
Great Sculptural Tradition of Temples in North - East India: A Study on Heritage Stature of Malinithan and Bhismak Nagar

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Abstract: North-East of India is distinguished for its exotic nature, mystifying diversity of ethnic communities and royal/ religious tourism places, temples and architectures. Malinithan near Likabali, Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border is an important archaeological site which indicates the persistence of human habitation under the patronage of the ruler from a distant past. This area is famous for its excavations of the ruins of the temples belonging to the 10th to 12th Century. Malinithan, the famed archaeological site has carried plenty of proofs for empathetic the cultural and religious growth of the area since ancient time. Another important archaeological site Bismak Nagar, located near Roing in Lower Dibang district, Arunachal Pradesh a fort ruins of Chutia Kingdom during 12th to 16th Centuries. The archaeological, aesthetical, historical and tourism data has taken up to document with this paper. The paper has critically studied the heritage of the temple sculptures of Malinithan and fort ruins of Bhismak Nagar.

Keywords: Assam, Temples, Cultural Heritage, Architecture, Sculptural Tradition, Malinithan, Bhismak Nagar

Introduction

Assam an integral part of North-East of India, comprises eight states of the region including Sikkim with remarkable homogeneity from ethnicity, artistic virtuosity, customs so on and so forth. The particular area also presents the panoramic artistic view of the region with indigenous flavour, forms, colour inherent in inhabitant's life and culture throughout the centuries. The North-East frontier region shares an extensive international border. It has Bhutan, Tibet and China to the north; China and Myanmar to the east; and Bangladesh to the south. It shares approximately a mere three per cent of its territory with India, connecting it to the state of West Bengal (Baruah 2012: 3).

The archaeological remain of early sculptural tradition of temples of North Eastern India provides significant shreds of evidence of rich cultural heritage and human connections by way of the great legacy of art and culture of the Indian subcontinent.

Some crucial instances of the heritage of North-Eastern India are as follows- Indigenous stone monolith (Figure 1), relief sculpture (Figure 2), temple architecture, and, Rock-cut sculpture (Figure 3), terracotta, mask making, wood carving tradition and manuscript painting tradition. Nearby Bengal and Assam, people have been neighbours with knowledge of the existence of each other from times immemorial as having been described by such widely various sources as the Mahabharata. And the seventh-century Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang, their cultural traditions developed independently of each other as did the Chaitanya inspire *Gaudiya Vaishnavism* of Bengal and Sankaradeva inspired *Vaishnavism* of Assam. The process of independent development gave to each culture a distinctive regional identity (Ray 1992: 2).



Figure 1: Stone Monolith, Kachomari, Assam, 15th century C. E.

Since primitive times, North East India is rich art, architectures and sculptures. The ancient dynasty took active part for development of the temple architectures. Among the different sculpture of temple, some important of North East India are Tripureshwari Temple, Daparbatiya temple (Figure 4), Tamreswari temple, Kamakhya temple, Deoparbat temple, Madan Kamdeva temple, Pingaleswar temple, Hayagriva Madhava temple, Malini than temple. All these temples are made up of stone. The original structures of most of them are destroyed but, some of them are reconstructed. From the ruins, sculptures of different subject matters are discovered abundantly.



Figure 2: Relief work, Kamakhya Temple, Assam, 8th - 17th Century C. E.



Figure 3: Rock-cut sculpture, Vishnujanadan archeological site, Guwahati, 9th century C. E. (Courtesy: www.wikipedia.org)



Figure 4: *Ganga* and *Yamuna*, Da Parvatia temple, Assam, 6th Century C. E.

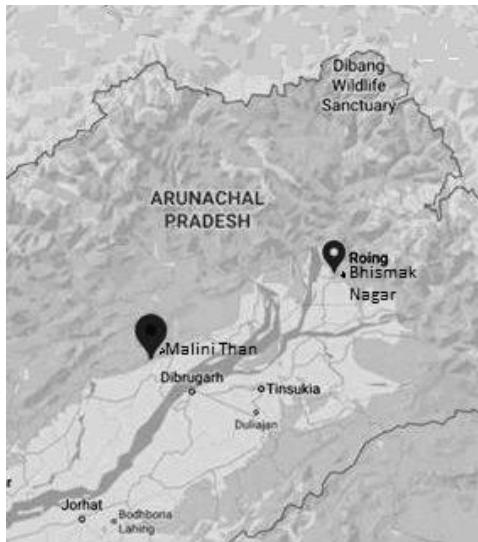


Figure 5: Map Showing Study Area



Figure 6: Malini Than, 10th- 12th century A.D.

