
Astrolatry in the Brahmaputra Valley: Reflecting upon the Navagraha Sculptural Depiction

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Abstract: *Since its beginning, Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, the historical kingdom of the Brahmaputra valley had a close association with the Sun worship and other forms of Astrolatry, which is apparent from the available literary, inscriptional and archaeological evidences. Traces of Navagraha worship, which was prevalent in central and eastern India during the early medieval period, could be seen in Assam as well. A total of seven temple door lintels with Navagraha depiction observed at various sites of the Brahmaputra valley stand out in terms of their artistic execution and iconographic precision. These Navagraha panels of Assam carry some distinctive native features and as well as show certain similarities and differences with their counterparts from Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. Availability of Navagraha panels along with numerous Surya sculptures reiterates the presence of a strong solar sect in the Brahmaputra valley during the early medieval period. This paper also highlights the popularity and extent of Navagraha worship in the valley.*

Keywords: Astrolatry, Sun Cult, Planetary Deities, Early Medieval Period, Deopahar, Door Jambs, Architecture

Introduction

Worship of stars, planets and other celestial deities is the most common feature among different religious practices around the world. This phenomenon is not only limited to major religions but can also be seen in many communities practicing nature worship, ancestor worship or animism. Most theologians consider astrolatry as the earliest known form of religion and nature worship (Irvin *et al.* 2006). Reverence towards the heavenly deities such as Sun, Moon and other planetary bodies are evident in different cultures and civilisations across the world. The antiquity of astro-theology and primitive astronomy in the Indian subcontinent goes back to very early times. Many scholars have even tried to interpret astronomical symbols present in the Indian prehistoric and proto-historic rock art and megaliths (Menon and Vahia 2011, Abbas 2016, Menon 2016) across the country. However, the first concrete evidence of astrolatry comes from Rigveda which refers to deities like Surya (Sun), Soma (Moon), Indra (God of thunder), Varuna (God of water associated with sky), Vayu (wind) and Dyaus (Heaven) (Radhakrishnan 1954: 16). Thenceforth we find reference to number of

celestial bodies like *Nakshatras* (stars), *Grahas* (planets), *Dikhpalas* (guardians of directions) and so on, in all three major religions of India viz. Brahmanical, Buddhism and Jainism. This paper is an attempt to understand the iconographic distinctiveness among the Navagraha sculptures from the early medieval temples of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The Navagrahas are Surya (the Sun), Chandra (the Moon), Mangala (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Guru/Brihaspati (Jupiter), Shukra (Venus), Shani (Saturn), Rahu (demon of eclipses, ascending lunar node) and Ketu (personification of comets, descending lunar node). The study will help in understanding the significance of the worship of stars, planets and other celestial deities in the early medieval period in the valley. These widespread occurrences of Navagraha sculptures along with other planetary deities like Surya indicate the presence of the strong cult of astrolatry in the region.

The Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa kingdom was one of the prime centres of solar worship in ancient India. The kingdom flourished in the Brahmaputra valley between 3rd to 12th centuries CE. The ancient Pragjyotishapura has been identified with the present-day city of Guwahati in Assam based on inscriptional evidences (Barpujari 1990, 1994). *Prag* means eastern whereas *jyotisha* denotes shining or astrology (Gait 1926). So, the word Pragjyotisha indicates 'The city of Eastern Astrology' or 'Light in the East'. Mythologically, it is believed that the region was ruled by Naraka of the Bhauma dynasty. However, historically, the kingdom was known to be ruled by three major dynasties - the Varmans (350-650 CE), Mlechchhas (655-900 CE) and the Palas (900-1100 CE). After these three powerful dynasties there was a phase which saw the birth of various small kingdoms and the scenario continued till the rise of the Ahoms in the upper Brahmaputra valley and Koches in the lower Brahmaputra valley.

Available shreds of archaeological evidence, literature and local adoption of mythological stories indicate the presence of a strong sect which followed the astronomical deities in the region during the time of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa kingdom. The Kalika Purana, compiled around the c. 10th century CE also states that it was the city where Lord Brahma sat and gave life to stars. The text also compares the city of the first light (Pragjyotishapura) with the city of Indra (Das 2007: 9). Therefore, it can be said that solar worship and other forms of astrolatry have a very early presence in the Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa region. The Kalika Purana further mentions two important places in Kamarupa where Sun worship was in practice. One of these places was Rabikshetra and the other was Prakparva which was popularly known as Citrasaila, i.e. the location of the present day Navagraha temple in Guwahati city.

