. The texts of Śāstric Tāntricism/ Śaktism or *Tantra Śāstras*, are divided on the basis of, mainly, *Krāntā*, *Krama*, *Ācāra* and *Āmnaya*. Krāntās, according to Tantra Śāstras are three main religio- cultural regions of the Indian subcontinent or the ancient greater India and they are basically three in number. These Krāntās, according to the Tantra known as *Mahāsiddhasāra Tantra*, are namely- *Viṣṇukrāntā*, *Aśvakrāntā* and *Rathakrāntā* (Ghosh, 1989, 58). The Śakti- Maṅgala Tantra says that the region lying east of the *Vindhyās* or the *Vindhyācala*

mountain ranges in central India and stretching up to Java (in modern day Indonesia) is known as Viṣṇukrāntā which includes Assam, West Bengal, Odisha, modern day Bangladesh etc. , the region north of the Vindhyaś and extending up to *Mahā Cīna* or Tibet is Rathakrāntā and the region west of the Vindhyaś and also covering southern India is Aśvakrāntā (58). The Mahāsiddhasāra Tantra and also other Tantras like Sarvollāsa Tantra and Vāmakeśvara Tantra says that there are 64 Tantra Śāstras in each of the three Krāntās or cultural regions, therefore making the total number of Tantra Śāstras as 192. But, this is just an estimated number. The number of Tantra Śāstras can be even more in each of the Krāntās.

According to the *Sammohana Tantra*, Tantras can also be divided into four classes, from the geographical point of view : *Kerala*, *Kāśmīra*, *Gauḍa* and *Vilāsa*. The Kerala class is said to prevail in all regions within the Indian subcontinent from Aṅga to Mālava, the Kāśmīra class from Madra to Nepāla, the Gauḍa class from Śilahatṭa or Sylhet to Sindhu. The Gauda class also includes the Kāmrūpa region or Assam. The Vilāsa class is said to be found in all regions or common to all regions (Bagchi, 1989, 18).

Āmnaya means path of revelation. There are six major Tāntric Āmnayas or paths, according to the *Sammohana Tantra*, namely *Pūrva* (eastern), *Dakṣiṇa* (southern), *Paścima* (western), *Uttara* (northern), *Ūrdhva* (upper) and *Pātāla* (nether) (Bagchi, 1989, 18). Krama in Tāntricism or Śaktism means a school of philosophy based on a sequential unfolding of consciousness, so the name Krama (Krama means sequence).

Laukika traditions of Tāntricism/ Tāntric Śaktism/ Śaktism are folk religious and cult traditions styled as Tantra, and are seen to exist both independently and as an integral part of the Śāstric or mainstream Tāntric Śaktism/ Śaktism as well as Purāṇic/ Smārta Śaktism.

Purāṇas or Purāṇic texts are also divided into *Mahā Purāṇas* and *Upa Purāṇas*. The Upa- Purāṇas are subsidiary or minor Purāṇas. There are numerous versions of the Mahā Purāṇas and Upa Purāṇas too that have evolved in different time periods and in different and diverse regional and cultural traditions of Hinduism across history. Apart from the Mahā Purāṇas and the Upa Purāṇas, there are a class of lesser known texts prevalent in specific regional cultures which are styled as Purāṇas, but

are not Purāṇas in the actual sense, for example, the Padmā Purāṇa. The Mahā Purāṇas and the Upa Purāṇas can be categorized as the mainstream Purāṇas/ Purāṇas or Purāṇic texts in general. The Purāṇic or Smārta form of Śaktism can be called as by and large a pouring of Vedic Brāhmaṇic elements into Tāntric Śaktism which is the actual Śaktism, as mentioned already. Śaktism in the Upa Purāṇas like Kālikā Purāṇa, though having a Vedic Brāhmaṇic presence in it, is predominantly Tāntric. Though it is a Purāṇic text, it is more of Tantra in its extensive emphasis and the preference it gives to antinomian rituals and practices which can be categorized under the *Vāmācāra* or *Kaulācārā* branch of Tāntric Śaktism.

(d) Śaktism in Assam : A Brief Overview

Assam, located in the north-eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, has been known as one of the important seats of Śaktism/ Śākta Tantra or tradition of Devī/ Śakti worship, since the remote ancient times. Ancient Assam or Kāmarūpa and the temple or sacred region of Kāmākhya at Nilācala in Guwahati or erstwhile Prāgyjyotiṣa , in particular, has been recognized as a major and the highest centre of Śaktism. The number of Śakti Pīthas or centres/ seats/ sacred spaces of Śaktism vary from four to one hundred eight, but the name of Kāmarūpa is seen to occur in every list, including the smallest list of four Pīthas, namely- *Jalandhara*, *Uddiyāna*, *Purnagiri* and *Kāmarūpa* (Sinha, 1992, 8). Kāmarūpa Pītha has been known as the seat of the Kaula Dhārā or the Kaula tradition of Tantra, where the Upāsana or worship of Kālī- not identical with the present day Kālī Pūjā is pursued (Mukherjee, 1989, 42). Purāṇas like Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa, Brihad Dharma Purāṇa, Varāha Purāṇa, Devī Mahābhāgavata/ Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa, Devī Purāṇa, Kālikā Purāṇa and Skanda Purāṇa, epics like Mahābhārata and Tantras like Yoginī Tantra, Kāmākhya Tantra, Mahānirvāna Tantra and Kubjikā Tantra refers to Kāmarūpa and particularly the Mahāpītha of Kāmākhya on the Nilācala hill in Guwahati as the greatest centre of Śakti worship. Buddhist Tāntric texts like the Mahācīnācara Tantra also speak of Kāmarūpa and the temple of Kāmākhya as an important place for Śakti and Devī worship. It further says that goddess Kāmākhya of Kāmarūpa gets pleased instantly (Laskar, 2010, 76). There are ample evidences in oral and written literature, epigraphs, folklore and visual arts which prove the greatness and importance that Kāmarūpa or Assam once held and still holding in the evolution and proliferation of Śakti/ Śākta worship.