Incredible Architecture and Sculptural Tradition in Assam

Monoranjan Dutta describes in his book Sculpture of Assam as “*during the earlier period it is from the western side of Assam that accessible and connecting routes were possible which helped in the migration and expansion of culture from the Indian mainland. With the*

development of the Aryan domination to the eastern Indian region and extension of the Aryan rule to east India, Indo- Aryan ideas penetrated early Assam. We have found no remains of sculptural art in any medium in Assam be it metal or stone, which perhaps belongs to a period earlier than the 5th century A. D. Judging by the extant remains, the sculptural activities in Assam began with the expansion of the Gupta empire" (Dutta 1990: 34-35).



Figure 7: Notice Board: Malinithan Monuments



Figure 8: Malinithan entrance gate



Figure 9: Malinithan Deity



Figure 10: Excavated temple plinth of Malinithan

Based on sculptural remains at Da-Parvatia, Mikir-Ati, Barganga, Kamakhya and Dudhnai, of late 5th and 6th century A. D., sculptural art during this period appears to have prospered in full flowering in Assam. (Dutta 1990: 35) Some other names of sculptural development are Madan-Kamdev, Kamakhya, Pingaleswara, Sukresvara, Malinithan of Greater Assam displayed a continuous artistic development in the

medieval period. In the later period, the main centres of sculptural activities were at Kamakhya, Hajo, Garhgaon, Rangpur, Jayasagar, Kalugaon and Sibsagar, Sadya, Dimapur, Khaspur and Jaintapur are also rich in reliefs and sculptures.

Heritage Stature of Malinithan

"Arunachal Pradesh is studded with a number of ruins viz. forts, temples, monasteries etc. Both the northern and the eastern extremities were adorned with Gompas (monasteries) and Chortens (Stupas). Several Archaeological monuments in Arunachal Pradesh have been declared protected by the Government of India viz. Malinithan, Bhalukpong, Tamreswari temple, Bhismaknagar and Vijaynagar. Malinithan, one of the most important archaeological remains of Arunachal Pradesh is a temple ruins with rich sculptural and architectural remains, located at Likabali in West Siang district. The place is associated with mythical Krishna legend" (Figure 5) (Report, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh).

Malinithan Archaeological Monuments (Figure 6) is situated at twenty-one metres high hill directing towards the plains of Assam (Figure 7). Worth to mention as Research Department, Government of Arunachal Pradesh has excavated the site during 1969-71 shows a temple ruin with three components namely Garbhagriha, Antarala and Mandapa along a entrance gate with intricate stone carving (Figure 8). According to the local legend associated with the place, Lord Krishna carried away Rukmini, the daughter of King Bhisma on the eve of her marriage with Shishupal, Krishna and Rukmini were welcomed here by Devi Parvati with garlands. Devi Parvati thus acquired the name Malini or flower gardener and the place is Malinithan. Lord Krishna and Rukmini visited nearby place Akashiganga falls and famed *Shakti Peeth* temple in which head part of Sati, wife of Lord shiva had fallen near Akashiganga according to legends. Idol of Mother Goddess (Figure 9) has been worshiped in a makeshift temple near the ruined main temple of Malinithan.

In the upper part of hillock there is another temple of Rukmini named as Rukminithan in association with Lord Krishna and Rukmini legends near the Archaeological Museum. Though wholly collapsed, the remains of Malinithan (Figure 10) indicate that it was a massive edifice of architecture style of Orissa, the Pitha is 10 metres in length, and the original height of the shrine could be about 20 metres. The numerous Brahmanial images, female figures in enchanting poses, Dwarfs, Yakshas, Vidyadhara, Amalaka, erotic motif like Gajavyala Kirtim Ukha etc. have been unearthed in the course of excavation. These could have ornamented the facades of the Jangha and Sikhara of all sculptures, and five are masterpieces, Indra on Airvata, Kartikeya on peacock, Surya on Chariot Ganesha with Mouse (all in high relief) & the huge Nandi bull (in the ground). These are of Granitic rocks; otherwise, mostly sandstones have been used. Decorative exuberance, classic ornamentation and mature planning of the sculptures suggest graceful marks the period. Temple architecture had reached the stage of zenith the Pala Dynasties of Assam. Any written evidence of the exact period of the temple is absent and based on the architectural style, art and iconography it could be placed in between 10th- 12th century A.D. (Wikipedia 2015).

The archaeological wealth of Malinithan is richer than most of the other sites. "The early Sanskrit literature refers to two types of architecture – *asmamayi* or of stone, the siliceous type, *Ayasi* (Iron) or metallic and *ama* or of raw unbaked mud brick." (Acharya 1927: 111-130).