The identification of Rabikshetra as Sri Surya Pahar has been evident from the *shloka* in Kalika Purana, which says that "*Rabikshetran Zatra Deva Aditya Statan Stitah*" (Patowary 2008: 249, Sanathana 2019). The word Surya Pahar literally means 'Sun hill' or 'hill of Sun'. Markandeya Purana refers to the existence of a Sun temple in Udayachala, i.e. the mountain of Sunrise (Das 2002). The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapala refers to him as '*Aditya bhattaraka*' means the worshipper of *Aditya* (Sharma 1978: 179-193).

Though there exists some comprehensive studies on the Sun worship in ancient and early medieval Assam (Sharma 1979-82, 1990; Choudhury, R.D. 1985; Choudhury, N.D. 1985; Shastri 1989-90; Dutta 1990; Saraswati 1990; Tripathy 2002; Das 2002, 2007; Phukan 2017), the Navagrahas have been overlooked. The Navagraha worship evolved side by side as part of a leading Sun cult in the early medieval Assam. It is evident from the presence of Navagrahas in the lintels of early medieval temples across the state. In the Indian context, at around the 6th century CE, Navagrahas started to appear on the temple door lintels of the northern part of India (Markel 1987, 1990; Mevissen 2012).



Figure 1: Lintel Containing the Navagraha Panel from Bamuni Pahar, Tezpur



Figure 2: Lintel Containing Navagraha Panel from Biswakarma Temple, Singri, Tezpur



Figure 3: Lintel Containing the Navagraha Panel from Cole Park, Tezpur

Early Medieval Temples of Assam and Navagraha Panels

Temple and other religious architecture dominate the early medieval structural landscape in almost all parts of the sub-continent (Sharma 1998: 992). Perhaps it might be due to the over emphasis on temple sites of this period. The same scenario can be observed in the Brahmaputra valley as well, as the excavations and explorations hardly expose any early medieval secular architecture in the valley. Major archaeological

evidences of the period are in the form of stone temple ruins, individual and rock-cut sculptures and habitational deposits with pottery, bricks and terracotta objects. It is evident from richly available religious sites across the region that there was an extensive temple building activity carried out all through the valley during the early medieval period. However not a single temple belonging to this period in standing condition can be noticed in the region. Currently only the foundations, scattered sculptures, decorative and non-decorative architectural members and huge mounds created by temple debris can be witnessed in these sites. Choudhury (1985: 131, 2013) points out that the major reasons for this deplorable condition of the temple remains are untoward climatic conditions and earthquakes prevalent in the region. However, the method of temple building adopted in the valley during the early medieval period can also be considered as another important reason. Evidently, huge architectural blocks were used in the construction of these temples just with iron clamps as the binding material. This dry masonry method along with the climatic and seismic conditions affected the temples and hence, we see all those temples as construction debris across the region. However, in some cases, foundations are clearly visible beneath the debris, such as at Deopahar (also known as Deoparvat) (Numaligarh in Golaghat), Bamuni hills and Singri (Tezpur), Madan Kamdeva (Kamrup), Abhayapuri Ganesh temple (Bongaigaon), Sri Surya Pahar (Goalpara) and Malini than (Lower Siang in Arunachal Pradesh). The early medieval temple complexes of the Brahmaputra valley can be mostly seen in Krishnai-Dudhnoi confluence, Kamrup (Metro and Rural districts), Kalang-Kapili valley, Kapili-Jamuna valley, Dhansiri-Doiyang valley, and Tezpur-Sonitpur region. Guwahati city including north Guwahati region hosts several important temple sites having evidence of the effect of earthquakes (Sanathana and Hazarika 2019).

The remnants of doorframes of early medieval temple sanctums of Assam are one of the key structural pieces present in these temple ruins. These ornamented and well-decorated *dwaras* (doorframes) provide significant information on the prevailing religious practices and beliefs. The *dwaras* are constituted of *uttaranga* (upper panel/lintel), different *shakhas* (bands) on the door jambs and *urdhwanga* (lower panel). In these different parts, depiction of various deities including Dashavatara of Vishnu, Shivaganas, *maithuna* images, Adityas, *kalasha*-motifs along with different *patra-shakhas*, *pুষpa-shakhas*, and *naga-shakhas* are fairly common. Many of these door jambs are either kept in the temple premise or embedded in the walls and door-frames of the temples constructed in the later periods. Many of them have been housed in the district museums as well as in the Assam State Museum in Guwahati.