Not only the Kāmākhyā Pītha in Nīlācala, all the other Śakti Kṣetras or Śakti temples or shrines distributed across Assam are prominent centres of Śakti and Devī worship. Each of them hold a distinct place in the Śākta culture of Assam. The lore, belief systems and ritual practices of all these temples or shrines are indispensable in the process of understanding the evolution of Śaktism in Assam. The Ugratārā Devālaya at Jorpukhurīpār in Uzanbazar in the heart of Guwahati, the Dirgheśvarī Devālaya at Rangmahal in Uttar or north Guwahati, the Thāns or Deosāl-s/Sāl-s to goddess Kecāikhaitī at Sadiya in easternmost frontier of Assam, the Mahāmāyā temple at Bagribari in Bongaigaon district in western Assam, the Buḍhī Gosānī Devālaya at Jorhat in eastern Assam, the Kāmākhyā temple at Silghat in Nagaon district of central Assam, the Bāgheśvarī temple at Birjhara in Bongaigaon, the Durgā Devālaya at Hatimura in Nagaon, the Dipteśvarī Devālaya and Jayantī Devālaya at Rangiya in Kamrup district, Kāka Gosānī Thān at Golaghat district in eastern Assam, Hārhi Devālaya at Lakhimpur district of eastern Assam, Petuā Gosānī Thān in Lakhimpur, Pañcānan Devālaya and Nīl Gosānī Thān also in Lakhimpur district, Kacākānti temple at Cachar district of southern Assam, Kālī Devālaya at Balileca/ Bailleca in Nalbari district of western Assam, Srīpur Devālaya at Baksa district, Ramkhā Pītha Devālaya at Sivasagar district in eastern Assam and Ardhanariśvara temple at Patidarrang in Darrang district are some of the numerous ancient and living sites of Śakti or Devī worship in Assam. As per studies, and archaeological documentation, Śaktism in Assam, as well as most of these Śakti or Devī shrines or temples in Assam, including the Kāmākhyā temple at Nīlācala are said to have emerged and rose to prominence from 9th or 10th century CE, a period when traditions of Tantra and Śaktism had also attained the position of a dominant and canonized religious path. These temples have received patronage from and erected by numerous dynasties, kingdoms and feudal states that ruled Assam from 10th century CE to the early part of the 20th century CE.

(e) Śākta Images in Assam

The study of Iconography of the images of the numerous conceptions of Devīs/ Śaktīs or goddesses in Hindu, and also Buddhist and Jaina religious artistic traditions can be categorized under Śākta Iconology.

e (i) Texts for Study of images of Devīs or Goddesses

The Mahā Purāṇas, Upa Purāṇas, Āgamas, Tantras, Smṛtis, Silpaśāstras and Smārta Durgā Pūjā Paddhatī texts, mainly composed in eastern India during the 15th to 16th century CE, are the major categories of texts used for the study of Śākta iconography. Apart from them, Sthala Māhātmyas and Sthala Ākhyānas are another categories of texts which deal with the eulogy, narratives and descriptions of numerous deities, mainly clan or family goddesses or *Kuladevīs* and Sthala Devīs or local lesser known goddesses or appropriately, forms of goddesses. These texts contain references and knowledge systems that are crucial in understanding the iconographic and cultural evolution within Śaktism, how diverse traditions of worship of female principles ranging from the peripheral to the well organized mainstream have blended into a undifferentiated whole in Śaktism. Such texts fall in the categories of both Śāstric or Śāstrika/ mainstream and Laukika/ folk. Understanding the visualizations in Laukika texts mainly consisting of religious narrative poetries and eulogies, books on incantations and occult, ballads and ritual poetries is also an integral part in the study and deciphering of diverse images of Devīs/ Śaktis. In Assam, there is a huge corpus of texts on incantations and charms known as *Mantraputhis* which are being locally classified or styled as Tantra and texts of Śaktism.

Apart from the above texts which are mainly literary, there are diverse non-literary texts that are integral in the processes of studying Śākta iconography. Non-literary texts for understanding images and iconographical representations of Devīs mainly include visual material images (sculpted and painted), ritual acts and performances. The ritual acts and practices can be classified as Śāstrācāras or Ācāras or ritual practices and sacraments performed either according to Śāstras- Mahāpurāṇas, Upa Purāṇas, Tantras, Āgamas and Smṛtis or texts and methods which are recognized by these Śāstras, and Lokācāras/ Deśācāras or Ācāras or ritual practices which are specific to an indigenous or local culture, mainly sylvan or village cultures. The demarcation between Śāstrācāra and Lokācāra/ Deśācāra in Hinduism, as well as in Buddhism and Jainism is very thin and blur, both these Ācāras are found to be merged in each other. Deśācāras/ Lokācāras in the ritual worship of different goddesses and also other deities are emphasized upon in the Smṛti texts. These texts instructs the worship of deities through an undifferentiated combination of Deśācāras/ Lokācāras and Śāstrācāras. The worship of *Navapatrikā* or the composite of nine

plants is a Deśācāra/ Lokācāra which has been an integral part of the predominantly Śāstric ritual of Durgā Pūjā, particularly in Assam and Bengal.

e (ii) Śakti/ Devī Images found in Assam

Generally, the Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses worshipped in the diverse traditions of Hinduism fall under the following categories :

1. As consorts or personifications of the energies of the major gods or male deities- Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, either conceived and worshipped as subordinate to or associated with them or as independent deities.
2. As supreme creative, nurturing and destructive principles with all other deities as emanations, parts or reflections of them.
3. The third category include goddesses or Devī-s/ Śakti-s who are shared by Hinduism and Buddhism and Jainism, in their Tantric forms.
4. Several goddesses from Laukika traditions styled as Tantra whose identities have, either merged into the goddesses in the mainstream Tāntric and Purāṇic traditions, or have retained their identities as emanations or aspects of the mainstream goddesses.
5. Apart from the above four categories, there is also a vast category of goddesses who are lesser known. They are being either worshipped as aspects of some known goddess or their images or representations lying neglected.

Images/ Icons of goddesses or Devīs belonging to all the above categories are found in the sculpture and painting traditions of Assam.

From the archaeological findings, it can be said that sculpted representations or images of diverse forms of Devīs/ Śaktis recovered from different regions in Assam can be categorized as belonging to two time periods :

- i) Sculpted representations or images produced during the pre- Āhom periods (circa 9th to 12th century CE).
- ii) Images produced during the Āhom period (from 15th to 18th century CE)

Images of Devīs/ Śaktis dating to the Āhom period can be further divided into :

a. Images of Devīs/ Śaktis produced under the patronage of Bāra Bhuyāns, Kochs, Cutiyā Kacārīs, Dimāsā Kacārīs, Jaintiās and other dynastic cultures contemporary to the Āhom dynasty, and

b. Images of Devīs/ Śaktis produced under the patronage of the Āhom dynasty.

The sculpted representations of Devīs/ Śaktis belonging to the above time periods are found mostly in two types of mediums- stone and metal . Wooden and Terracotta sculpted images or representations are also not rare, but they are less compared to the ones found in stone and metal. Images of Devīs/ Śaktis sculpted in metal are seen to be greater in number than those sculpted in other three mediums, particularly in the sculptural art of Assam during the 15th to 18th century CE, i.e. during the period of rule of the Āhoms. Some of the significant archaeological sites in Assam yielding a good number of Devī images sculpted during the pre- Āhom or Early Medieval periods are in the Nīlācala region, Uzanbazar, Kahilipara and Ambari in Guwahati, Hahara, Rangia, Baihata and Chaygaon in the Kamrup district, the regions lying in the Kapili- Jamuna river valley in central Assam, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong districts lying in the Doiyang- Dhansiri valley region, Sonitpur and Darrang districts in central Assam, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, and Tinisukia districts of eastern Assam. Mālinī Thān, an archaeological site containing the remains of a stone temple complex probably dating back to 11th to 12th century CE and lying in the region forming a border between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, near Lakhimpur, has also yielded a good number of Devī/ Śakti images. The regions comprising the modern day Sivasagar district which became the heartland of the Āhom dynasty around 13th to 14th century CE have also yielded sufficient number of images/ icons of Devīs sculpted both in stone and metal and dating back much earlier than the Āhom period and rise of the Āhom dynasty.