Figure 11: Ornamental decoration of stone block, Malinithan

The remains of Malinithan evidently belong to the first type. There is hardly any trace of free standing Hindu temples proceeding the Gupta period. The Gupta temples were constructed without mortar, but the famous one at Deoghar shows the use of iron dowels to hold the masonry together. Iron dowels were also discovered in the ruins of the stone temple of Tamreswari in the Dibang Valley District. On all these pieces of evidence viewed in the wider perspective the ruins of Malinithan may be ascribed from early medieval to late medieval. This assumption is also supported by the ruins of a stone temple, probably of the sixth century, found in a village called Dah Parbatiya near Tezpur and other relics lying about in its vicinity which has close affinities with the relics at Malinithan.

As a noted historian, P. C. Sarma writes, "Kings of the Chutiya Kingdom in the 13th- 14th Century built the Malinithan temple. He reigned in the Sadiya region in the Northeast corner of Assam on the north bank of Brahmaputra. The chief deity of Malinithan temple is Durga/ Kechai-Khaiti or feminine supreme power deity of Hindu mythology. Goddess in her Shakti form worshipped. A nearby narrow stream named Akhashiganga similar to the site of Tamreswari and Bura- Buri Temples of Sadiya. It indicates that sacrifices were in the temple" (Sarma 2020: 205).

But according to eminent museum expert and archaeologist R. D. Choudhury, the architectural style and sculptures of the ruined temple as bearing the Indo- Aryan traits of architecture and the mark of the sculpture of the late variety of the eastern Indian medieval school, which was not known to Chutiya artisans. He opined that the temple erected at the foot of the hills near Likabali must have been the creation of the artisans

from the Brahmaputra Valley. (Choudhury 2020: 5) More than one hundred carvings, images of various Hindu gods and goddesses including Durga, Saraswati, Ganesh, Kartik, Apsara, Sun God, Siva Tandava, Dwarpalak, Yakshas in dancing postures, sculptured panels, animal motifs of the bull, lion and elephant were unearth in the remains of Malinithan. The beautiful image of Indra, Kartik and Surya are instances of excellent carvings. It is indeed, a monument of great synthesis of cultures that took place in India through the ages. Besides these, iron dowels or clamps used as binding material in lieu of mortar and many other works of art in stone executed in relief with geometric and floral designs were dug out. It was a 'buried treasure' indeed. A striking feature of the Malinithan remains is the frequent occurrence of erotic figures in various postures. These erotic sculptures are no doubt the survivals through Tantricism of the fertility cult of the primitive tribal society upholding the mother principle as the procreative power of nature. B.K. Barua writes of the *maithuna* or sexual union as "*The occurrence of these figures mainly in the Siva and Sakta temples, as suggested by Sir William Rothenstein, was a part of the Tantric attitude which was characteristic of Indian religious philosophy between the 11th and 12th centuries, it appears that these erotic sculptures have the support of the traditional practices of centuries of temple building, and have been enjoined by the sacred texts such as the Kamasutra*" (Bauah1951: 172).



Figure 12: View of ruins at Bhismak Nagar, 12th to 16th century A.D.

This sculpture *Gajasimha* is depicted on a corner stone block in which elephant is being trumped by the brute force of lion. This is the most common animal motifs found in temples. The sculpture of the bull is one of the most significant finds from Malinithan. In Indian mythology and religion, the bull named Nandi is always associated with Siva as his vehicle. The Nandi bull is symbolic of asceticism and religious discipline, and

according to rule, an image of sealed Nandi is installed in front of the temple dedicated to Siva. The style of the Malinithan ball is simple, the representation fairly lively and the ornamentation resembles the Hoysala style. The lion on elephant motif, an interesting find from Malinithan, were found in the Dimapur ruins and in various parts of Orissa as well. The hair-dress of a female figurine of Malinithan also seems to resemble the style of Orissa sculptures. At the Rukmini temple at Malinithan Krishna and Radha sculpture is depicted on a corner pillar stone in tribhangha posture, Krishna playing flute holding with both his hand. A strip of cloth is tied on his head in which a peacock feather is placed. Radha is in dancing pose, profusely ornamented and dressed up canopy is seen over headed. Intricate and detailed carvings of ornamentation in the stone block depict indigenous floral motif and folk tradition (Figure 11).