Temple door lintels play a crucial role in understanding the religious past of the Brahmaputra valley as there is no intact temple available to give a concrete context regarding the deities worshipped. The depiction on the *dwara lalata-bimba* (centre most portion of the temple door lintel) and the panels on either side of the *lalata-bimba* could give the precise idea regarding the presiding deity and the prevalent sect followed during that period. As many as seven door lintels with the depiction of Navagraha in a

panel have been noticed throughout Assam during our field visits so far. The panels are recorded at Deopahar in Golaghat; Bamuni Pahar, Singri and Cole Park of Tezpur; Mikirati and Kawaimari in Nagaon and Basishtha in Kamrup districts of Assam.

One of the areas having the largest number of door lintels with Navagraha depictions, Tezpur, has been identified with Harrupesvar, the seat of power during the Mlechchha dynasty established by Salasthambha in 650 CE. Bamuni Pahar is popularly known as Ushapahar and located east of the Tezpur city on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. The *pahar* (hill) contains a mound of architectural ruins of an early medieval temple complex. Banerji (1928: 115-116) has reported seven temple remains from the site. The lintel (Figure 1) containing the Navagrahas has been found in two broken pieces. The lintel is of a Shaivite shrine showing standing Shiva in the *lalata* (centre of the panel) and Brahma and Vishnu in both the ends. In between them, the Navagrahas are shown in standing posture in individual frame-like designs. Rahu and Ketu are shown in the same frame, one above the other respectively. The image of Shani is lost due to breakage.

Another broken lintel with Navagraha panel (Figure 2) is found in Viswakarma temple of Singri situated west of Tezpur. Just like Bamuni Pahar, this Archaeological Survey of India protected site also contains a large heap of temple architectural ruins. Only the second half of the panel is found at the site whereas the authors have traced the first half at the District Museum situated in Tezpur city, housed in a colonial building called as *Dak-bungalow*. Remarkably, the panel is similar to the lintel of Bamuni Pahar, including in the placement of *trimurtis* and the *grahas*.

A unique lintel (Figure 3) with Navagrahas has been observed in the Cole Park of Tezpur. The park is situated in the heart of the city and the name of the park has recently been changed to Chitrlekha Udyan. The actual provenance of this lintel is unknown. However, this panel is different from the above mentioned two panels of Singri and Bamuni Pahar in stylistic features as well as the placement of the *grahas*. The lintel conceivably belongs to a Surya shrine as Surya is shown on the *lalata* portion. The panel does not follow the traditional placements of the *grahas* making it difficult to differentiate Chandra, Mangala, Budha and Shukra as they usually bear identical iconographic features in the panel. The *grahas* are shown inside a shrine like motif and separated with designed pillars. Interestingly the lintel also contains an image of Kamdev at the left end of the panel.

Another beautiful panel of Navagraha (Figure 4) has been found at Deopahar temple site situated in Numaligarh of Golaghat district. As the name suggests, the site is located on a hill, known as Deopahar or Deoparbat. The site is protected by the Directorate of Archaeology, Government of Assam. Like other early medieval temple sites of Assam, the Deopahar is also in ruins and the wide extent of the architectural remains indicate the magnitude of the original structure that once stood in the area. The temple is believed to be of Shiva, however representation of Vishnu as the *lalata*-

bimba (figure in the centre of the lintel) suggest a contrary picture. Brahma and Shiva are sculpted on each end. The *trimurtis* are shown in standing posture inside a temple like frame with two attendants each accompanying them. The stepped *shikaras* on the frames emulate the *pidha-deula* style of Kalingan (Orissan) architecture. A Ganesha image is sculpted just beneath the *lalata-bimba*. Each of the Navagrahas are depicted inside rectangular frames, however, Rahu and Ketu are shown together in a single frame.



Figure 4: Navagraha Panel in the Lintel of Deopahar Temple of Numaligarh, Golaghat

In Nagaon, two lintels with Navagraha panels have been found at the sites of Mikirati and Kawaimari. Mikirati is an important archaeological site of the Brahmaputra valley as the site has yielded evidence of architectural tradition from 6th to 12th century CE. The site has remains of an ancient brick temple and an early medieval stone temple, both in ruined condition. The lintel (Figure 5) appears to be of a Shaivite shrine as Shiva is depicted on the *lalata* position. Brahma and Vishnu are shown on either sides and the *grahas* are depicted in between conventionally inside shrine like frames. The lower portions of Mangala, Budha, Vishnu and Guru are lost due to the damage of the lintel.