Amongst the sculpted Devī images or icons found across Assam, irrespective of the time period and the dynastic culture, the number of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī Durgā images can be said as highest (Choudhury, 2010, 99). But, images or icons portraying other myriad iconographic aspects and types like Gaja Lakṣmī, Simhavāhinī Durgā, Gaurī, Cāmundā, Tārā, Kālī, Bhairavī, Vārāhī, Vaiṣṇavī, Yoginīs etc. are also not scanty in the sculptural art of Assam. There are also various sculpted images of iconographic forms or types of Devīs found either as worshipped and revered Vigrahas, or as a

part of ruined architectural fragments in Devālayas (Hindu temples) and Thāns (folk or village shrines) across Assam who i) are found to be of Tantric Buddhist or Vajrayāna derivation, ii) are interpreted as shared by the Śākta Tāntric cults in both Hinduism and Buddhism, and iii) are having a subtle composite or amalgamation of both Hindu and Vajrayāna Buddhist symbolisms. Images of such goddesses are mostly found to be dated to the time period within 10th to 16th century CE. Two examples of such images are : Tārā or Tārā as Prajñāpāramitā crafted in black basalt stone found at Buḍhā Mādhava Devālaya in Biswanath Chariali, and preserved in the collection of the Sonitpur District Museum at Tezpur in Sonitpur district of central Assam [**Appendix 1 : Figure (i)**], and Cuṇḍā sculpted in bronze found at Odalbakra in Guwahati, and preserved in the collection of the Assam State Museum in Guwahati [**Appendix 1 : Figure (ii)**]. The Kāmākhyā temple at Nīlācala and its vicinity has also yielded several of such images. P.J. Deka has included his findings and observations of some images of Tārā found carved on rock faces in different areas of the Nīlācala hill in his book *Nilacala Kamakhya- Her History and Tantra* (2004). Apart from the bronze image of Cuṇḍā, a number of miniature bronze images of other Tāntric Buddhist goddesses are also found in the Odalbakra region of Guwahati. These are also preserved at the Assam State Museum in Guwahati. Sarma (1994, 114- 115) points out that, from the last phase of the rule of the Pāla dynasty kings in Assam, i.e. from the 11th to 12th century CE, Vajrayāna Tāntric Buddhism having a concoction of diverse ritual and cultural practices in it started to exert its influence on the culture of worshipping Śakti/ Devī. In addition, it profoundly started to influence the socio- cultural life of Assam. This observation by Sarma can be used as an explanation behind the finding of more number of sculpted images of Devīs of Vajrayāna Buddhist derivation and Devīs having an amalgamation of Vajrayāna Tāntric Buddhist and Hindu iconographic characteristics between the time period from 11th century CE to 16th century CE.

Sculpted images of Devīs along with their male consorts like Śiva and Viṣṇu, or images portraying non- solitary, non- independent or subordinate aspects of Devīs are recovered from almost every region in Assam. Images and fragments of images portraying Pārvatī/ Gaurī/ Umā/ Durgā in embrace with her consort Śiva or Maheśvara known as Umālingana or Umā- Maheśvara, in stone dated circa 9th to 11th century CE are recovered from places like Uzanbazar in Guwahati [**Appendix 1 :**

Figure (iii)] and Davaka in Nagaon district [**Appendix 1 : Figure (iv)**]. The 11th century CE temple of Madana Kāmdeva at Baihata Ceriali in Kamrup district, which is now in ruins, has a partially damaged and almost mutilated stone image of a male deity seated in embrace with a female deity. The image though mutilated can be identified as a Uma- Mahesvara image, though the locals identify it as Madana Kāmdeva.

The Kāmākhyā or the Nīlācala region in Guwahati and the Mālinī Thān, in particular, has yielded a large number of sculpted images mostly dating between 11th to 13th century CE which feature a solitary goddess or female figure in full nude seated in a squatting posture with her vulva exposed. These types of images are evidences of prevalence of different esoteric Tāntric rites in Assam like the *Cakra Sādhanās* or *Cakra Pūjās* where the sex organ or vulva of a woman was emphasized and worshipped conceiving her to be the goddess (Deka, 2004, 65-66). Such rituals and rituals similar to them are known to be performed in secret till today in Assam, by sects categorized as *Rati Khowā*, but, may be with many changes and substitutions, keeping in view, certain formed social ethics. Practices like Cakra Pūjās : Including *Bhairavī Cakra* and *Yoginī Cakra*, and *Yoginī Sādhanās* involving sexual rituals, wine, meat, blood etc. are the integral part of the Kaulācārā or Vāmācārā Tāntric worship, not only in Nīlācala Kāmākhyā, but have been the core of Tāntric Śākta system in an extended region in Assam.

During the time period from 15th to 16th century CE in Assam, the rising popularity and spread of the different traditions of the ‘reformist’ neo- Vaiṣṇava sect of saint Śankardeva and his spiritual successors like Madhavadeva, Damodaradeva etc. resulted in a waning of the tradition of Śaktism or Śākta Tantra which had attained a prominence and a dominant place in the culture of Assam during the 10th to 12th century CE. But, it does not mean that the practices of Śaktism or Śākta Tantra had totally lost its ground during the 15th to 16th century CE. The practices and beliefs of Śaktism were kept alive in the numerous ritual performing art traditions of the region, for e.g. *Sukannāni Ojā Pāli*, which is still a significant living tradition in the culture of Assam. Some of the numerous known/ prominent as well as lesser known ritual practices or observances centred on goddess worship which have survived the influence of neo- Vaiṣṇavism and other ‘reformist’ religio- cultural systems during the 15th to 18th century CE, and are still significant religious traditions in Assam are *Āi*

Sabāh, Lakhimī Sabāh, Apeśvarī Sabāh, Māroi or Māre Pūjā, Kherāi Pūjā, Śāradīyā and Bāsantī Durgā Pūjā, Puhan/ Pohan Biyā, Sāthā Barat, Katyayānī Brata, Minocī Jobā, Yān- Yo- Midi or Subacanī Sevā, Hubacanī Sevā, Āulā Pūjā, Dāji Iban etc.

