

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

Section 3.1

Building of Hindu temples or Douls by the Āhoms :

3.1 (a) The First Phase (from circa 14th century CE to circa 1682 CE)-

The local terminologies for the Hindu temples built by the Āhom royalty, are *Devālaya* (Dwelling place of God), *Deoghar* (the house of God) and *Doul*. According to the historian Paromita Das, the word Doul, in general, is used for the temples built by the Āhoms in the regions which were the central seats of their power and influence, particularly in Sivasagar, Lakhimpur and other regions of eastern or Upper Assam. After the Āhoms embraced the various mainstream Purānic and Tāntric traditions of Hinduism, they started erecting temples or Douls of brick and stone. The architectural forms of the surviving Douls that were built by the Āhoms during the initial phases of their absorption to mainstream Hinduism (during the 14th to early 17th century CE) are seen to be simple and direct, with minimum embellishments and absence of infusion of any material/ sculpted anthropomorphic and theriomorphic images or iconographic representations of deities, and other animal, human figures or narratives both on the outer and inner portions of their architectural structures. Two of such Douls are the Thāwrā Doul and the Garakhiyā Doul, both in Sivasagar district . The initial Āhom built Douls were modelled on the simple forms of different types of huts built in Assam by the common people during that time, and also probably on some Islamic monuments of the contemporary Sultanate and Mughal styles .

The Garakhiyā Doul at Nazira is said to be built during the reign of king Siu-Seng-Phā or Pratāp Simha during the early 17th century CE [**Appendix 3 : Figure (i)**]. It is one of the earliest surviving Douls built by the Āhoms during the initial phases of their Hinduization or absorption to Purānic and Tāntric traditions of Hinduism. The

Garakhiyā Doul is entirely made of bricks and has an octagonal *Bāda* topped by an irregular conical *Śikhara*. According to Sarma (2012, 43), the ideal features of a *Nāgara* type temple (referred to the Odishan or *Kalinga* style *Rekhā Deula* temple) are totally absent in the architecture of the Garakhiyā Doul. [Note : the temples built during the pre- Āhom period (8th to 12th century CE) in Assam are said to have similar features or said to have been derived from the Odishan or Kalinga *Nāgara* style of temple architecture and also from the temple styles of central India]. Rather, he speaks of sharp Islamic influence in the architecture of the Doul. The *Bāda* of the Doul is further, not divided into sections, namely- *Pā Bhāga*, *Jāngha*, *Baranda*, like that of a *Nāgara* style *Rekhā Deula* temple. There are two rows of architectural niches or *Devakoṣṭa*-s on the *Bāda* sans any sculpted image of deities inside them. The designs of the *Devakoṣṭa*s and their overall plan on the architecture of the Doul, according to Sarma (2012, 42) speaks of an inspiration or a imitation of the architectural styles of the contemporary Mughals. The Garakhiyā Doul has only the *Garbhagr̥ha* which is enclosed within the octagonal *Bāda* and the conical *Śikhara*. It has no *Maṇḍapa*. In place of the *Maṇḍapa* now, there is a modern structure having a gabled tin roof.

The Thawrā Doul, situated at Thawrā in Sivasagar district, en route to Dibrugarh is also entirely brick built. It can be called a *Cou Cāli Doul*. Its *Bāda* has a square plan and has no *Śikhara*. It is topped by a *Cou Cāli* style or Bengal style roof [**Appendix 3 : Figure (ii)**]. The *Cou Cāli* style of Doul can be said of an influence of the temple building styles of contemporary Bengal. A structure of a *Maṇḍapa* can be seen here.

Another Doul which has certain affinities with the architectural style of the Garakhiyā Doul is the *Māghnowā Doul*, at Padmapur in Lakhimpur district of eastern Assam. But according to Sarma (2012, 45), the architecture of the *Māghnowā Doul* is, in comparison to that of the Garakhiyā Doul, more refined and shows more advanced workmanship. The *Bāda* or wall bounding the *Garbhagr̥ha* of the *Māghnowā Doul* is also not divided to distinct *Pā Bhāga*, *Jāngha* and *Baranda*. But there seems to be a *Baranda* or a *Bāju* in the *Bāda* of the *Māghnowā Doul*. It is not a *Baranda* in the conventional sense, it is rudimentary. It can be rather described as a narrow

ornamental band consisting of a series of relief carved lotus blossom motif, not as a Baranda (45) [**Appendix 3 : Figure (iii) and (iv)**].

The time period of the Māghnowā Doul is still disputed. Seeing its architectural resemblance with that of the Garakhiyā Doul, it can be said that it was built during the period of reign of king Pratāp Simha. But, the most accepted opinion by historians and archaeologists is that the temple was built under the patronage of king Rudra Simha in the early 18th century CE and later on developed by king Rājeśvar Simha in the later part of the 18th century CE .

3.1 (b) The Second Phase (from circa late 17th century CE to the last part of the 18th century CE)-

From the period of reign of Gadādhār Simha onwards in around 17th century CE, the art of temple building by the Āhoms started to attain a degree of sophistication. More features and parts started to appear in the architectural composition of the Douls (Sarma, P., 2012, 53- 54). Under the aegis of king Rudra Simha, Āhom temple architecture attained a new degree of innovation and perfection (54-56), and it achieved its peak of finesse and aesthetic grandeur during the reign of Śiva Simha and his Kunvarīs or queens, circa 18th century CE. The most finest of all the surviving Douls built by the Āhom royalty during the time period from the late 17th to early 18th century CE are the Keśavarāi Doul/ Jay Doul, Gaurisāgar Devī Doul and Bar Pukhurī Śiva Doul in Sivasagar district, and the Negheriting Śiva Doul at Dergaon in Golaghat district in eastern Assam. The architectural styles of these Douls are unique innovation under the aegis of the Āhom dynasty. This architectural style can be called as an excellent amalgamation of the sophisticated Nāgara style, of Kalinga/ Odisha and central India, and the regional and vernacular styles of Hindu temple architecture of Assam like the *Nilācala* style which is said to make its first portrayal in the architecture of the Kāmākhyā temple at Guwahati built by the Koch Kamatā king Naranārāyaṇa or Malladeva in circa 16th century CE [**Appendix 3 : Figure (v)**]. Also, there can be seen a presence of the elements of Buddhist Stupa-s and temple architectural styles met with in the Indo- Chinese regions like Thailand, Laos and Vietnam which were and surround the original homelands of the Āhoms. The influence of the contemporary temple architecture of Bengal can never be ruled

out. The Douls built in the 18th century CE from the reign of Śiva Simha and Phuleśvarī Kunvarī onwards are seen to feature the following two major designs of Śikhara-s or spires over the structure of the Garbhagrha or sanctum sanctorum, namely- *Kardaisiriyā* (having the form of a *Kardai* or Star fruit) and *Jikāsiriyā* (having the form or shaped like a *Jikā* or Ridge gourd).

From the reign of Rudra Simha onwards, the Āhom built Douls are seen to somewhat exhibit the complete basic conventional traits of an ideal Nāgara style temple. *Ratha*-s or *Ratha* projections, mainly of the type *Pañca* (five) *Ratha* started to distinctively appear in the structural plan of the Douls built by the Āhoms from the period of reign of Rudra Simha during the late 17th to early 18th century CE. Clear and near to perfect vertical divisions of the Bādas into Pā- Bhāga/ Adhithāna, Jāngha and Baranda can be traced in these Douls.

The Keśavarāi Doul or the Jay Doul is one of the most significant earliest surviving Douls that portray the above development. The Doul is of a *Pañcaratha* type and can be said to be built in the regional Nilacala style of temple architecture (Sarma, P., 2012, 56-57). The *Nilācala* style of architecture is considered as one of the easternmost regional variations of the Nāgara style of temple architecture. The most prominent feature of the *Nilācala* style is the presence of a domical/ hemispherical Śikhara over an ideal Nāgara style Bāda structure with *Ratha*-s. The domical Śikhara of the Keśavarāi Doul has a grid like or a honey comb like design . In the Śikhara of the Jay Doul too, there is a dense grid-like pattern reminding of the similar patterns in the bamboo and cane structures and objects frequently crafted in the culture of the region. It may be possible that the grid- like interconnected pattern on the temple Śikhara was modelled after the weaved patterns found the bamboo and cane basketry of the region. The finial or tip of the Śikhara of the Doul has no distinct *Āmalaka* and *Kalaśa* unlike that of the conventional Nāgara style temple [**Appendix 3 : Figure (vi), (vii) and (viii)**].