Figure 5: Lintel Containing the Navagraha Panel from Mikirati, Nagaon District

Evidence of an early medieval temple ruin along with a fragment of Navagraha panel (Figure 6) can be observed in Kawaimari village of Nagaon district. The panel along with many other temple ruins have been housed in Sri Sri Bishnupuri Than of Kawaimari. The Navagraha panel of Kawaimari is broken and only the first half of the panel is observed at the site. Shiva is shown on the *lalata-bimba* of the lintel and Brahma has been depicted on the right end. Surya, Chandra, Mangala and Budha are shown

between Brahma and Shiva. Stylistically the *grahas* are similar to the one from Deopahar.



Figure 6: Lintel Containing the Navagraha Panel from Sri Sri Bishnupuri Than of Kawaimari, Nagaon District



Figure 7: Lintel Containing the Navagraha Panel from Basishtha Temple in Guwahati

Another lintel is found placed inside the sanctum of the Basishtha temple (Figure 7) in Guwahati city. This temple of late medieval Ahom period is dedicated to Shiva, however there are adequate evidence of the presence of early medieval temple construction in the vicinity. There are rock-cut sculptures of Ganesha and many other deities in eroded condition due to the constant flow of the water channels, famously known as *Tridhars*, the rivulets of Sandhya, Lalita and Kanta. Presently, the site is known for the late medieval temple built by Ahom King Rajeswar Sinha in Saka 1686 (1764 CE) (Neog 1960). The Ahoms mostly built temples in those locations which once had early medieval temple. Many a times, they tend to use the existing early medieval sculptures in their temple walls for decorations. Unfortunately, this Navagraha panel has undergone severe weathering and only the outlines of the depictions can be observed. This panel is different from other above-discussed panels as there are no partings of any kind found between the depictions of the *grahas*. Interestingly the *grahas* represented on the panels of Assam are in *sthanika* (standing) posture.

Iconographic Depiction of Navagrahas in Temple Door Lintels

Agni Purana is considered to be the earliest scripture to discuss the iconography of Navagrahas. Additionally, Vishnudharmottara Purana, Chaturvarga Chintamani, Amsubhedagama, Shilparatna, Abilashitartha Chintamani, Sritattvanidhi, Purvakarnagama and Kalika Purana also provide detailed iconographic features of Navagrahas (Joge *et al.* 2015). One of the authorities on the subject, Mevissen (2011), opines that Navagrahas are easy to identify, as long as they appear in panels as they provide circumstantial evidence for the identification of *grahas* individually. The Navagraha panels generally follow an order based on the seven week-days, which starts with the Surya, Chandra, Mangala, Budha, Guru/Brihaspati, Shukra, Shani which are added with Rahu and Ketu (Mevissen 2011, 2012). Similarly, a popular *stotra* (Sanskrit poetic work) named as *Navagraha stotra* also gives the exact positions of the *grahas* in an order. The *stotra* goes like "Namah Sooryaya, Chandraya, Mangalaya, Budhaya cha, Guruhu, Shukra, Shanibhihi cha Rahuve, Ketuve Namaha" (Salutations to Sun, Moon, Mars and Mercury, I also salute Jupiter, Venus, Saturn as well as Rahu and Ketu). It is interesting to note that the six out of seven panels form the Brahmaputra valley mentioned above have followed the above sequential order. The panel displayed at the Cole Park (Figure 3) is the only exception as it might be due to having Surya in the *lalata-bimba*. The iconographic details of the *grahas* illustrated on the panels of Assam are discussed below.

Surya: According to *Amsumadbhedagama* and *Suprabedhagama* (Rao 1914: 306), the sculpture of Surya should be sculpted with two hands each holding a lotus. The hands should be held up as to cause the fists holding the lotus reach the level of the shoulders. Surya should be adorned with ornaments like *karanda mukuta* on the head, pair of ruby *karna kundalas* (ear rings) and over the chest there should be a *hara* (necklace). There should also be *yajnopavavita* (sacred thread) on the deity. In *sthanika* (standing) images, the figure of Surya should be made standing on a *padma pitha* (lotus seat). These key iconographic features of Surya such as two fully blown flowers in his hands and additionally feet covered with long boot are present in all the panels, except the *kavach* (body armour). Interestingly *kavach* is not even present in the individual Surya sculptures of the valley (Sanathana and Hazarika 2020). Surya is depicted in similar fashion across the panels. He is adorned with *karanda mukuta*, *hara* (necklaces and garlands), *upavita* (sacred thread), *karna-kundla* (ear rings), lower drapery and so on. Only on the panel from the Cole Park (Figure 3), Surya is shown on the *lalata-bimba* along with his attendants Danda and Pingala. Surya was one of the popular cults of ancient and early medieval Assam. So, this panel strongly indicates an existence of a temple dedicated to Surya in and around Tezpur region. Moreover, this particular panel is stylistically unique, in terms of attire, order of the *grahas*, and iconographic features.