A significant number of miniature metal casted images, and few random stone sculpted images of different aspects of numerous Devīs/ Śaktis dating back to the above time period have come to light. A majority of these images are claimed to be tutelary and revered goddesses of the Bāra Bhuyān feudal chiefs, who rose to power from 13th and 15th century CE onwards, and were ardent worshippers of Śakti/ Devī, the rest belonged to the Dimāsā Kacāri, Jaintiā, Koch/ Kamatā and Cutiyā kings. The finding of these images indicate that Śaktism or Śākta Tantra was retaining its importance and following in spite of the growing influence of neo- Vaiṣṇavism. During the 17th to 18th century CE, the Āhoms, particularly the Āhom royalty, who were of Shan ethnic origin and became the dominant power in Assam, subjugating and conquering all other tribes, chiefdoms and kingdoms, fully embraced and got absorbed into the different factions, traditions or systems of Hinduism prevalent in Assam. As per Burañjīs or traditional Āhom historical chronicles, and modern writings on the history of Assam, it was from the later part of the 17th century to 18th century CE, that the Āhom dynasty became extremely drawn towards Śaivism and Śaktism, of the mainstream Purāṇic and Tāntric types. But the popularity and zeal towards these two traditions became profound amongst the members of the *Tungkhungīā* clan of the Ahom royalty, which resulted in the revival, growth and restoration of Śaktism as a dominant religio- cultural tradition once again in Assam. The Āhom dynasty started to patronize building of Hindu temples or *Douls* in their newly innovated architectural styles, later ones of which have been identified with or affiliated to the *Nāgara* type (Gogoi, L., 1994, 65), and adorned or replete with stone representations or images also crafted in a *newly emerged or evolved Style or Idiom of Relief Sculptural art* from late 17th century CE onwards in various regions of eastern or Upper Assam, chiefly the regions lying within the administrative boundary of modern day Sivasagar district, which were their erstwhile central seats of power, Lakhimpur district, and Dibrugarh district. The Hindu temples or Douls built by the Āhoms from 16th to 18th century CE can be divided into two categories :

1st Category- Douls that were built by the Āhom dynasty in their characteristic unique architectural styles over the ruined edifices and using the remains of ruined

temples dating back to the pre- Āhom or Early medieval period (8th to 12th century CE).

2nd Category- Douls built by the Āhom dynasty in their characteristic unique architectural styles in newly consecrated land or not over the fragments of earlier ruined temples (as claimed by the Burañjīs or Āhom historical chronicles and other historical documents citing the Burañjīs).

Only in the architecture of Douls documented as built from the late 17th century CE onwards to the 18th century CE, stone relief sculptures/ sculpted images crafted in a new style or idiom that evolved in ateliers patronized by the Āhom court, are seen to appear. The Keśavarāi Doul at Jaysāgar in Sivasagar can be said as the only known, existing Doul in Assam dating before the 18th century CE which contain stone relief sculptures crafted in this new style on its architecture.

Not all of the (existing) Douls which were built after the 17th century CE to the last part of the 18th century CE are seen to contain stone relief sculptures crafted in this new style or idiom. The Douls which are presently found to feature this new style of stone relief sculptural art as a part of the architectural scheme are :

- Keśavarāi Doul and Śiva Doul at Jaysāgar, Sivasagar district.
- Māghnowā Doul at Lakhimpur district.
- Devī Doul, Śiva Doul and Viṣṇu Doul at Gaurīsāgar, Sivasagar district.
- Barpukhurī Śiva, Devī and Viṣṇu Doul at Sivasagar town, Sivasagar district.
- Barpātra Devī Doul/ Jagaddhātrī Doul and Barpātra Śiva (or Viṣṇu) Doul at Kalugaon, Sivasagar district.
- Rāidangiā Doul at Dibrugarh district.

As per evidences, images or representations of Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses or female divinities where they are in their independent/ solitary aspects/ non- subordinate forms (not accompanied by or subordinate to their male consorts) and, where they are the central and dominant figures, can be said to first appear in this new style of architectural stone relief sculptural art of the Āhoms only from 18th century CE onwards.

The relief sculptural art of the architecture of the existing Douls dated and documented as built after the reign of the Āhom king Siu-Khrung-Phā/ Rudra Simha, by the commission of his son king Siu-Tān-Phā/ Śiva Simha, his two queens Bar Rajā Phuleśvarī Kunvarī/ Pramatheśvarī Devī and Bar Rajā Ambikā Kunvarī and their court nobles are seen to feature the most frequent number of images and representations of Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses as independent and dominant/ central divinities.

The only existing Doul estimated to be built before the reign of Śiva Simha and his queens, and under the patronage of Rudra Simha, during the early 18th century CE to contain images of independent forms of Devī/ Śakti in the relief sculptural art of its architecture is the Māghnowā Doul.

In the sculptural art of the Douls like the Keśavarāi Doul said to be built during the late 17th century CE, images of Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses Laksmī, Sarasvatī and Rādhā do are seen, but they are all represented in their forms accompanied by and subordinate to their male consorts, not in their forms or aspects where they are independent and occupying the dominant or central position. But, the Keśavarāi Doul contains two sculpted images on its architecture which feature two female figures, one tending to her hair and the other carrying a child on her lap. Though these two images cannot be categorized as goddesses, they can be studied under Śakti or Devī imagery.

In this thesis, only those images in the architectural relief sculptural art of the Douls built by the Āhoms, which feature forms of Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses occupying the Central and Dominant position, where they are Independent, Non-subordinate or Solitary, will be considered. Their Iconology or interpretation of their Iconography constitute the Main Subject of study.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The greater number of images of independent iconographic aspects of Devī/ Śakti appearing in the relief sculptural art of the Douls dating to the 18th century CE can be said as a result of the attraction towards Śaktism, its acceptance and its patronage by the Āhom rulers during the above time period and the establishment and raising of Śaktism and goddess worship as the official faith and state symbol of the Āhom

kingdom, particularly by the efforts of queen Phuleśvarī Kunvarī. (as elaborated in the Burañjīs or Āhom Historical Chronicles, numerous historical documents and oral narratives). These iconographic forms, and their conceptions are not focussed in the previous studies on the sculptural art in Assam. These are also not seen to be taken as a subject of study or discussion even by the experts of Āhom cultural history, and people intimately associated with the conservation and upholding of Āhom cultural heritage. Though some of these experts have mentioned of and attempted to decipher such unique iconographic conceptions of goddesses in their works, but their deciphering of these iconographic forms are based on generalizations and cannot be called a detailed systematic study.

The only Śākta images featured in the stone relief sculptural art of the Douls built by the Āhom dynasty during the 18th century CE, that are seen to have received some amount of attention in the modern historical and archaeological writings are the *Mahiśāsūramardinī Durgā* images. But, they are not seen to be analyzed in detail. Possible iconographic variations in them, and how their portrayals are similar to, related to, and different from the *Mahiśāsūramardinī* images in the art of the preceding periods, in the art of other cultures in Assam contemporary to the Āhoms during the 17th to 18th century CE, and in the art of other traditions or cultures of the Indian subcontinent are not found to be discussed. Apart from the *Mahiśāsūramardinī Durgā* images, there are found a variety of *Simhavāhini Durgā* images in the sculptural art of the Douls built by the Āhoms which require proper and detailed inquiry. Moreover, images of other iconographic types namely Gaja Lakṣmī, Māṭṛkās, and Sarasvatī featured in the Douls are not found to be given attention in the previous studies on Āhom sculptural art. Questions regarding possible peculiarities in conception and portrayal of the above pan- Indian Śākta iconographic types in the Āhom relief sculptural art are not put forward in the previous academic works. Apart from the above pan- Indian familiarized Śākta/ Śakti iconographic types or iconographic types of Devīs, there are evidences of different Śākta iconographic types or goddess forms that are unique and distinct to the sculptural imagery of the architecture of the Douls built by the Āhoms during the 18th century CE. These images are uncategorized till date and there is found no extensive documentation and literature on them. But, it can't be said that deciphering such images are not at all attempted. Though identifications of these unique images are being done, these do not

contain mention of texts and cultural interconnections by the readings of which, or modelled on which, the identifications have been done.