The Keśavarāi Doul has a brick structure leading to the Garbhagrha or sanctum sanctorum enclosed by the Pañcaratha Bāda and the Śikhara. This structure may be the Maṇḍapa. It is modelled on a typical village hut having a *Do Cāla* roof (Sarma, P., 2012, 58). Again leading to this structure are the remnants of another larger

structure, over which a tin roof supported by iron posts and beams has been erected now.

Adjacent to the Keśavarāi Doul, is situated the Baidyanatha Siva Doul (Sarma, P., 2012, 60) . It has a unique architectural style with pronounced Islamic influences. Its architecture, again shows a sharp deviation from the ideal Nāgara temple style [**Appendix 3 : Figure (ix)**]. The Keśavarāi Doul has two smaller Do- Cāla architectural structures just near to it . These might have once served as temples to Gaṇeśa and Sūrya. This composite Do- Cāla structure is also sometimes known as *Bhog Ghar* or a house where Bhoga/ Prasada or consecrated food for offering to the deity and the devotees were cooked (61).

The Devī Doul at Gaurīsāgar or Gaurīsāgar Devī Doul was built by the orders of Bar Rajā Phuleśvari Kunvarī, the queen of Śiva Simha. The architectural style of this Doul can be explained as the complete attainment of the ideal Nāgara style of temple architecture but with sharp minimalist features and bearing the essence of the visual sensibilities of the region during that time (Sarma, P., 2012, 72). Its architecture can be said as a ‘*Apabhramsa*’ of the Rekhā Deula type of Nāgara temple. The distinctive parts of this architectural style which first expressed itself in the Gaurīsāgar Devī Doul has been diagrammatically explained by Pradip Sarma in his book *Assamar Sesh- Madhyajugiya Mandir- Sthapatya* (2012) . The division of parts is seen to be almost akin to the Rekhā Deula type of temple [**Appendix 3 : Figure (x) and (xi)**], but certain parts are rudimentary here. There can be traced sharp regional variations. The terminologies or names of each of the part are of the local derivation. The Ratha projections of the Bāda of the temple rise up rhythmically upwards in a clean streamlined curvilinear manner to form Śikhara and the subsidiary Śikharas known as *Angaśikhara-s* or *Uramañjarī*. The curvilinear Śikhara composite is called Kardaisiriya (star fruit shaped) in local dialects (77) . The central Śikhara terminates in a finial which consists of vertically stacked disc shaped structures topped by a pointed Kalaśa. The composite of disc or flattened bowl shaped structures with the larger disc at the bottom and the smaller disc at the top carrying the Kalaśa cannot be said as a Āmalaka present in the ideal Nāgara temple architecture. True Āmalaka like structure is never to be found in the temple architecture of the Āhoms. Between the curvilinear body of the Śikhara and the finial or tip structure of the Śikhara of the

Doul is seen an ornate band which can be called as a vestige of an Āmalaka [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xii)**]. The Gaurisāgar Devī Doul has a Maṇḍapa and a Antarāla. Both of these are brick built structures have a simple plan having a Do Cāla roof.

The above architectural style which expressed itself in the Gaurisāgar Devī Doul was again applied later in building the Bar Pukhurī Śīva Doul at Sivasagar town. Here, this architectural style is seen to have achieved the highest degree of finesse and grandeur. The Bar Pukhurī Śīva Doul was also commissioned by Śīva Simha and his second queen Bar Rajā Ambikā Kunvarī. The Maṇḍapa of the temple, presently is a structure made of wood and iron and having a gabled tin roof. The Mandapa made of wood, iron and roofed by tin sheets is followed by a brick built Cou Cāli structure which leads to the Antārala and the Garbhagrha [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xiii), (xiv), (xv)**].

The Bar Pukhurī Śīva Doul is amongst the tallest temple structures in the Indian subcontinent. Adjacent to it are the Bar Pukhurī Devī and Viṣṇu Douls. The architectural style of the Viṣṇu Doul approaches somewhat near to the Keśavarāi Doul. Its Śikhara has a grid like pattern on its surface. The architectural style of the Bar Pukhurī Devī Doul is somewhat unique. It also has a Pañcaratha plan but its domical Śikhara has neat closely spaced, incised longitudinal or vertical groves on its surface. This Śikhara may be called the Jikāsiriya type of Sikhara (Sarma, P., 2012, 77) [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xvi) and (xvii)**].

There are two Douls presently standing on the banks of the tank known as Barpātra Pukhurī or Lakṣmī Sāgar at Kalugaon in Sivasagar district itself. These two Douls were built by the commission of Harināth Barpātra Gohāin, who served as a chief minister and lieutenant at the court of king Śīva Simha and Bar Rajā Phuleśvarī Kunvarī. One of the Douls is known as the Jagaddhātrī or Devī Doul and the other might have been a Viṣṇu or Śīva Doul. The Jagaddhātrī Doul was in a totally dilapidated state until it was restored again back in 2018-19 by the efforts of Assam State Archaeological Department. The architectural style of the Jagaddhātrī Doul is also a derivative of the Nāgara style. It has a Pañcaratha plan. Its structure almost resembles that of the Gaurisāgar Devī Doul and the Bar Pukhurī Śīva Doul discussed

earlier, but, here the Śikhara is not high and pointed unlike the above two Douls. It has a Maṇḍapa and a Antarāla having a Do Cāla roof [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xviii)**].

The another Doul adjacent to the Jagaddhātī Doul identified as a Viṣṇu or a Śiva Doul has a Nīlācala style Śikhara. It has a beehive like pattern resembling the Śikhara of the Kāmākhyā temple at Guwahati. This Doul also has a Pañcaratha plan and each of the central Ratha on the four sides terminates to a pair of Anga Śikharas. [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xix)**]

The architectural structures of both the above Douls at Kalugaon, built at a much later phase of the 18th century CE does not bear the finesse, perfection and refinement in rendering of planes and shapes unlike the Bar Pukhurī Śiva Doul and the Gaurīsāgar Devī Doul.

Section 3.2

3.2(a) Tradition of Stone Relief Sculpture patronized by the Āhoms-

The Āhoms, as per known historical records, did not pay attention to patronizing or encouraging sculptural art in stone or sculptural art as a whole during the initial phases of their rule. No significant sculptural representation crafted under their patronage during the time period from 13th to 16th century CE has been found till now in Assam. But there is no certainty about the total absence of a sculptural tradition in the culture of the Āhoms before their advent to Assam and before their acceptance and absorption into Hinduism. Not a single evidence of a tradition of worship of sculpted anthropomorphic images or icons of deities/ spirits has been found in the religious practices of the ancient/ original religion of the Āhoms. But that may not mean that such a practice never existed in their religion. The image of the deity Chumdeo has been already discussed in Chapter 2. It is till now not clear about the exact form of the image of Chumdeo, whether it is an anthropomorphic form, a zoomorphic form or some abstract aniconic amorphous form. A mention of the image of the goddess worshipped as Durgā in the form of Kāka Gosānī has also been made in Chapter 2. The image of the goddess was according to historical accounts and local lore, was actually carried and offered worship by king Gadādhara Simha or Siu- Pāt- Phā during his period of exile. Gadādhara Simha is known to have

personally, never accepted Hinduism, particularly Purāṇic and Tāntric Śākta Hinduism during his lifetime and he devotedly followed his ancestral religion. If this is considered, then the image of the goddess now worshipped as Durgā in the form of Kāka Gosānī may be identified as actually representing some important goddess of the Āhom religion. If this is assumed, then it will mean that a tradition of sculpting and worshipping sculpted anthropomorphic images of deities might have existed in the ancient/ original Āhom religion. This is just an assumption but needs further insight, exploration and research.