Chandra, Mangala and Budha: Chandra (the Moon) is also called Soma. As per *Amsumadbhedagama* the sculpture of Chandra might be represented in standing or in seated posture (Rao 1914: 318). He should be shown holding a *kumuda* flower (water

lily) in both or one of his hands. In most of the panels from the Brahmaputra valley, he is shown holding the flower in one hand. Mangala (Mars) is also known as Bhauma. Many *silpashastras* describe him along with Budha with four hands. As per the *sastras*, Mangala's upper right hand is shown with *abhaya* mudra and rest of the hands are shown carrying attributes like *shakti*, *gada* and *sula*. However, the depiction of Mangala in the valley shows him with just two hands and in couple of instances he is attributed with *sula* (short sword). Similarly, Budha (Mercury) is shown with *abhaya* mudra and attributes like *khadga*, *ketaka* and *gada*. These *grahas* are mostly depicted identically on the panels of the Brahmaputra valley. At Bamuni Pahar (Figure 1) and Viswakarma temple at Singri (Figure 2) these three *grahas* are represented identically holding lotus buds (water lily?) in left hands and standing in *tribhanga* posture. The right hand is shown resting on the right thigh. The Budha in the lintel of Deopahar (Figure 4) is shown holding a bow and arrow. The depiction of Chandra and Mangala are also different in the panel of Deopahar as Chandra is shown holding an *akshamala* (rosary) in the raised right hand and bowl of nectar in his left hand, which he is holding near the chest. On the other hand, Mangala is holding the *akshamala* in the right hand near the chest and a *kamandal* (holy water pot of oblong shape) in the left hand. Here even Shukra and Shani are also depicted identically. At Mikirati (Figure 5), Chandra, Mangala and Budha are shown identically; they are standing in *tribhanga* posture with crossed legs, holding swords in their right hand. At Kawaimari (Figure 6) Chandra is shown holding lotus bud and *kamandal* in his left and right hands respectively. Mangala is shown with sword and *kamandal* whereas Budha is shown holding an *akshamala* (rosary) near his chest.

Guru and Shukra: Guru (Jupiter) or Brihaspati is usually shown in sage like attire as mythologically he is considered to be the teacher of the *Devas* (Gods) with usual attributes like *danda* (stick), *akshamala*, *kamandal* and *padma*. At the panel from Deopahar (Figure 4), he is shown holding the sacred texts in his right hand and a bowl of nectar in his left. At Bamuni Pahar (Figure 1) and Viswakarma temple at Singri (Figure 2), the Guru along with Shukra are shown identically standing in *tribhanga* posture, holding lotus buds in right hand while left hand is placed on the left thigh. At Cole Park, he is depicted like hermit on the right most end standing in *samapada* posture holding the *kamandal* in his right hand. Even at Mikirati (Figure 6), he is shown like a sage in a writing posture which matches the depiction as described in Vishnudharmottara Purana. Shukra, the teacher of *Danavas* (Demons) has been depicted identical to Guru at Bamuni Pahar and Singri, and Shani and Mangala at Deopahar. However, he is shown with a bow and arrow at Mikirati.

Shani: As per *Amsumadbhedagama*, Shani should be relatively smaller in stature and his leg should be somewhat lame. His attribute is a *danda* (staff). In the lintels of the Brahmaputra valley Shani has a unique iconographic representation in all the panels with a crippled leg except at Deopahar. At Deopahar, he is shown identical to Shukra and Mangala. At Mikirati and Cole Park, he is shown holding a thick staff with circular top.