In all the available, very few previous and contemporary studies on Āhom relief sculptural art and temple architecture, attention is paid more to understanding and interpreting the formal aesthetics and the nature of line, form, material and proportion, rather than content and symbolisms. No academic work specifically or solely dealing with Śākta iconology in Āhom relief sculptural art as well as other sculptural art traditions of Assam are known. Iconological studies on Śākta images is often seen to be neglected in the previous academic works, due to several reasons, one of which may be the individual ideological preferences of the scholars.

Images of Devīs sculpted in metal like gold, silver, brass, and the sacred eight metal alloy or *Aṣṭadhātu* were also produced in the ateliers patronized by the Āhom court, mainly during the 17th to 18th century CE. A portion of these images available now are found either enshrined as Vighras receiving daily ritual worship, or are just kept without offering any ritual worship in temples and shrines across Assam. Another portion of these images are found to be preserved in the museums, and archives of families of certain families across Assam. The iconographic form portrayed by the majority of these images is the Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī Durgā form, though very few examples of metal sculpted images featuring forms like Gaurī/ Pārvatī, Rādhā, Rukminī, Gaja Lakṣmī, Dakṣiṇā Kālī, Tārā etc. are also found. A metal sculpted image of a four handed goddess standing on a lotus has been found in the Gaurībāllabh Doul (known as Na- Gosāin Sattrā) built by the Āhoms during the later phase of their rule [**Appendix 1 : Figure (v)**]. The goddess in this image is unidentified and it is one of the finest examples of metal sculptural art in Assam, and must be produced in the ateliers patronized by the Āhom court. The metal Vighra worshipped as Tārā/ Ugratārā and enshrined in the Antarāla of the Ugratārā Devālaya at Guwahati is also said to be crafted under the auspices of king Śīva Simha and his queen Bar Rajā Phuleśvarī Kunvarī and installed by them in the temple. The features of the image are not clear as it always kept adorned with garments, ornaments and flowers as a part of the daily worship.

Amongst the religious sculptural imagery produced under the Āhoms, the metal sculpted images of Devīs are seen to be in a much better condition than the stone

sculpted images of Devīs featured in the architecture of the Douls. The images featured in the stone relief sculptural art of the Douls are slowly facing defacement and destruction due to ignorance by people and unplanned methods of preservation. Moreover, the lack of study, attention and enthusiasm of the scholars, historians, art historians and archaeologists have made these images insignificant and left out in the mainstream studies on historical evolution of religious cults and systems in Assam.

1.3 Review of Literature

I. *Tai Sanskritir Rup Rekha*, by Lila Gogoi (1994) :

The author, through an extensive documentation, field study, and study of Āhom Burañjīs and other historical documents has given a detailed description of the visual and tangible culture of the Āhoms, as well as of Assam under the rule of Āhom dynasty. The dressing habits, traits, preferences, beliefs and customs of the Āhom royal house and the royal court are discussed and described by him citing and referring to known and lesser known Burañjīs, and other historical documents, and local lore. The Āhom royalty's acceptance and patronization of different traditions of Hinduism and their assimilation into them are discussed by the author. The temple building activity of the Āhom rulers has been focussed, but there is no discussion on the style and iconographic details of the different Hindu deities, including the Devīs/goddesses that make the sculptural imagery of the architecture of the Douls built under their patronage. A chapter has been dedicated to how Śaktism influenced the Āhom royalty, and how it gradually evolved to acquire a prominent position in the Āhom kingdom from the rule of king Śiva Simha and his queens. The author has also discussed about the cultural changes and conflicts that arose from the Āhom royalty's patronage of Śaktism. Though no detailed studies have been made by the author regarding the stylistic and iconographic features of the sculpted images featured on the Douls, his observations and documentations of the architectural features of the temples and monuments built by the Ahoms, the tangible culture and customary practices and beliefs of the Āhom royalty, the culture that evolved under their rule, and their patronage and adherence to Śaktism are useful for a critical understanding of the images of goddesses in the sculptural imagery of Douls taken up in the study in this thesis.

II. *Sculpture of Assam*, by Manoranjan Dutta (1990) : A detailed study of the stylistic developments in the sculptural art of Assam from the post- Gupta period to the Āhom period has been done by the author. He did mention of his observations of the iconographic features of images of certain deities in the tradition of Āhom relief sculptural art, but did not focus on the representations of Devīs/ Śaktis or the goddesses. In his analysis of the images of Hindu deities featured in the new style of relief sculptural art of the temples built by the Āhoms during the late medieval period, a brief idea has been given about several new iconographic characteristics that have appeared in their representations and conceptualizations. The author was among the first scholars in the modern academic history of Assam who attempted to analyze the Ahom temple relief sculptural art from a minute angle and brought to light a new distinct artistic school which he termed as the *Late Medieval School of Sculptural Art of Assam* or *Late Medieval School of Art*. According to him, the sculptures made under the patronage of the Āhom court fall under the above school. Though, he did not discuss about the iconography of the goddesses in the relief sculptural art of the Āhoms, his observations are found to be useful and has formed a base for understanding and approaching the unique and rare representations of goddesses in this thesis.

III. *Assam In the Ahom Age*, by Nirmal Kumar Basu (1970) : Here, extensive discussions on several levels of confluences, interactions, infusions and influences in culture that took place under the rule of the Āhoms are made by the author, but attention has not been paid to interpreting the stylistic and iconographic features of the temple relief stone sculptures that were created/ crafted under the Āhom patronage from late 17th century CE onwards. But his documentations on the numerous cultural interactions and influences can be useful as reference points in the understanding of iconology of goddesses in the study in this thesis.

IV. *The Antiquity of the Goddess Mahiṣamardinī and her Icons in Assam : an article by Nishipada Deva Choudhury, published in the Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 32 in the year 1992, (pages 25- 39) :*

This article can be called as a detailed discussion of the Śākta iconography in Assam, particularly the iconography of Durgā as Mahiṣamardinī/ Mahiṣāsūramardinī and other aspects of Durgā that have appeared in the art of Assam. The author

mentioned of some significant representations or image types of Mahiṣamardinī/ Mahiṣāsuramardinī Durgā, Simhavāhinī Durgā and Gaurī found in the sculptural art of different regions across Assam and provided a minute analysis of their style of portrayal and their iconographic arrangements. The only Śākta image in the Āhom style of sculptural art to be discussed by the author is the rock cut Mahiṣamardinī or Mahiṣāsuramardinī image at the Durgā temple in Hātimurā in Nagaon district of central Assam. He has not included in his study, the Śākta or Devī images featured in the relief sculptural art of the Douls in eastern Assam built during the late 17th to 18th century CE. Apart from the Mahiṣamardinī/ Mahiṣāsuramardinī Durgā image at Hātimurā, it is seen that the author has focussed more on the sculpted Devī or Durgā images produced in Assam between the time period from 9th to 13th century CE.