In the present date, as there is no established proof of an already existing sculptural tradition in the Āhom culture and no known and seen practice of worshipping sculpted or material images of deities in the rituals of the ancient Āhom religion, it has to be accepted that the practice of sculpting images/ icons of deities, worshipping and consecrating these sculpted images and the overall tradition of sculpting images as a part of religious architecture started and entered the culture of the Āhoms only after their acceptance or coming in contact with the Hindu traditions, mainly the mainstream Purāṇic and Tāntric traditions. This tradition might also had come to an end with the fall of the Āhom kingdom during the 19th century CE. King Pratāp Simha or Siu- Seng- Phā, under whose reign, the Hindu influence or Hinduism had greatly entered amongst the Āhoms, mainly the Āhom royalty, first brought in and introduced the tradition of sculpting and worshipping clay images of Durgā amongst the Āhoms. He brought in this tradition from the Koch or Kamatā kingdom during the 16th century CE (already discussed in Chapter 2) against which he had waged wars, but also established diplomatic relations through marital and cultural alliances. The tradition of worshipping the clay image of Durgā as well as of other Hindu deities continued in the Āhom royalty even after Pratāp Simha. The introduction of the tradition of sculpting and worshipping clay image of Durgā from the Koch kingdom also means the flow of artisan communities from the Koch kingdom or patronized by the Koch royalty to the Āhom kingdom or to the regions under the political and cultural influence of the Āhoms. Even though Pratāp Simha invited several communities of artisans having the knowledge of making images of Durgā and Hindu deities and themes from the Koch kingdom to the heartland of the Āhom kingdom in Sivasagar and eastern Assam or other Āhom administered areas in the Brahmaputra valley, they might not were skilled in sculpting in stone or did not have

the practice of sculpting images in stone in their traditions. So, this might have been the reason that stone sculpted images did not appear as part of the architecture of the temple buildings built under the patronage of Pratāp Simha and his succeeding rulers, but there is no certainty in this assumption. Sculpted images of deities in stone are seen infused in the architectural structures of certain temples which can be said as rebuilt versions by the Āhoms, of ruined stone temples dating from circa 8th to 12th century CE. These temple structures are seen to be mostly built over the ruined edifices of the earlier stone temples. The stone sculpted images or representations infused on the architectural bodies of these newly built temples are seen to be not of a new style. These images actually formed the parts of the earlier ruined stone temples of the 8th to 12th century CE, which were again collected and placed randomly on the rebuilt structures commissioned by the Āhoms. These sculpted images are seen to portray the visual characteristics of the East Indian Schools of Medieval Art (EISMA), e.g. the Pālas and Senas, explained by Dutta (1990, 68-76), several regional styles of sculpture inspired and influenced by the classical ideals of the imperial Guptas, the stylistic ideals of EISMA and Central Indian schools of art, which proliferated and flourished in Assam from the post- Guptā period (Late 6th century CE) to 13th century CE. Erecting new brick built temple structures over the ruins of earlier stone temples of the 8th to 12th centuries and using the stone sculpted images of the earlier temples as adornments of the architecture of the new temples (Douls and Devālayas) continued to be a practice amongst the Āhoms till the climax of their rule.

Sculpted images and other representations in stone or stone sculptures/ images of a 'New style' or a 'Newly Emerged Style' are met with only in the architecture of the Douls and Devālayas built by the Āhoms in Sivasagar, certain parts of eastern Assam like Dergaon, Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh, and also in the Guwahati region from the later part of the 17th century CE to the 18th century CE. Till then, the Āhom built temples either had no stone sculpted images on their architecture or were infused with stone sculpted images or fragments belonging to ruined temples of the earlier periods. The period from late 17th to 18th century CE was marked by the rule of king Rudra Simha, king Śiva Simha and his queens, chiefly Phuleśvarī Kunvarī and Ambikā Kunvarī, and their successors who were great patrons of temple art and architecture, painting and other visual arts. Under their rule and patronage, there

emerged organized guilds or communities of artisans and craftsmen known as *Bārhoi-s*, *Khanikars* and *Śilākutis*, said by the Burañjis to be supervised and administered by particular class of officers recruited by the Āhom royal court known as *Khanikar Baruāh* and *Śilākuti Baruāh*. The *Śilākuti Baruāh* specially supervised the guilds of artisans or sculptors or *Śilākuti-s* who were employed for carving or crafting stone images or representations for placing in the architecture of the Douls and Devālayas. The proper and organized patronization, and a stable atmosphere resulted in the artisans evolving a New style of sculptural art which will continue to characterize the temple architecture of the Āhoms from the later 17th century CE onwards.

Now, the question is about the ‘New Style’ or ‘Newly Emerged or Evolved Style’ of stone sculptural art that began to characterize the architecture of the Douls built from late 17th century CE onwards. What can be the possible prototypes of these stone sculpted images ? What are the defining features of this style that can tell about its evolution ? And most importantly, who were these *Śilākuti-s* employed by the Āhom royalty to craft images in the ‘New style’ ? These will be discussed in upcoming paragraphs. The numerous stone sculptures or sculpted images in the ‘New Style’ adorning the architecture of the Douls in eastern Assam built under the patronage of the Āhom dynasty from late 17th century CE to 18th century CE can be categorized into different types depending on the form and subject matter/ theme they represent :

- i) Images representing the Anthropomorphic (Human- like or having the form of human) and Theriomorphic (Half Human, Half Animal) forms or conceptions of the various categories or aspects of Hindu deities,
- ii) Images representing different types of animals and birds, which also include the animal mounts of the Hindu deities,
- iii) Images representing narrative compositions of people and animals, events, historical and mythological narratives and allegories,
- iv) Images representing floral compositions and compositions containing a rhythmic arrangement of floral, ornate organic and pseudo-geometric forms.

All the above categories of sculpted images are seen to be arranged or placed profusely on the outer and inner portions of the Bāda enclosing the Garbhagrha or sanctum sanctorum of the Douls [To understand the arrangements of these sculpted

images, refer to **Appendix 3 : Figure (xx), (xxi), (xxii)**] . In some of the above Douls, such images are also seen placed on the inner walls of their Maṇḍapas or Antarālas . It has been observed that amongst all the Douls built by the Āhoms within the time period from late 17th century CE to 18th century CE, the Keśavarāi Doul is the only one in the architecture of which all the above categories of sculpted images find their depiction. As per evidences, the Keśavarāi Doul can be said as the first Doul built under the patronage of the Āhom royalty which displayed certain significant architectural features of an ideal Nāgara style temple . It can be said as the first Doul built in the late 17th century CE to have the depiction of the sculpted images crafted in the ‘New Style’ evolved in the ateliers patronized by the Āhom royal court.

Amongst the stone sculpted images or representations of the ‘New Style’ adorning the Āhom religious architectural structures erected in Sivasagar and eastern Assam from the later part of 17th century CE onwards, the ones depicted on the architecture of the Keśavarāi or Jay Doul, the Gaurīsāgar Devī Doul and Bar Pukhurī Śiva Doul, in Sivasagar district, in particular are seen to be more intricate and meticulous in terms of their formal rendering, and in their overall arrangement on the temple architectural structures. The relief sculpted images featured on the architecture of the Bar Pukhurī Śiva Doul, particularly, are presently facing severe defacement and damage, mainly due to unplanned restoration techniques. Many of these exquisite sculpted images have become either faded, obliterated or have totally disappeared across years.

The stone sculptures or sculpted images/ representations of the ‘New Style’ featured on the architecture of the Douls are mostly of *Bas-relief* or *Shallow relief* type. Such images also known as *Citrārdha* in Assamese and in the terminology of the Sanskrit image making texts (Rao, 1997, 18) . The type of stone or stones or rock on which these images are sculpted is not clear. These stones or rocks may be categorized under a variety of Shale like rock/ stone or some locally available rock similar to Sandstone, Gneiss or Granite.

3.2 (b) The ‘New Style’ of stone relief sculptural art forming a part of the architecture of the Douls in Sivasagar and other parts of eastern Assam built under the patronage of the Āhoms circa late 17th to early 18th century CE-

The term ‘New Style’ has been continuously used to define and distinguish the stylistic aspects of the various stone relief sculptural representations or images that are seen to appear as a part and as an identifying feature of the architecture of Douls and religious structures built under the patronage of the Āhom dynasty from late 17th to 18th century CE., and which were produced in the ateliers or workshops patronized by the Āhom royalty. Now, the questions arise, did this ‘New Style’ arise all of a sudden ? Can it be called as a stylistic tradition that has in it no elements of the sculptural art traditions that flourished in Assam during the 7th to 14th century CE ? Are there no such elements in this ‘new style’ which hint towards its evolution from the earlier stylistic traditions of sculptural art or other already existing contemporary stylistic traditions of sculptural art ? An insight into these queries will be given in the upcoming paragraphs.