Rahu and Ketu: In the panels of the Brahmaputra valley, Rahu and Ketu are shown in same frame as mentioned above. Rahu can be identified by bearded and moustached face, holding a crescent moon and a sun-disk in his hands whereas Ketu is shown with snake-tails and sometimes with snake canopy. In the panel at Deopahar, Rahu is depicted holding the crescent moon and a sun-disk in his hands whereas at Bamuni Pahar, Singri and Cole Park, only his face has been depicted without the above unique features. Interestingly, at Cole Park his headgear resembles ethnic attire. On the other hand, Ketu at Deopahar and Mikirati is shown holding a sword and a fire pot in his hands. In rest of the panels, he is shown with *namashkara* mudra (folded hands). All the panels have shown his lower body like a snake tail, however at Cole Park only his one leg has transformed into tail.

An alluring sculpture of Mohini (Figure 8) is observed at Baba Than Shiva temple near Deopahar archaeological site. The sculpture was probably brought from the Deopahar site to the Baba Than. Mohini is the female *avatar* of Vishnu and responsible for the creation of Rahu and Ketu as *grahas*. Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Padma Purana and Brahmada Purana give an extensive account on the story of *Samudra manthan* and how Mohini deceived the *Asuras* (demons) and provided the pot of *amruta* (nectar) to the Devas. As per the Puranic accounts Mohini started distributing the nectar to *devatas* meanwhile a demon named Svarabhanu sat in the row of *Devatas* and consumed the nectar. Sun and Moon informed the incident to Mohini and accordingly, she cut the head of Svarabhanu through the *Sudarshan Chakra*. As Svarabhanu had already become immortal, his head was separated from his body and the head portion came to be known as Rahu while the body part as Ketu. Mahabharata describes Surya as the enemy of Svarabhanu. As per the Puranic mythology Rahu and Ketu are connected with Solar and Lunar eclipse (Dimmitt 2012). In the sculpture at Baba Than, Mohini is portrayed holding a lotus stem in her right hand and a rectangular nectar container in her raised left hand. A Mohini image with identical iconographic traits has been reported from the Darasuram Airavateswar temple of Tamil Nadu.

Independent Sculpture of Shani

An independent image of Shani, stylistically belonging to the early medieval period, has been observed embedded inside the Ahom built Kurma Janardan temple (Figure 9) of North Guwahati. The temple is located on the northern bank of Brahmaputra in Madhyamkhanda village. The deity is shown with crossed left leg and stiff right leg. He is holding an *akshamala* in right and a long staff with a ring on top in left hand. All these features match with the iconography of Shani seen in the Navagraha panels of the Brahmaputra valley and independent sculptures of Shani reported from Bihar and Dhaka (Mevissen 2011: 96).

Navagraha Temple at Chitrachal Hill, Guwahati

Scholars have traced the Chitraparvat mentioned in the Kalika Purana as the present day Chitrachal hill and Navagraha temple of Guwahati. Kalika Purana refers to the

Chitraparvat as a centre of Navagraha worship during early medieval Assam (Kouli 2012-13: 108-111). An inscription on the temple wall records that the temple was built during the reign of Ahom king Rajeswara Singha in 1752 CE. Kouli suggests that the present temple was built on the octagonal plinth of 9th century CE. The temple is well known for the worship of the aniconic Navagrahas in the form of *lingas*. Here the *grahas* are differentiated with the help of different coloured cloths placed around them. *Rupamandanam* one of the *silpashatras* gives a summary (Sankyatirtha 1936) of the colours ascribed to the nine *grahas* like, Surya, Chandra and Shukra in white, Mangala in Red, Budha and Guru in Yellow, Shani in black, Rahu and Ketu in smoke colour. Individual images of Navagrahas are embedded on *devakoshtas* in the inner wall of the sanctum of the present temple. Kauli (2012-13: 108-111) has given a detailed account on the art and iconography of these images.