V. *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, by Padmeswar Gogoi (1976) :

A detailed observation and study of the original or ancestral Tai Ahom religion and its diverse aspects has been done by the author. Further, the significant ritual practices, belief systems, symbolisms and cosmological narratives of the Tāi Āhoms or Āhoms, the interaction of the ancestral Āhom religion with the Hindu traditions, texts and theogony, the Buddhist influences and elements in the Āhom religion, the coinage of the Āhom rulers, and, the acceptance of Hinduism by the Āhoms and their gradual assimilation into it and the resulting social, political and cultural implications, are some of the significant subjects discussed and analysed by the author. Though no discussion has been carried out by the author regarding the subjects of the relief sculptural imagery of the architecture of the Douls built between late 17th century CE and 18th century CE, his observations, documentations and research on the ancestral Āhom religious traditions, imageries, theology and belief systems, and their interaction with the Hindu traditions can be integral in interpretation of the iconographical features of the images of Devīs that have appeared in the relief sculptural art of the Douls. These studies by the author can be helpful in explaining the possible variations that have appeared in the iconographic conceptions of different goddesses in the sculptural imagery of these Douls.

VI. *The Sculptures of the Jagadhātrī temple, Kālugaon, Assam* : an article by Paromita Das published in Kalā : The Journal of Indian Art History Congress, Vol. 18 in the year 2011- 2012 (pages 108- 111) :

This article can be called as one of the very few available writings on the sculptural representations in the architecture of the Āhom built Douls or temples. The author here, talks about her observations on some select representations of deities and epical narratives in the sculptural art of the architecture of Jagaddhātrī Doul at Kalugaon in Sivasagar district. She mentions of only two Devī images depicted on the architecture of the Doul. Further, no detailed mention of textual references on the basis of which she made the identifications of the iconography of the images are found in the article. She mentions of certain peculiar and unique features in the images but does not go deep into the analysis of these. The whole article is an overview and outline of the sculptural representations depicted in this lesser known Doul built by the Āhoms, and it do provide a scope for the future researchers to carry out an insightful and critical study regarding these.

VII. *Asamat Śākta Devīr Mūrti* : an article by Rabin Deva Choudhury, published in *Daivikola* : a Collection of Essays on Sakti Tattva in the year 2010 (pages 99- 104) :

This essay provides an outline and information about some selected image types of Devīs in Assam, including some rare images. The images that are discussed here are datable to the pre- Āhom period, i.e. between 9th to 12th century CE. Some Devī images datable to the 13th to 14th century CE are also focussed here. But, no images or image types of Devīs from the architectural relief sculptural art of the Āhoms dating to the late 17th to 18th century CE are focussed by the author in this essay.

VIII. *Art of Medieval Assam*, by Rajatananda Dasgupta (1982) :

The author's observations and detailed study of the stylistic aspects of the Ahom temple relief sculptures and their visual affinities with the sculptures of south-east Asia, though not prominently or directly, can be reference points in the present study.

Elements of Hindu Iconography by T.A. Gopinatha Rao (1997), *Iconography of Hindu Tantric Deities* by Gudrun Buhnemann (2016), *Iconology of Composite Images* by D.C Bhattacharya (1980), *Hinduder Deb- Debi (Part III)* by Hamsanarayan Bhattacharya (1994), *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* by David Kinsley (1998), *The Hindu Goddesses* by David Kinsley (2005), *Development of Hindu Iconography* by J.N. Banerjea (1941) are the significant works

on Iconography, History and Development of Image Worship, evolution of different deity conceptions in Indian art, and diverse pantheistic and sectarian systems of Hinduism. The information and the studies in these works are being used as references and for forming the methodological structures in the thesis.

1.4 Aim and Objectives

- i) To give an overview of the evolution and development of the architectural relief sculptural art under the aegis of the Āhom dynasty, its characteristic and distinguishing formal/ stylistic and iconographic features.
- ii) To observe and interpret the iconography of common and some selected uncommon and rare forms of Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Durgā , featured in the imagery of relief sculptural art of the Douls.
- iii) To find justifiable interpretations for some selected goddess forms in the relief sculptural art of the Douls which could not be identified or categorized. Questions regarding their distinctiveness in the relief sculptural art of the Douls needs to be explained.

1.5 Methodology

a) Sources of Data

Primary sources of data- The primary sources of data include :

- visit to the Douls, photographing and sketching the concerned relief sculpted images,
- consultation and interaction with academicians and scholars specializing in the study of visual culture of Assam (as well as of the Indian subcontinent), and in study of Śaktism and Śākta Iconography- the Śākta iconography in the tradition of eastern India in particular,
- interviewing people who are initiates and are practitioners (**Śāktabhiṣiktas** and **Pūrnābhiṣiktas**) of different ritual traditions and systems of Śaktism or Śākta Tantra in Assam,
- interacting with people who are direct or indirect descendants of the Śākta Brāhmin priest scholars who officiated at the Douls and were settled in Assam by the Āhom royal court during the late 17th to 18th century CE, and are still

preserving and keeping intact the ritualistic practices/ traditions and certain belief systems in these Douls since that period,

- interacting with people acquainted with the knowledge of folk and sylvan beliefs and narratives regarding different goddesses and are involved in preserving different folk ritual practices of mother and goddess worship in Assam, and,
- observing and understanding rituals, visual cultures and texts in Assam. These are either directly or indirectly associated with the worship and belief systems of goddesses or Devīs

Secondary sources of data- The secondary sources of data include :

- the translated, edited and published printed versions of the Purāṇas, Tantras, Āgamas Śilpaśāstras, Pūjā Paddhatis, regional religious texts like Nams, Sthala Māhātmyas, Ākhyanas, and *Itibṛttas* or historical accounts of Devālayas (temples) and Thāns (village shrines),
- collecting and studying scholarly or academic works on the concerned subject, and on other subjects and topics relating to the concerned subject. These include books, writings in periodicals, journals, anthologies and newspapers, and,
- published literary works preserved in small district and village libraries and archives are also consulted. These literary works mostly include writings by people who are outside the academia. The subject matter of these writings range from locally prevalent and lesser known historical narratives, regional histories, eulogies, to ritual poeties.

The research/ study in this thesis is of a **Qualitative type** and the data and the problems are being analyzed using a Trial and Error Method.

b) Theoretical Perspectives

The whole of Hindu, as well as Buddhist and Jaina or in general Indic iconology is built up upon a code of symbols based on the assumption that there exists a natural affinity between ideas, conceptions, knowledge or *Nāma* and forms or *Rūpa* (Ramanuja Achari, 2015, 4). It can be explained that behind every form/ visual form/ concrete form, there is a thought, a realization, a reading, a practice, a complex

interconnected system of canons, formulae and narratives. This affinity between Nāma and Rūpa is somewhat akin to the relation between form, content and context elaborated in the modern iconographic theories given by historians like Erwin Panofsky.