This ‘New Style’ of stone relief sculptural art patronized by the Āhoms can be categorized under or can be included as one of the Late Medieval schools or stylistic traditions of Indian Art or Late Medieval style of Sculptural Art of Assam, according to the observations made by Dutta (1990, 111-117) in his book *Sculptures of Assam*. Talking about the various images of anthropomorphic forms of deities which form a major portion of the stone relief sculptural art of the new late medieval style patronized by the Āhoms, their rectangular, squarish facial shapes, heavy and flat facial features, sketchy and blunt contours of eyes, thick and fleshy lips, squat and sturdy body structures, thick short neck, bulky shoulder and upper chest region, strict frontal attitude and a somewhat inward meditative immersion in their faces [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxiii), (xxiv), (xxv)**] somewhat makes them resemble with the stone sculpted images of deities produced in the ateliers of the sculptural schools or stylistic traditions that flourished during the early medieval period (7th to 11th century CE) in the Doiyāng- Dhanśiri valley region which include the modern day districts of Golaghat, Jorhat and Karbi Anglong in eastern- central Assam and parts of neighbouring Nagaland. As per evidences, the prime ateliers of these sculptural schools or stylistic traditions were located at Deopānī, Dubarani and Deoparvat within this region (Dutta, H.N., 2021, 110, 120, 124, 125, 126). Most of the

stone sculptural representations or images of different anthropomorphic forms of Hindu deities found in archaeological excavations and explorations in these sites are categorized as affiliated to either the *Deopānī*, *Dubarani* or *Deoparvat* styles [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxvi) and (xxvii)**]. Out of these three styles, the *Dubarani* and the *Deopānī* styles are dated to a much earlier phase within 6th/ 7th to 11th century CE. The *Deoparvat* style can be dated to the 9th to 11th century CE. As per studies, after the 13th century CE, all the three regional schools or stylistic traditions of sculptural art lost their prominence and the practice of stone sculpting in the above early medieval styles in the valley came to a halt, possibly due to the lack of proper, organized patronage and the atmosphere of instability that reigned the political and cultural atmosphere in Assam after the 13th century CE, till the Āhoms rose as a stable political power around the 16th to 17th century CE. It has been said that the Ahom rulers, might be during the late 17th century CE to 18th century CE revived the practice of stone sculpting again in the valley through a proper system of patronage. Along with stone sculpting, the other forms of sculptural art like wood sculpture and metal sculpture also proliferated in the region under their patronage. The artisans who crafted sculptures in stone and patronized by the Āhom royalty might be the descendants of the same artisans/ sculptors who worked in the above three schools of sculptural art which flourished in the valley during the early medieval period. They might have been carrying forward the practice of sculpting stone images in the above three styles amidst all the unfavourable and disturbing political and cultural situations till they received a proper patronage and encouragement from the Āhom royalty during the late 17th century CE to 18th century CE. Now, considering the resemblance and affinity of certain formal, or more appropriately, morphological characteristics of relief stone sculpted images of the anthropomorphic forms of deities featured in the architecture of the Āhom built Douls with that of the available stone images sculpted in the early medieval styles of *Deopānī*, *Dubarani* and *Deoparvat*, it can be said that there was a possible involvement of artisans belonging to the lineage of the early medieval artisan clans of the Doiyāng- Dhanśiri river valley in sculpting the relief stone images on the architecture of the Douls .

The Āhom rulers revived the tradition of stone sculpting in the Doiyāng- Dhanśiri valley which had almost gone extinct since the 13th century CE. They started to

engage the artisans in the valley to craft exquisite stone images which could suit to the aesthetic as well as iconographic programme of their brick built Douls which were profusely built from late 17th to 18th century CE. Again, these artisans might be, either the later generations of the artisan clans of the early medieval period who were involved directly in sculpting stone images in the above three regional styles- Deopānī, Dubarani and Deoparvat, or artisan communities seemingly acquainted with certain stylistic intricacies of these early medieval styles of stone sculptural art, though not completely, but in a fragmented way. The Āhom rulers might have brought these artisan communities from the Doiyāng- Dhanśiri valley and settled them in the regions surrounding or adjacent to their capitals like Rangpur and Garhgaon modern day Sivasagar district. These artisans after having settled as *Pāiks* (Dutta, M., 1990, 116) by the Āhom royalty, might have been thoroughly engaged in sculpting relief stone images for adorning the architecture of the newly built Douls.

The anthropomorphic images of deities produced by the early medieval Deopānī, Dubarani and Deoparvat schools, and found in the Doiyāng- Dhanśiri valley portray an interesting blend of the visual styles reminiscent of the classical sculptural tradition of the imperial Guptās and several visual styles which are of regional and folk derivation. Though the above three styles or schools, are said to have evolved under the shadow of the national classical idealism of the Guptās, during the later 6th to 7th century CE. but, by the arrival of the 8th century CE, the visual sensibilities, idealisms, formal and iconographic elements of regional and folk derivation began to assert their dominance in the sculpted images of the deities produced by these schools (Dutta, H.N., 2021, 110-111). As per evidences, the stone sculpted images of the anthropomorphic forms of deities produced by the above schools abundantly from late 7th to 8th century CE to 9th century CE do exhibit the subtle and sublime plastic finesse, intricacy in modelling in round, and portrayal of naturalistic volumes which are reminiscent or suggestive of the influence of the national classical Guptā idiom, but these elements are seen to have attained a new expression by the inclusion and amalgamation of certain prevalent folk and regional visual mannerisms. There might be numerous processes of intermingling and negotiation between distinct cultural ideas which can be the cause or inspiration behind bringing out of this visual or formal syncretism in these cultic or religious images. The Doiyāng Dhanśiri valley region, though had become a seat of Aryan culture from before the 7th century onwards, as

a result of the extension of the Guptā empire , there had been a strong presence of the non- Aryan culture in the region. The Mongoloid and Austro Asiatic peoples like the Kacārīs, Cutiyās, Nāgās, Karbis had been forming a major part of the population in the region since the early medieval period. Gradual Sanskritization and Hinduization of these groups of people under the influence of the dominant Aryan culture might have started during the 8th century CE. The features like the squat, stocky and sturdy torsos, the wide, heavy and squarish faces not having a tapering sharp jawline, the blunt noses, the not so prominently shaped eyes, characteristic of the Mongoloid and Austro- Asiatic racial morphology observed in the sculpted anthropomorphic images of different Hindu deities produced, particularly by the Deopānī and Dubarani schools possibly connote towards an attempt to include or bring the non- Aryan people into the fold of mainstream Hinduism or the Hindu sects or cults and also include their visual mannerisms and their anthropological and cultural identities as a defining feature in the system of Hinduism. Stylistically, and in their visual dialogue, these sculpted images are seen to express the regional, folk and ethnic temperament. The regional and ethnic conception of form in these images is not seen to be overshadowed or muted by the presence of the classical ideals of form of the Guptā school, and later the formal stylistics of the East Indian School of Medieval Art or the Pāla school and also Central and Western Indian schools of sculptural art ; rather, the classical conceptions and ways of seeing and rendering of form of the Guptā, Pāla and Central Indian stylistic traditions have gone to enrich and accentuate the regional and ethnic visual elements in these images.