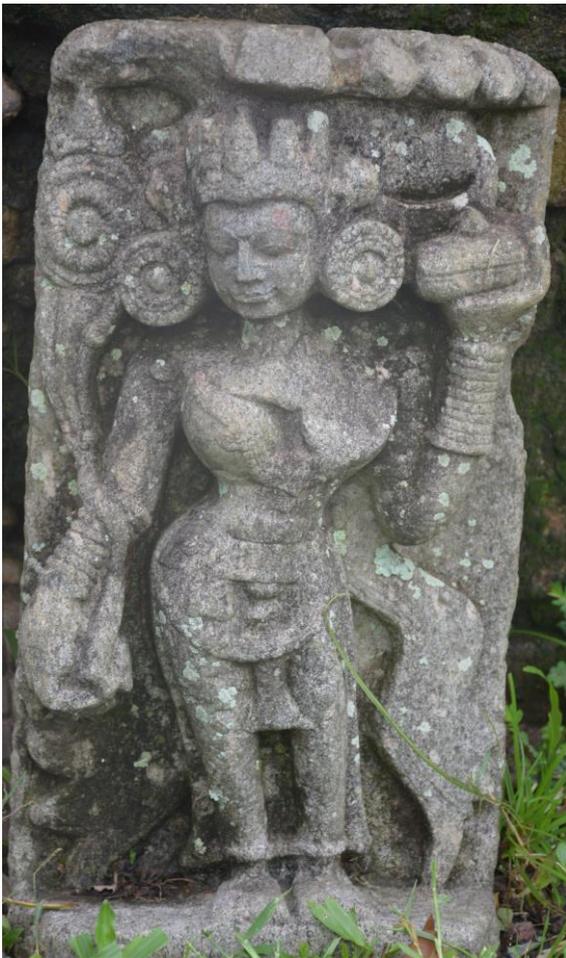


Figure 8: Sculpture of Mohini from Baba Than Shiva Temple near Deopahar



Figure 9: Sculpture of Shani from Kurma Janardan Temple, North Guwahati

Discussion

Regional variation, which is one of the peculiarities of Indian culture, can also be seen in the way these celestial deities have been treated in temple sculptural art. These variations are evident in the way the *grahas* have been worshipped, showcased through

sculptures and the symbolism and inherent philosophy they carry. It is evident from archaeological sources that the Navagrahas gained much importance in temples of northern India, long before their occurrence in the Dravidian temples. The Navagrahas on the door lintels of the sanctums can be seen mainly from the temples of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Bihar and Assam.



Figure 10: Eroded Navagraha Panel (Courtesy: Mainamati Museum, Bangladesh)



Figure 11: Navagraha Panel on the 'Mother and Child Sculpture' from Bengal (Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi)

From the regions of West Bengal and Bangladesh, a wide-range of Navagraha sculptures and panels have been reported, however, lintel panel depicting the *grahas* are not known to be reported so far. This is indeed a major difference between the Navagraha depiction of Assam and the undivided Bengal. The Navagraha panels have been reported from Raiganj, Uttar Dinajpur, Malda, Balurghat, Rajshahi, Kanakadighi,

Mainamati (Figure 10) of Bengal (Sarkar 2004, Mevissen 2011). Two major differences can be noticed between the Navagraha panels of Bengal and Assam. The Navagraha panels of Assam are purely depicted on the door lintels of early medieval temple sanctums, whereas the Bengal sculptures are individual panels which were once a part of the temple walls. The Navagraha depictions at Bengal contain *vahanas* (vehicles) beneath each *graha* on the plinth of the panel (Mevissen 2011) like Surya with horse, Chandra with *makara*, Mangala with peacock, Budha with dog, Brihaspati with goose, Shukra with frog, Shani with an ass, Rahu with an axletree and Ketu with fire and smoke. These detailed attributes of *vahanas* are not shown on the panels of Assam. We even find the Navagraha depictions as subsidiary figures of a major deity in Bengal. One such example is the mother and child image of Pala period acquired from Bengal and presently housed at the National Museum in New Delhi (Figure 11). The image beautifully showcases a mother and child in sleeping posture and above them, the Navagrahas along with Ganesha, Karthikeya and a *Shivalinga* are depicted.



Figure 12: Navagraha Panels on the Lintels in Orissan Temples from Bhubaneswar

Another region popular for the Sun and Navagraha worship is Odisha. Navagraha panels are integral parts of Orissan temples since late 7th century CE which is evident from the Lakshmaneshwar temple at Bhubaneswar. Navagraha depiction is prominent

in the lintels of Orissan early medieval temples (Figure 12). The *grahas* here are shown in *asana* (siting) posture, seated in *padmasana*. Just like the panels from Assam, each *graha* is given with an individual frame including Rahu and Ketu. Tirthesvara temple, Muktesvara temple, three Shiva temples at Baudh, Rajarani temple and Brahmesvara temple are the major Orissan temples with Navagraha depictions on the lintel (Behera 1992; Donaldson 1976; Sahu 2014).