The theoretical method of Iconological interpretation given by Erwin Panofsky in *Studies In Iconology* (1939) is three-tiered. In the first level of this method, extrinsic aspects of the artwork like forms, planes, colours, proportions and volumes are explored and understood, the art work is considered as a 'motif' in this stage. In the second stage, the 'motif' is made associated or is understood through the symbolisms and themes mentioned in texts, mainly literary texts. Here, the motif turns into an 'image'. The third level is totally based on the intrinsic understanding of the image, the cultural contexts of the image, and the image as reflection of the 'Symbolic values' of the culture of which it is a part. The term 'Symbolic values' was coined by Cassirer, which allude to the different preferences, preoccupations, ideologies, subjectivities and dialogues of a particular community or culture.

As per V. Ganapati Sthapati (2002, 4-5), the *Śilpaśāstras* or the vast body of traditional Indian texts on iconography and image making, mention that the artisans or sculptors, for creating an image of a deity for worship, or as a work of art, should have a thorough knowledge of the following. In other words, the following are the requisite knowledge systems that an artisan/ sculptor or a Śilpī must acquire, understand and internalize for crafting an image, for worship and as a work of art :

- i) The various forms and images- these may refer to the knowledge of various visual forms and combinations of these forms or images.
- ii) The different raw materials used in making the images.
- iii) Qualities and descriptions of the images- these may be the knowledge of the diverse literary texts, lore, canons, symbolisms, invocations etc. describing and containing references to the attributes and qualities of the image of the deities they will sculpt.
- iv) Dimensions of images.
- v) Rhythms and Proportions (Tāla Māna).
- vi) The six basic measurements and plumb lines.
- vii) Physical resemblance to natural objects.

- viii) Hand poses or gestures (Hastas or Mudrās).
- ix) Body flexion (Bhangas or Bhangimās).
- x) Dance postures (Karanas, Sthānas, Padas and Calanas).
- xi) Seated poses or Seats of the deities (Āsanas, Pīthas and Vāhanas).
- xii) Costumes and Ornaments.
- xiii) Symbols and motifs.
- xiv) Imaginative features : These may include the knowledge of how and where in making an image of a deity, the artisans could use their creative liberty or faculty of imagination.
- xv) Colour.
- xvi) Evocation (Bhāva) and Expression (Rasa)

Each of the above sixteen important knowledge systems elaborated in the Śilpaśāstras are not solely for the artisans/ sculptors but also for persons engaged or involved in study of the images of deities in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Any sculpted or even painted image in Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina art including the images in the sculptural art of the Āhom built Douls are to be understood and interpreted through different combinations of the above integral knowledge systems. In this thesis, a combination of the knowledge systems in (i), (iii), (vii), (viii), (ix), (xi), (xii), (xiii) and (xiv) in combination with the Iconological model or Three tiered method of iconological interpretation given by Panofsky will be applied in interpreting the selected images of Devīs/ Śaktis in the relief sculptural art of the architecture of the Douls built by the Āhoms. Each of the above sixteen concepts or knowledge systems of the Śilpaśāstras mentioned are intimately related to and is a result and function of each other. The knowledge systems regarding form and formal structure (tangible and material texts) are a result of the literary and theoretical systems (intangible texts) as well as literary and theoretical knowledge systems are a result of the knowledge systems on form and formal structure.

The images of Devīs taken up in this thesis will be studied as texts that reflects or connotes another text or meaning making process , these can be texts either known, lesser known or extinct/ obscure. The theory of *Intertextuality* by Julia Kristeva has to be mentioned here. Intertextuality requires understanding of texts not as self contained closed systems, but as differential and historical. In the study, the sculptures are not

considered as a product of an isolated aesthetical view, instead they are established as bearing associations to different cultural changes of the time.

For the convenience of study in this thesis, amongst the imagery of the relief sculptural art of the Douls, the goddess forms who have combination of attributes like lotus seat, lotus/ lotuses in hands, and elephants are classified as images of Lakṣmī, the goddess forms bearing combination of attributes like a musical instrument and lotus seat are classified as images of Sarasvatī, and the goddesses slaying a demon, having a lion mount, holding attributes like Trisūla, war weapons, and mirror are classified as images of Durgā. The images featuring female forms of Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Śiva, Varāha, Kārtikeya and Indra can be easily classified or categorized as Matrīkās. The images of goddesses categorized as forms of Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, Durgā and Matrīkās are being studied in a single chapter. The images of goddesses bearing unidentified combination of attributes are studied in a separate chapter.

Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Durgā, in particular are being generally considered and understood as the three major and ultimate identities of a supreme feminine principle Mahādevī/ Mahāmāyā/ Mulaprakṛti in the culture of Assam as well as in a major part of the Indian subcontinent. All other manifestations and Devī forms are conceived to be branched out or emanated from Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Durgā. The categorization of the images of the recognizable goddess forms in the relief sculptural art of the Douls under Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Durgā is based on such a cultural perception. This categorization is also based on an understanding of a theory elaborated in the Devī Māhātmyam of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, a significant and canonical text for the Śāktas. The *Prādhānika Rahasyam*, an appendix to the Devī Māhātmyam establishes that Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Durgā/ Gaurī are the three main Sakala or Vyakta manifestations of the supreme threefold feminine principle or Śakti. The functions of creation, preservation and dissolution are carried out by them along with their male consorts- Viṣṇu, Brahmā and Śiva respectively. The Devī Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa also theorizes that the primal and the highest undivided feminine principle or Mula Prakṛti has divided herself by her own accord and made herself manifested in the creation in multifold aspects, but mainly as Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, Durgā, Savitrī and Gangā (Kumar, 1983, 25).

1.6 Limitations of the Study

The images or representations of the goddesses or Devīs in the relief sculptural art of the Douls built by the Āhoms during the late 17th to 18th century CE are in a pathetic state of preservation. Majority of these images included in the study in the thesis are mutilated, eroded or partially damaged which have posed a problem in putting forward conclusive or definite interpretations of them. Due to several missing motifs, parts and attributes in these images, the studies on them are based on assumptions and permutations. Further, the inaccessibility, scarcity and obscurity of certain texts and knowledge systems, mainly in the category of Primary data or Primary texts are a major limitation on the comprehensiveness of the study in the thesis. A majority of the Śākta texts and ritual practices, both mainstream and folk, are esoteric which poses restriction in uncovering and understanding the different forms of knowledge, particularly the knowledge of iconography and forms of deities. Moreover, no evidence of any proper image making text or text on iconography or Śilpaśāstra dating to the later Āhom period or earlier periods have been found, or have appeared even in modern transliterated translated printed format which could have been helpful in understanding the characteristic features and iconographic conception of the Devīs in the sculptural art of the Douls in a more meaningful and specified manner. No tradition of sculpting images of deities in stone from the Āhom period has survived to this day in Assam. Even though some local artisans in Assam craft images of deities, even the exact replicas of the ones seen in the architecture of the Douls, they don't have a firm grounded knowledge of iconographic nuances of the deities, of the intricacies of the Śilpaśāstras. A section of these artisans claim to be the descendants of the artisans and sculptors who sculpted the images in the Āhom built Douls during the late 17th to 18th century CE, but they are not found to have the memory of sculpting on stone, iconographic theories, deity descriptions, ritual imageries. The scarcity or absence of such cultural memories regarding stone sculpting and iconographic tenets are a limitation in the proper and detailed deciphering and interpretation of the images of Devīs taken up in the thesis.