The images of the anthropomorphic forms of deities in the ‘New Style’ or late medieval style of stone relief sculptural art, adorning the architecture of the Āhom built Douls, though, remotely, bearing stylistic and formal resemblance with the images of deities produced in the early medieval schools of Dubarani, Deopānī and Deoparvat, though can be said (due to this remote resemblance) as supposedly crafted by the artisans supposedly belonging to the lineage of the artisan clans adept in the early medieval Dubarani, Deopānī and Deoparvat stylistic traditions of the Doiyāng- Dhanśiri valley, do not bear the finesse, confidence and neatness unlike the images of anthropomorphic forms of deities produced by the above early medieval schools of sculptural art. The artisans who crafted these images on the architecture of the Āhom built Douls during the late 17th to 18th century CE might be belonging to

the clans who were acquainted with the knowledge of the above early medieval styles, their forefathers might be those expert artisans who crafted images in the above three styles during the early medieval period, but they could not bring about the expressiveness and the completeness achieved by their forefathers or preceding generations. It can be said that attempts have been made by these artisans to follow the nuances or mannerisms of the early medieval styles of the Dubarani, Deopānī and Deoparvat schools in making up the forms of the deities in the imagery of the stone sculptural art of the Āhom built Douls, but they could not succeed (Dutta, M., 1990, 117). The forms have acquired a more sketchy and crude appeal, but they are not devoid of a subtle quality of lively and organic suggestion. The formal and stylistic features of the early medieval schools of sculpture, can be said as actually present in them as rudiments or vestiges. Further, their forms can be said as emulating more of the contemporary images of deities crafted in wood (Dutta, M., 1990, 121). Possibly, these artisans, after the 13th century CE, might have resorted to crafting images in wood, which is a cheaper medium and easy to procure and process than stone or rock. The stylizations and the forms which were once executed on stone became more restrained in wood, they became somewhat flat, angular and minimal. It may be possible that when these artisans were again employed to work in stone for the Āhom built Douls, they used the techniques and stylizations of wood sculpting, thereby resulting in the images of deities in the relief sculptural art of the Douls to project a crudeness and ruggedness in their forms, which is actually a characteristic of the contemporary wood sculpted images or representations.

The images of anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms of deities depicted in relief sculptural art of the Douls which have been classified under the Late Medieval style of Art, though they do not portray the intricacy, elaborateness and plastic finesse of the early medieval styles of art, do have a peculiarity and uniqueness in them. Several new elements are seen to be forming the overall visual dialogue of these images or representations, and, several visual elements of the earlier stylistic traditions, though rudimentary are seen to have attained a certain degree of simplification and briefness, and substituted by similar looking visual elements, but derived from different cultural contexts. The most significant of the new elements are the drapery and the jewellery adorning the torsos of the figures of the deities. Most of the figures of the deities (both male and female) are made as wearing elaborate

multi stranded necklaces, most of them resembling the designs of *Dhol Biri*, *Sātsarī* or *Navasarī* which were a very important part of the costume of the Āhom royalty (Gogoi, L., 1994, 15). A chest ornament with a pendant resembling the design of a *Dugdugi* - another significant part of the royal Āhom jewellery is also seen adorning the figures of the deities. In most cases, the leaf or heart shaped *Dugdugi* is seen depicted in midst of the chest of the figures of the deities [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxviii)**]. All the deities are shown adorned by *Bājus* or armbands and *Valayas/ Khārus* or bangles resembling the designs of metallic silver, gold and *Minākarā* or enamel or lac inlaid bangles like *Gām Khāru*, *Sacaruā Khāru*, *Muṭhi Khāru*, *Bālā* etc. [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxix)**] which formed the attire of the members of the Āhom court and royalty as well as several other cultures contemporary to them. Many designs of such bangles and armbands are seen to have gone out of vogue as they are seldom crafted by artisans in Assam in the present day. The large ears of the deities having anthropomorphic forms are shown adorned with ear piercings. The designs of these ear piercings resemble either *Thuriyās* or *Kāṅphuls* [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxx)**] which were also an important part of the regional attire during the rule of the Āhoms.

Dugdugi, *Thuriyā*, *Gām Khāru* and *Muṭhi Khāru* are still a part of the traditional attire of Assam. The regions which have been prominent centres of crafting and production of such types of jewellery in Assam since the Āhom period are Ranthali in Nagaon district in central Assam, Jorhat district in eastern Assam and Barpeta district in western Assam.

The drapery or the costumes which are shown adorning the figures of the deities also were derived or inspired from the royal attire of the Āhoms as well as the trend of clothing prevalent during that time (late 17th to 18th century CE). Sharp similarities are observed between the figures of deities portrayed in the imagery of relief sculptural art of the Douls and the figures of deities portrayed in certain miniature paintings produced (from the 16th century CE onwards) in the ateliers of the neo-Vaiṣṇava Sattras across Assam, particularly in respect of their costumes and morphological features [**Appendix D3 : Figure (xxxi)**]. There are also some resemblances of the figures of deities in the sculptural imagery of the Douls with the deity depictions in miniature paintings produced in the ateliers of the Pahari and Rajasthānī Rājput courts during the above time period, mainly in respect of costumes

and drapery. Observation of such similarities hold ground because of the cultural interactions that took place between the Āhom kingdom and the Rājput states, particularly under the aegis and encouragement of king Rudra Siṁha, as mentioned by the Burañjīs and modern writings on Āhom history.

Generally, the rendering of the costumes of both the male and female deities are almost seen to be similar, but the costumes, especially the skirts of the figures of the female deities/ goddesses or Devī-s do are seen, in some cases to be carved with intricate floral designs and such patterns which are derived from the contemporary designs of the skirts known as *Mekhelās* or *Ghuris* used by the women of the Āhom royal house. The details of the costumes and jewellery adorning the figures of the deities, in contrast to their bodily forms are seen to be more minutely and subtly rendered; every inch of the decorative patterns, particularly of the costumes are found to be dedicatedly, sensibly and adeptly worked upon by the sculptors or artisans [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxxii)**], may be implying towards a profound cultural sensibility or affinity which must have developed or was present towards the language of textile designing. The cultural sensibility of the people of Assam towards the practice of weaving and embroidery, in particular, and the immense importance that it holds in the culture of Assam can be known through the numerous prevalent belief systems and ritual practices, one of them being *Āulā Pūjā*- a ritual observed on the Navamī of Durgā Pūjā in which young girls invoke goddess Pārvatī or Durgā for attaining expertise in the art of weaving (Bardaloi, 2007, 412).

The headgears of all the deities are crowns or *Mukūṭa*-s with erect, ornate prong like triangular vertical projections or pointed ribs encircling a wide irregular conical central structure or a lotus bud like structure might be reminiscent of the design of the crowns of deities crafted in the Pāla style or the styles of EISMA. Almost similar *Mukūṭas* are also seen as a part of the attire of deities and divine figures featured in the sculptural art of the early medieval Deoparvat style and in the contemporary miniature paintings produced in Assam as well as in the cultures of northern, western and central India. In some images, these crowns with pointed ribs also are seen to bear sharp resemblance with the headgears known as *Kiritī* or *Śirastrāna*¹ and crowns featured in the bamboo and clay masks or *Mukhās*, both used in the traditional *Bhāona* plays of the neo- Vaiṣṇava culture. Both the male and female deities are depicted draped in a two piece clothing which constitute a lower garment covering

the lower torso and a upper garment covering the upper torso. The upper garment of both the male and female deities is a *Uttarīya* or a wrapper/ shawl shown as thrown over the shoulders with both its bordered ends hanging on either sides. In certain images, the *Uttarīya* is not at all clearly portrayed, or its presence is just suggested by the depiction of its bordered ends hanging on either sides of the figures of the deities. also, it is sometimes rendered as a diaphanous garment. Its presence on the body and the manner in which it traverses the body is just suggested by its ornate borders. The *Uttarīya* in case of the male deities can be called a *Khaniyā Kāpor*, *Bar Kāpor* or *Celeng Kāpor*, and in case of female deities it can be called a *Cādar* or a *Rihā* as well as a *Khaniyā Kāpor*. The *Khaniyā Kāpor*, *Cādar* and *Rihā* are all important types of clothing that became the trend of royal and aristocratic dressing and attire under the Āhom rule. The garments shown as worn by both the male and female deities seem similar in arrangement and in their forms. The designs or ornate patterns of these garments are also similar except in the imagery of some Douls, like the *Gaurīsāgar Devī Doul*, where the lower garments of some of the female deities are infused with intricately carved floral patterns all over their surface, differentiating them from the lower garments of the male deities which are either depicted without any ornate design or having a simple floral border.