Figure 13: Inscribed Brick, Bhismaknagar
(Courtesy: www.wikipedia.org)

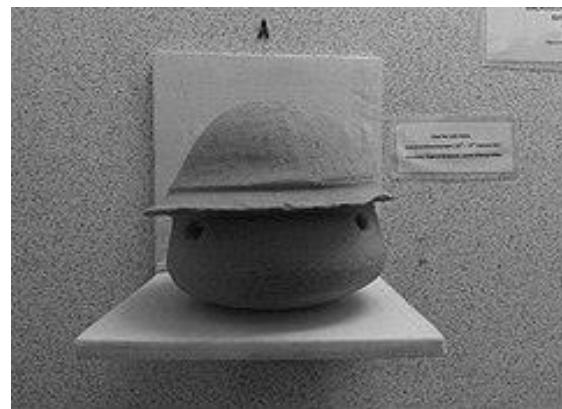


Figure 14: Perforated Pot, Bhismaknagar
(Courtesy: www.wikipedia.org)

Malinithan raises two important questions-how-old are the relics and who were the builders of the temple and makers of its sculptures. Many attempts based on contemporary shreds of evidence have been made, but they are in no way conclusive. Neither inscription has been neither found so far, nor any literary record. A study of iconography and evolution of Indian temple art, however, indicate that the cultural period to which the Malinithan remains belong extends probably from about the 10th century A.D. to the 14th century A.D. Malinithan embodies a variety of culture trails. The archaeological relics give definite evidence of contact between different groups of people and the contribution of architects and sculptors of Assam, of the Orissa School as well as the Pala School of Bengal and Bihar.

Historical and Archeological Importance of Bhismak Nagar

“Bhismak Nagar is a ruined township and fortress built in brick is situated at the foot of Mishmi Hills near Roing in Dibang Valley district. This historic place is associated with Krishna Legend, Rukmini Haran dated back to 12th to 16th century A.D.” (Report, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh) Location of The archaeological site of Bhismak Nagar or Kundil Nagar is near Roing in Lower Dibang Valley district of Arunachal Pradesh (Figure 12). Bismak Nagar fort was built by Chutia Kings and his people during 8th to 10th Century near the river Kundil, between Roing and Tezu. Researcher coined Bhismak Nagar

name as the discovery of ruins in 1970 (Figure 13) Perhaps in the name of the legendary king of the Chutias *Bhirmukka* mentioned at the manuscript text as *Chutia Vanshawali, Deodhani Buranji* Bhismak Nagar is situated over an area of 10 square Kilometres, surrounded by a wall 4.5 meters high and 6 meters wide made of granite stone and bricks on the east, west and south directions. In the north direction, the Mishmi hills protect the monument as a natural barrier. (Momin & Mawlong 2004: 47) The central complex of Bhismak Nagar extends over an area of 1850 meters, and shows remain of three halls, six ingresses and two extension rooms. Two metres high stone wall inside the complex architecture of fort ruins displays the medieval culture. While quarrying at the huge fort pieces of works of art like potteries (Figure 14), terracotta figurines, terracotta plaques and decorative tiles were discovered. (Wikipedia 2020) Bhismak Nagar was perhaps as the main political centre of the Chutia Kingdom with another Centre located at Sadhayapuri or Svadhyapuri (Gait 1962: 16).

Bhismak was a stronghold of the Chutias (12th -16th centuries). Still, the excavations have been showing the discovery of its much earlier antiquities, which confirms the presence of a previous Chutia Kingdom as founded one named Asambhinna as stated in Assam Chronicle during the 7th Century.¹⁵ The Chutia King Lakshminarayan perhaps repaired it as newly found bricks with the name Sri Sri Lakshmi- Narayana in the site (Neog 1977-78: 817).

Conclusion

The detailed study of the area provides a glimpse of ancient Malini than, which was an essential region of the religious and cultural landscape of Northeast India of the early medieval period. These sculptures and the remains of the temple found in the area provide evidence of the past days. Among the notable archaeological sites in the Northeast region, Da-Parbatiya, Rajaduwar, Tamreswari Temple as well as Malini than stands as unique due to the colossal rock-cut images of some Hindu deities. Thus architectural and sculptural activities in the North Bank of Brahmaputra during Chutia reign were done following Indo- Aryan style. As Dr. R. D. Chouhury describes, the architectures in Malinithan and Bhismak Nagar convey the Indo- Aryan mannerisms, and the sculptures carry the mark of distinctive variety and richness of eastern Indian medieval school as perhaps work of the artisans from the lower parts of Brahmaputra valley. (Choudhury 2020: 4) Appropriate protection of these monuments is immediately required removal of all different plants, proper chemical treatment of edifices and with the aid of new technology as silicon-based technology in the field of conservation of buildings and monuments. The monuments should be maintained with proper beautification with emptiness and natural gardening to attract more visitors.

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