1.7 Scope of the Study

The iconological study of the images of goddesses or Devīs in the relief sculptural art of the architecture of the Douls built by the Āhoms during the late 17th to 18th

century CE, in this thesis, can form a part or pave the path for a much larger academic subject of study which will be specifically concerned with the representation of Śākta lore in the visual art traditions of the Āhoms, or patronized by the Āhom dynasty. The study in this thesis is a humble attempt to visit and explore a much neglected subject in the mainstream archaeology, art history and historiography of Assam. There are lacunae and errors in the study due to the unavailability and inaccessibility of certain data, but still, an analytical explanation and discussion of the subject based on a permutation and combination of the available data and application of the aforesaid theoretical tools is tried to be put forward. The study can provide possibilities for further extensive research. More needs to be uncovered regarding the iconographic characteristics, styles of portrayal of the Devīs as well as other deities in the architectural sculptural imagery of the Āhom built Douls which are gradually on the verge of getting lost into oblivion. The study in this thesis may prove helpful in this regard.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis entitled “**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)**” is organized under SIX chapters, out of which the Chapters 1, 2 and 3 form the Introductory Chapters containing an introduction to the subject of study, and the historical, cultural and art historical contexts of the subject concerned. Chapters 4 and 5, form the Core chapters which include the findings and analysis of the data collected for the study, and Chapter 6 include a summary of all the findings and interpretations carried out in Chapters 4 and 5, and a concern for a planned and scientific preservation of the stone relief sculptures forming an integral part of the Douls built by the Āhoms :

Chapter 1 : Introduction

1.1 Background Concepts of the Study- An Outline :

- a) Iconography and Iconology
- b).Hindu Iconography or Hindu Iconology
- c) Śaktism or the tradition(s) of worship of Devī/ Śakti
- d) Śaktism in Assam- a brief overview

e) Śākta Iconography of Assam

1.2 Statement of the Problem

1.3 Review of Literature

1.4 Aim and Objectives

1.5 Methodology

1.6 Limitations of the Study

1.7 Scope of the Study

1.8 Chapterization and Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 : The Āhoms and the Āhom dynasty : Their Religion, Culture and Absorption to the Hindu Religio- cultural systems

This chapter is completely concerned with the tracing of the religious history of the Āhoms, particularly the Āhom royalty. The study is based on secondary sources and certain oral narratives. The different sections of the chapter contains an overview of :

- The ancestral Āhom religion.
- Contact of the Āhoms with the folk and tribal traditions of Hinduism in Assam and their appropriation of these traditions.
- Acceptance of Purāṇic and Tāntric traditions of Hinduism (Mainstream/ Core) by the Āhoms and their gradual absorption into these traditions.
- Acceptance and Patronage of Śaktism by the Āhoms.
- Śaktism as a State religion under the encouragement of the Āhom court

Chapter 3 : The Building of Hindu temples or Douls by the Āhoms, a General Overview of the Architectural features of the Douls, and Stone Relief Sculpture/ Stone Relief Sculptural Art on the Architecture of the Douls

This Chapter is divided into two sections : Section 3.1 and Section 3.2

Section 3.1 gives an overview of the various new Hindu temple architectural styles that were evolved under the aegis of the Āhom dynasty from circa 16th century CE to 18th century CE.

Section 3.2 is on the stone relief sculptural art of a newly emerged style that started to make its presence as an integral part of the architecture of the Douls, a discussion of its possible prototypes , how it might have evolved, and who might be the artisans

involved in its making, followed by a general overview of its salient stylistic features and mannerisms. It will be further followed by a general introduction to the **Deity forms/ Iconographic Conceptions of Deities in the imagery of this Stone Relief Sculptural Art.**

Chapter 4 : Iconology of Some Selected Images/ Forms of the major pan- Hindu Goddesses : Laksmī, Sarasvatī, Durgā and Sapta Mātṛkās/ Saptamātṛkās represented in the Relief Sculptural Art of the Douls built by the Āhoms from late 17th to 18th century CE

This Chapter is further divided into **THREE sections : Section 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4**

Forms of Devīs/ Śaktis or goddesses, and their conception and representation in the iconographic programme of the sculptural art of the architecture of the Āhom built Douls is the main concern and the subject matter of this thesis. Out of all the Douls built by the Āhoms within the time period from late 17th to 18th century CE, and which are still standing intact to this day, only FIVE of them are seen to contain the largest number of extant stone sculpted representations or images of Devīs or goddesses on their architecture. The selected forms of the major goddesses Laksmī, Sarasvatī, and Durgā and the Saptamātṛkās that are discussed in detail in the four sections of this chapter are all featured in the imagery relief sculptural art of the architecture of the following Douls built during the 18th century CE :

- Māghnowā Doul,
- Gaurisāgar Devī Doul,
- Bar Pukhurī Devī Doul,
- Bar Pukhurī Śiva Doul and
- Jagaddhātṛī Doul or Barpātra Doul.

Devīs/ Śaktis or goddess forms featured in the imagery of relief sculptural art of the above Five Douls are categorized as :

1. Common and Uncommon/ Rare forms of the major Purānic and Tāntric goddesses : Laksmī, Sarasvatī, Durgā and Saptamātṛkās.
2. Forms that are unidentified and do not bear any feature or attribute commonly associated with the emanations of Laksmī, Sarasvatī, Durgā and Saptamātṛkās. These are seen to be unique to the relief sculptural art of the above Douls.

The Sections 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 include :

- A detailed Study of the Iconographic arrangements and conceptions of : Gaja Lakṣmī, Vāgvādinī or Vīnāhastā Sarasvatī, Mahiṣāsūramardīnī Durgā, Simhāvāhinī Durgā and Saptamātrkāś- the common pan- Indian forms of Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Durgā respectively in the relief sculptural art of the concerned five Douls.
- A detailed study of the forms or emanations of Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Durgā that are categorized as uncommon , lesser known and unique to the imagery of the relief sculptural art of the concerned Douls. Finding out sources of these forms, interpretations of possible contexts under which they might have evolved.

Chapter 5 : Finding Interpretations for some Selected Goddess forms in the relief sculptural art of the Douls which are Unidentified and are One of Their Kind in the Extant Sculptural Art of Assam

There are several unidentified goddess forms featuring in the imagery of relief sculptural art of all the above Douls that are one of their kind in the overall extant sculptural art found across Assam as well as in the context of pan- Indian sculptural art. They are till now unexplored and an in depth and interpretative study of these iconographic forms are not being focussed upon by archaeologists and art historians. Therefore, till now there is no known significant literature or documentation regarding these images. In this Chapter, an attempt is made to decipher or more appropriately to find interpretations or explanations for some of such selected images or goddess forms. Eleven of such rare iconographic forms or images are studied in this chapter.

Chapter 6 : Conclusion

This Chapter includes a summary of the analysis and interpretations made in the Chapters 4 and 5. It specifically speaks about the need for a scientific preservation of the different images of the Devīs discussed in the above chapters as well as all other images featured in the relief sculptural art of the Douls built by the Āhoms during the late 17th to 18th century CE.

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