Except some of the aspects of the Hindu deities like Śiva and Cāmuṇḍā/ Kālī, the figures of all other deities and other divine figures, in the imagery of the stone relief sculptural art of the Douls are seen to be adorned and draped in the type of jewellery and clothing described above. The male and female deities look almost similar in their morphology. The female deities are only recognizable by their breasts, which too, are not depicted or modelled prominently unlike the images of female deities in classical and early medieval traditions of sculptural art. Except the breasts, there is nothing that can differentiate the male and female deities through their morphology. The treatment of the breasts are not like observed in the classical or early medieval images of goddesses and other female characters. But, it is observed, particularly in the figures of the female deities in the sculptural art of the *Jagaddhātī Doul* that their breasts and planes and volumes of the torsos as a whole are tried to be rendered voluptuous and sensuously lithe compared to that of the figures of the female deities featured in the sculptural imagery of the architecture of other Douls built within the late 17th to 18th century CE.

The anthropomorphic images of deities featured in the sculptural art of the Douls also has noticeable affinities with those produced in the Khmer and Champa cultures of south-east Asia during the 9th to 11th century CE. Interesting similarities are traced between the style and formal expression and appeal of the images of deities featured on the architecture of the Douls with that of sculpted images of deities and other anthropomorphic figures featured in the architecture or found at the 9th to 12th century CE Hindu and Buddhist temple sites like Banteay Srei, Preah Khan and Ta Phrom at Cambodia. This similarity of the physical features of the figures of deities portrayed in the Āhom built Douls with that of the figures of deities featured in the temple sculptural art of south-east Asian cultures like the Khmer of Cambodia may connote towards involvement of artisans somehow connected with or belonging to the lineage of the artisans who sculpted images in the above temples in Cambodia, and, they may be amongst those ethnic peoples who came in hordes from south-east Asia to Assam, either along with the Āhoms during the 13th century CE, or at a later age, following the Āhoms, during the 18th to 19th century CE. They might have brought with them the memory of the visual styles that once manifested in the Khmer built temples and applied them in rendering, particularly, the anthropomorphic images of deities in the architecture of the Āhom built Douls. They might have worked together with or keeping in tune with the paradigms followed by the local artisans whom have been already speculated as later generations or associated with the artisans working in the early medieval sculptural schools of the Doiyāng- Dhanśiri valley region. It may be said that they infused their respective styles in harmony with the stylistics of the local artisans in making the images of the anthropomorphic forms of deities in the architecture of the Douls. This require more insightful and extensive study. The *Tāi Khāmṭīs* who were amongst the numerous ethnic people who came to Assam from south east Asia following the Āhoms during the 18th to 19th century CE. The *Tāi Khāmṭīs* have a rich living tradition of crafting images of deities, mainly Buddha and numerous other objects of decorative, ritual and domestic use. It can be said that *Khāmṭī* artisans might had lend a hand in sculpting the images in the architecture of the Douls, but there is no certainty about it.

There are images of numerous forms of deities depicted in the iconographic programme of the relief sculptural art of the architecture of the Douls. The iconography of most of the anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms of Hindu deities

like Viṣṇu are seen to be portrayed similar to that in the previous traditions of religious sculptural art, but, there are several images of these deities which bear certain iconographic features and characteristics that are strikingly different from their images and conceptions produced in the sculptural art traditions of the previous periods in Assam. Several iconographic conceptions of Hindu deities are seen to have appeared in the imagery of the Douls which have no parallel or similar version in the sculptural art of the preceding periods in Assam, or even in other artistic traditions within the Indian subcontinent. Regarding such images of Hindu deities, Lila Gogoi is of the opinion that they were made following the image making canons of the Agni Purāṇa, though he did not elaborate or go into detail regarding it. He further says that though the sculpted images of deities etc. follow the tenets of the Agni Purana, there are certain visual and iconographic features in them that are peculiar and unique (Gogoi, L., 1994, 65). Manoranjan Dutta go on to imply that iconographic injunctions/ tenets or *Pramāṇa*-s of the conventionalized and standardized texts are very loosely followed in making the images of Hindu deities in the relief sculptural art of the Āhom built Douls, compared to that in making images of deities in the sculptural traditions of early medieval periods (Dutta, M., 1990, 117). But, a loose following of these texts does not mean that these images and visualizations of the Hindu deities portrayed in the relief sculptural art of the Douls are incorrect. The artisans in making these images might have either followed some *Pramāṇas* or descriptions/ visualizations elaborated by such Purāṇic, Āgamic and Tāntric texts which became widespread, were held or made conventional and standardized in the regional context of the Hinduism in Assam during the 17th to 18th century CE, and were possibly not in prevalence or prominence during the early medieval periods. They might have followed *Śilpaśāstras* that were, possibly not followed in crafting images of Hindu deities during the early medieval periods. A possibility is also there of the artisans turning to the tenets of conceiving, making and shaping images of Hindu deities prevalent in the folk, tribal and sylvan belief systems (*Deśācāras/ Lokācāras*) or traditions of Hinduism that either have evolved or taken form during the 17th to 18th century CE, or which were unknown/ not taken as inspirations in conceiving and making images of deities in the sculptural art of the early medieval periods. Moreover, they might have followed such unique iconographic tenets or symbolisms that had newly emerged, might be because of certain political, socio- religious and cultural developments, exchanges and dialogues during that time,

i.e. within 15th to 18th century CE, the most important of them being the neo-Vaiṣṇava culture and its tradition of devotional lyrical poetry, the new type of political and cultural set up that emerged under the aegis of the Āhoms, and the contact and interaction with the contemporary Islamic Sultanates and the Mughals, and the Rājput states of northern, central and western India.

The images or iconographic conceptions of Hindu deities that are seen to have newly emerged in religious art of Assam, and are unique to the imagery of stone relief sculptural art patronized by the Āhoms cannot be said as crafted by the artisans without following any proper, organized or standardized textual authority. These unique and new iconographic conceptions of Hindu deities in Assam can also be thought of as a result of the artisans following certain literary texts that were promoted, made popular and prominent by the several new (new to the religious and cultural context of Assam) Hindu sectarian ways of outlook and codes like the Raghunandana Smārta code which were patronized and made dominant religio-cultural authorities during the late 17th to 18th century CE by the Āhoms. Also, several types of vernacular religious and secular oral literature and narrative poetry were composed during the above time period which might have inspired the artisans to craft the intriguing and unique images of Hindu deities on the architecture of the Douls. Going further, there evolved several types of oral literature and narrative poetry that projected a synthesis and a confluence of the symbolisms, and themes of the Hindu deities and the deities of the Āhom religion. These imageries formed by a synthesis of Hindu and Āhom cultic ideas might have also encouraged the artisans to craft such images of Hindu deities in the architecture of the Āhom built Douls the conception of which were totally unknown of in the religious sculptural art of Assam dating back to the early medieval periods.

The artisans who were employed to craft the relief sculpted images in the architecture of the Douls by the Āhom royalty, as concluded from the above discussion, may either be identified as the descendants or later generations of the adept artisans who worked in the ateliers of the early medieval schools of sculptural art in the Doiyāng- Dhanśiri valley region, or, they may be belonging to communities migrating from south-east Asian regions, and who are supposed to have some connection with the artisans credited with crafting the exquisite sculptural representations in the temples of Banteay Srei, Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom, Preah

Khan and Ta Phrom. But there can be several other possible cultural identities of these artisans. The faces of some of the anthropomorphic figures of deities and their Mukutas with upright triangular projections in the sculptural imagery of some of the Ahom built Douls, also have sharp formal resemblances with the wooden masks used in *Bhārigān*- a folk performing art tradition practiced in western Assam and also parts of northern Bengal. This connotes towards the possibility that there was an involvement of artisans from the above regions which were in the heartland of the Koch or Kamatā kingdom. The anthropomorphic features of the deities in the sculptural art of the Āhom built Douls also has striking similarities with that of the exquisite rock cut images of deities at Unakoti and Chabimurā in Tripura. Especially, the colossal face or head identified as that of Śiva carved on a rock face at Unakoṭi has various features that are akin to the conception visualization and rendering of faces of the deities in the sculptural imagery of the Douls built by the Āhoms. It is till now not clear who sculpted the various images of deities on rock faces at Unakoṭi. These representations can be placed within the time period not earlier than the 13th century CE.