Figure 13: Navagraha Panel from Madhya Pradesh (Courtesy: State Museum, Bhopal)



Figure 14: Door Lintel with Navagraha Depiction from Chittorgarh, Rajasthan (Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi)

Bateswar in Madhya Pradesh has yielded several door lintels of early medieval temples with the Navagrahas. Again, the images are sculpted in seated posture, yet they are stylistically different from the Orissan variety. At Bateswar, the depiction is spread on either side of *lalata-bimba* just like in Assam. However, there are no separate framings for the *grahas*. Individual Navagraha panels are also recorded at Madhya Pradesh (Figure 13). Temple lintel showing Navagrahas of Pratihara period belonging to 8th century CE is also reported from Chittorgarh in Rajasthan and presently the panel is displayed at the National Museum in New Delhi (Figure 14).

Navagrahas are even considered as sacred in Buddhist and Jaina philosophy. A Jain temple at Deogarh in Uttar Pradesh shows Navagrahas in standing posture on the door lintels (Mevisse 2012). Recently, Mevisse (2019) has done an extensive study of the Navagraha panels in and around Gaya in Bihar by documenting more than hundred panels including door lintels. Both *asana* as well as *sthanika* posture of the *grahas* in the panels are recorded. However, they are stylistically different from the specimens of Assam, in terms of stance, attributes, attires, and facial features. The popularity of Navagraha worship is well recorded in Nepal, Bengal and Bihar (Mevisse 2012, 2019). On similar lines, planetary worship was an equally popular cult in Assam and Orissa.

Presently, Navagraha worship is very popular in southern part of India. In spite of being a custom to have a Navagraha *mandala* in each of the Dravidian temples, sculptures of these *grahas* in panels are extremely rare. Rao (1914) states that in some Dravidian temples, the sculptures of the planets are setup in the order in which they are in the zodiacal circle at the time of the construction of the temple and he believes it might help in calculating the probable dates of the construction of those temples.

Conclusion

The Navagraha worship was and is still much in vogue in different parts of India, especially in eastern India (Banerjee 1985: 443-444). The ancient Indian texts like Yajnavalkya Sutra, Agni Purana, Vishnudharmottara Purana and Silparatna describe the forms of *grahas* and the importance of their worship as individual deity as well as in a group. During the early medieval period, the use of panels with Navagrahas as temple architectural members developed generally in northern part of India having a great extent in eastern India. Not much is known about the origin of the depiction of Navagrahas in door lintels. The Navagraha worship in eastern India rose to popularity instantaneously across the region. However, existence of regional variations in their iconography itself is an indication of an independent regional development of this cult.

The above discussed seven pieces of lintels with Navagrahas and an independent Shani image in the Brahmaputra valley provide us with immense information about the widespread popularity of these celestial deities in the religious beliefs during the early medieval time. It is important to appreciate the symbolism of the placement and the locational context of these planetary deities on the temples of the Brahmaputra valley. Unlike the panels from Bengal, *vahanas* (vehicles) of Navagrahas are not depicted beneath the feet of *grahas* in the valley. Perhaps, it is because the Navagraha panels here are part of the door lintels of the temple sanctum. Depicting these *grahas* on the lintels may be attributed to indicate the celestial nature of the presiding deity in the sanctum. The portrayal of Rahu in ethnic attire as *kirata* in the panel of Cole Park is a peculiar example of native adaptation of art. Moreover, in the same panel, Kamdev is shown with bow and arrows as one of the prime deities along with Surya and Guru. This might be due to the popular local legends of Kamarupa where Kamdev got his *rupa* (physical body) back in the region. As Surya is shown as the *lalata-bimba* in this panel, the *Trimurtis* are not depicted here as they are considered to be the higher

divinities above Surya in Hindu pantheon. Interestingly, Ketu is shown in folded hands wherever it appears in a Shaivite shrine, for example at Bamuni Pahar and Singri. However, he is shown with sword and fire at the shrine devoted to Vishnu at Deopahar. This might have a mythological parable as Vishnu is responsible for the torment of Rahu and Ketu.

Although sculptural depiction of Navagrahas did not continue in the valley during the mediaeval Ahom period; yet, the importance of planetary worship continued to sustain which is evident through the aniconic worship of the *grahas* in Guwahati. At the Dakshinpat Satra of Majuli in Assam, there is recorded a necklace of the Ahom period with nine jewels representing the Navagrahas (personal communications from Shiela Bora, 2020). The connection between Pragjyotishpura (the city of eastern light) with ancient astronomy, astrology and astrolatry is apparent through the available literatures, oral legends and archaeological sources. Opulently available Surya sculptures across the valley and with the findings of above panels, there are reasonably evident materials for further research on these lines.

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