The similarity traced between the sculpted representations of deities in the Āhom built Douls and rock cut colossal figures of deities at Unakoṭi and Chabimurā indicates towards a possibility of Āhom royalty bringing in and employing artisans expert in sculpting on stone from Tripura to work on the sculptural adornment of the Douls. Not completely, but artisans from Tripura, might had lend their hands in making the sculptural art of the Douls built by the Āhoms. A speculation that an involvement of artisans or sculptors from Tripura was there in making the relief sculptural art of the Douls, in a way, is not unjustified because cultural and diplomatic relations were established between the Tripura kingdom under king Ratna Māṇikya and the Āhom kingdom under king Rudra Simha during the late 17th century CE. The Āhom-Tripura relations are being documented and described in a Burañjī known as Tripurā Burañjī composed by Ratna Kandali and Arjundās Kaṭakī. Both of them were sent as envoys or emissaries by Rudra Simha to the court of the Tripura king (Bhuyan, 1990, IV).

The facial characteristics of the deities, along with their crowns with ornate pointed projections featured in the sculptural art of the Douls also have certain affinities with

the facial features of the metallic ritual masks or busts of deities known as *Mohrās* in the culture of present day Himachal Pradesh and its surrounding regions.

There are also several claims and documentations that the artisan communities who sculpted the stone images in the architecture of the Douls were brought in from Bengal. There is an architectural structure known as *Nāti Gosāin Doul* or *Ghanashyām Ghar* at Jaysagar in Sivasagar, adjacent to the Kesavarai Doul. This building is completely built in the characteristic Bengali temple architectural style of the 15th to 19th century CE derived from the temple styles of Bishnupur, Surul, Bankura etc. [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxxiii)**]. The terracotta sculptures adorning and making the structure of the temple are undoubtedly of the Bengali style and conception. Ruins of a temple known as Na Maṭha Kālī temple, in the Bengali style has been found in the Nīlācala hill in Guwahati, nearby Kāmākhyā temple [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxxiv)**]. This terracotta temple is said to have been built for Guru Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya Nyāyavāgiśa or Parbatīā Gosāin. The evidences of these two architectural structures in the complete Bengal style, no doubt proves the settling of artisans from Bengal by the Āhom royalty or in the Āhom kingdom. These artisans might also were manually involved in the stone sculptural art of the Douls. Their involvement in making the sculptural art in the architecture of the Douls cannot be ruled out because there are many motifs and mannerisms met with in the sculpted images from the Douls that draw parallel to certain visualizations in the contemporary Bengali sculptural art, particularly the style of temple terracotta and clay sculptural art. The Mahiṣāsūramardīnī Durgā image featured in the sculptural art of the Jagaddhārī Doul, for example is one such representation.

There is also a possibility that the artisans who were employed by the Āhom court to sculpt the stone relief images in the late medieval style, in the architectural structures of the Douls actually belonged to such communities or clans in the region that has no previous history of making art or has no memory of visual depiction of subjects and narratives in material or tangible mediums, but were perhaps skilled in handling and chiselling wood and stone. They might have somehow imbibed or got trained newly in the existing, or surviving local styles and conceptions of making divine or religious imagery, and also styles and conceptions of religious image making that came in from outside the region. They might have collected in fragments, the different texts and knowledge of Hindu temple or religious image

making which were already prevalent or were newly followed in the region, in the regional cultures, together with those introduced from outside the region. They might also have imbibed the conceptions of image making which have newly emerged specifically in the region as a result of intermixing of distinct religious traditions and new sectarian establishments.

It has been seen that the visualization and stylistics of mainly the anthropomorphic images of deities in the stone relief sculptural art of the Āhom built Douls, which are the only concern and subject of this study, have similarities with the stylistic and formal features of anthropomorphic representations of deities produced in a number of other artistic traditions, both within the region and outside the boundary of the region, and also remotely with that of the representations of deities produced in cultures outside the boundary of the Indian sub continent, i.e. south-east Asia. This easily let us to assume that artisans from all these distinct traditions were brought into the Āhom kingdom and employed in crafting these sculptural representations in the architecture of the Douls, considering the context of the pan-Indian and eclectic outlook of the Āhom rulers who patronized the building of these Douls. But, in this study/ thesis, we will choose to assume the artisans who sculpted the images in the architecture of the Douls as belonging to indigenous cultures and communities in eastern Assam, the heartland of the Āhom kingdom, as descended from the local artisans who worked in the schools of sculptural art during the early medieval periods, prime being those that flourished in the Doiyāng Dhanśiri valley (discussed before) and other being those which had evolved as offshoots of the EISMA. These artisans will be assumed as probably belonging to communities, the members of which had been crafting religious images in styles which arose as crude variants of the early medieval styles or were having very rudimentary characteristics of them. The sculptures featured in the stone fragments from Naksā Parvat in Sonitpur district of central Assam dated between 13th to 14th century CE can be said as examples of such styles [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxxv)**]. These artisans, when employed in sculpting stone relief sculptures for adorning the architecture of the Douls, might had gradually imbibed in and added the various new visual and iconographic elements to their conceptions owing to and keeping in mind the demands and wants of the patronizing authority- the Āhom royalty or court, the various religious and cultural trends and beliefs evolved in the region under the aegis

of the patronizing authority, and also their individual and inherited sensibilities, preoccupations and acquaintances with the various cultural texts of the region prevalent during that time (late 17th to 18th century CE).

In the following paragraphs, a brief discussion will be made on the representation of iconography of some Hindu deities in the relief sculptural art of the Douls :

Firstly, the images of Viṣṇu will be considered. Viṣṇu, in his anthropomorphic form, is depicted four handed in all the images, holding his characteristic attributes- the *Sankha* (conch shell), *Cakra* (discus), *Gadā* (mace/ club) and *Padma* (lotus). But in some images, particularly in the architecture of the Gaurīsāgar Devī Doul and Jagaddhātrī Doul, his four handed anthropomorphic form is shown holding Cakra, Padma and Gadā in his three hands and a sharp spear or lance like weapon in place of Sankha in his fourth hand. Such a form is seen to be very unique to the tradition of stone relief sculptural art of the Ahom built Douls [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxxvi)**]. Visnu, in the imagery of the sculptural art of the Douls, is either depicted either standing in *Samapada Sthānaka* pose or unbent straight standing pose or seated. Most of his images depict him in strict frontal view. But, images depicting him as seated on his vehicle Garuḍa with his face and upper torso (from the neck till the waist) in frontal view and his lower torso (below the waist) turned in profile view are also found [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxxvii)**]. There are also other deities apart from Viṣṇu in the sculptural imagery of the Douls whose seated figures are depicted in such a half- frontal- half- profile view or arrangement. This is seen to be the most preferred view when the deities are shown seated or riding their animal vehicles. There is an interesting conception of Viṣṇu in the imagery of the sculptural art of the Douls where he is shown in his usual four handed form, holding his characteristic attributes, and the serpent Ananta coiled around his body and the hoods of the serpent are forming a canopy over his head. An image of Viṣṇu where the serpent Ananta is portrayed coiled up around the body of Viṣṇu is very unique in the art of the Indian subcontinent as well as in the art of Assam itself . Such images of standing and seated Viṣṇu with the serpent Ananta coiled up or wound around the length of his body in the sculptural art of the architecture of the Jagaddhātrī Doul, and Raidangiā Doul at Dibrugarh district in eastern Assam [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxxviii)**]. The intention behind crafting images of Viṣṇu in the above manner is not clear. It may either be a stylistic device or there is some deep cultural symbolism

behind such a portrayal. In no image of Viṣṇu, he is shown as adorned with his Vanamālā and Kaustubha or shown with his characteristic Śrīvatsa mark on his chest. In all the images, he is shown dressed in the attire and jewellery of the Āhom courtly culture and the regional culture of the time described in the preceding paragraphs. In some images, he is shown with a mark engraved in the midst of his forehead. Does it indicate some Vaiṣṇava sectarian mark or other symbol is not clear. Images of Śiva, in the iconographic programme of the sculptural art of the Douls, are found to be very less. In all the Douls dedicated to him built by the Āhoms, he is found to be worshipped in his *Avyakta/Niṣkala* (formless, amorphous) or Linga aspect. Though, images of anthropomorphic forms of Śiva are seen to be scantily represented in the stone relief sculptural art of the Douls, there are sufficient examples of such images in the metal sculptural art patronized by the Āhom royalty. Two exquisite examples of metal images portraying anthropomorphic forms of Śiva are from the Umānanda temple at Guwahati [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xxxix)**] and another from the Kāmeśvara temple at Hajo, near Guwahati in the Kamrup district. These are said to be sculpted in the ateliers under the patronage of the Āhom royalty and donated by the Āhom rulers.

Śiva's characteristic matted hair and his bull mount or ride is seen to be depicted in all of his images extant in the relief sculptural art of the architecture of the Douls. Śiva, in the sculptural imagery of the Gaurisāgar Devī Doul, is seen depicted as having five faces/ heads or in his *Pañcavakra* aspect, and having four hands and riding the bull or Ṛsabha or Nandī. He is shown holding a Triśūla in one of his hands. The objects or attributes held in his other hands are damaged and are unidentifiable. His matted hair or *Jatās* are stylistically depicted as locks, may be dishevelled [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xL)**]. The form of Śiva in this image can be related to the form of Śiva as *Nīlakaṇṭha* described in the Tantric text *Śāradātilaka* (Bühnemann, 2016, 272). Evidences of images of Śiva in his Pañcavakra aspects or forms are not found amongst the extant sculptural art dating back to the early medieval periods. Though mentions of several forms of Pañcavakra Śiva are frequently made in the Kālikā Purāṇa composed circa 10th to 12th century CE, no evidence of manifestation of such forms in the sculptural art of Assam dating to the above time period has come to light. As per evidences, portrayals of Pañcavakra Śiva are found to have become more frequent in the sculptural art as well as in the art of

painting in Assam from 15th century CE onwards. Another image of Śiva is seen depicted in the architecture of the Jagaddhātī Douḷ. Here, Śiva is shown as having one head, four hands and seated on his mount, the bull. He is shown with his matted hair locks or Jatā somewhat arranged in the form of a *Jatābhāra* or bun. It is not clear whether he is depicted with a third eye or not. This image can be said as the only extant example in the whole range of temple relief sculptural art patronized by the Āhoms where Śiva is shown as monocephalic or having one head and four-handed at the same time [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xLi)**]. In none of the images of Śiva extant in the imagery of the sculptural art of the Douḷs, he is seen depicted with serpent ornaments and necklaces, his characteristic identifying attributes. There are found depiction of images of several deities, both male and female in the sculptural imagery of the Douḷs which portray iconographic features akin to that of Śiva, mainly matted hair and Triśūla. One such example is from the Jagaddhātī Douḷ. The deity in this image is four handed and shown with matted hair locks. The deity is shown holding a scimitar, a severed human head and a club. He is riding a bird almost resembling in form to a parrot [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xLii)**]. The Jagaddhātī Douḷ again feature a deity in its sculptural imagery who is holding a Triśūla- the characteristic attribute of Śiva and riding an animal which shows a confusing morphology. Its head seems like that of a rabbit or hare but its torso seems like that of a feline animal [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xLiii)**]. These two deities can be identified as aspects of Śiva because of the presence of the attributes like matted hair and Triśūla respectively, but, the animal vehicles like the parrot like bird and the animal bearing a hybrid or a composite form of a rabbit/ hare and some feline animal shown as their vehicles or mounts can bring out different interpretations. Till now, no proper and justifiable identification for these images have been found. Das (2011-12, 110) has gone to identify the deity in the first image as Kāmadeva, because of the presence of the parrot like bird. Parrot, in some texts, mainly in southern India, is associated with Kāmdeva as his vehicle. The second deity has been identified by the archaeologists of the Assam State Archaeological department as a Śaivite figure.

References to the iconography of the above two images are also not found in the known Purāṇic, Āgamic, Tāntric and Śilpa texts available. Not a single clue or hint in the folk religious literature or in the folk and tribal ritual practices or Deśācāras

that could have helped in finding interpretations for the iconography of the above deities, are found. Apart from the above two deities, there are numerous other deities depicted in the sculptural imagery of the architecture of the Douls which bear iconographic features that are yet not deciphered. The deities like the two from the Jagaddhātrī Doul mentioned above bear such motifs like the parrot like bird which is not at all seen as depicted as some symbol of significance in the known narratives or beliefs of the Hinduism prevalent or practiced in the region.

Coming to the deities having theriomorphic forms like Gaṇeśa and Narasimha, in the sculptural imagery of the Douls, Gaṇeśa's elephant head is seen to be modelled near to naturalistic in all his images. His torso does not portray the characteristic corpulence as seen in his images crafted in the sculptural traditions of the early medieval periods. In none of his images in the Douls, the prominent depiction of his large pot shaped belly is seen unlike in his known images produced in the sculptural traditions of the early medieval periods [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xLiv)**]. Narasimha is seen to be portrayed as four- handed, seated in a *Pralambapada* pose with the defeated Asura Hiranyakaśipu lying supine on his lap. He is shown as tearing apart the abdomen of the Asura by his front two hands whereas his back two hands are shown as pulling out the entrails out of the abdomen. The figure of Prahlāda is shown in all his images as positioned near his feet and offering prostrations to him [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xLv), (xLvi)**]. It is interesting to note that the figure and conception of Narasimha in the sculptural imagery of the Douls has sharp resemblances to that of the coloured clay, bamboo and cloth made full body masks of Narasimha used in the Ankiyā Bhāona or Bhāona plays of the neo Vaiṣṇava culture. Like in the masks of Narasimha used in the Bhāonas, the leonine head and face of Narasimha in the sculptural imagery of the Douls is depicted as having a long snout, sharp upright ears, stylized eyes, and with manes like that of a horse [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xLvii)**].

Most of the anthropomorphic and theriomorphic figures of deities (both male and female) in the sculptural imagery of the Douls are either shown as standing in Samapada Sthānaka pose or as seated on their respective animal mounts/ vehicles, vehicles drawn by animals or on full blown lotuses. In some images, the figures of the deities are also depicted seated, or sometimes standing on types of low stools or cots having ornate legs [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xLviii)**]. The designs of these cots or

stools resemble that of *Tāmuli Pīrā*, which holds immense importance in visual culture and belief systems of Assam [**Appendix 3 : Figure (xLix)**]. *Tāmuli Pīrās* are associated with several *Deśācāras/ Lokācāras* or rituals and customs of regional and folk Hinduism, as well as regional traditions of Islam. The full blown lotuses are seen rendered in various manners. In most of the images, the lotuses serving as the seats of the deities are made as having a semicircular frame with their neatly and intricately carved stylized petals radiating from the centre of the semicircle. *Padmāsana*, *Maharājililāsana* and *Pralambapada* are seen as the significant sitting postures of the deities in the sculptural imagery of the architecture of the Douls. Though other poses are also seen, but they are not so frequent or common. In the images of deities depicted with their animal mounts, the figures of deities are almost in all cases seated on the backs or in the manner of riding their animal vehicles, just like an ordinary human. The divine bird *Garuḍa* who serves as the vehicle or mount of *Viṣṇu* and *Matṛkā Vaiṣṇavī*, in the sculptural imagery of the Douls, is seen to be portrayed only in his theriomorphic form- having the head of an eagle/ kite and torso of a human male with wings. He is shown adorned with *Mukuṭa* and other costumes just like the deities. It has been observed that no importance or focus has been laid on depicting various hand gestures of the deities. The gestures of the hands of the various deities which are without any object held in them are seen to be rendered with an air of uncertainty and they are not distinguishable in most cases. The designs of various weapons, particularly swords, choppers, lances, spears, goads and staffs, and other objects, particularly jars and vessels placed as the attributes of the deities are seen derived from the designs of the same type of weapons and objects prevalent in the visual and material culture of the region during the late 17th to 18th century CE. The swords featured as attributes of deities like *Durgā* can be said as mostly modelled after the Mughal and Rajput swords with curved blades, e.g. *Shamshir* and *Goliyā* [**Appendix 3 : Figure (L)**], and also *Khanda* and *Hengdāng*- the traditional and highly revered sword of the *Āhoms* [**Appendix 3 : Figure (Li)**].

Notes :

¹ Information from Ditya jyoti Goswami, Majuli, 2023.

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