

EVOLUTION OF ICONOGRAPHY IN ASSAM ACROSS THE EPOCHS: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamic evolution of iconography in Assam, delving into the intricate interplay of historical and cultural transformations across epochs. The socio-religious history of the region unfolds as a rich tapestry, woven with the threads of diverse faiths and beliefs. Key themes include settlements, ethnic migrations, socio-economic and political shifts, environmental changes, natural calamities, and the infusion of new ideologies. Cult images and icons of deities, serving as tangible reflections of spiritual metamorphosis, form a central focus. Monument building emerges as a visual narrative, encapsulating the adaptation of new ideas and expressions within the religious landscape. The study specifically scrutinizes the iconography of Brahmanical deities, providing a regional perspective. A succinct overview of the landscape, political history, and monumental landmarks sets the stage for a nuanced exploration.

Keywords: Iconography, Assam, Brahmanical Deities, Cultural Transformations, Socio-Religious History.

INTRODUCTION

The socio-religious history of a region serves as a poignant mirror, reflecting the diverse faiths and beliefs that have woven the fabric of its existence across epochs. This historical journey is marked by a myriad of transformations, encompassing the ebb and flow of settlements, migrations of diverse ethnic groups, socio-economic and political fluctuations, environmental shifts, natural calamities, the infusion of new ideologies, and evolving religious practices. Amidst this dynamic tapestry, expressions of these practices find manifestation in the construction of monuments and the incorporation of cult images within them.

The cult images and icons of deities in a region, evolving over time, stand testament to the ever-changing spiritual and religious landscape. They encapsulate the adaptation of new ideas and the amalgamation of different modes of expression into these venerable representations. Monument building becomes a tangible expression of these shifts in faith, providing a visual narrative of the region's spiritual metamorphosis.

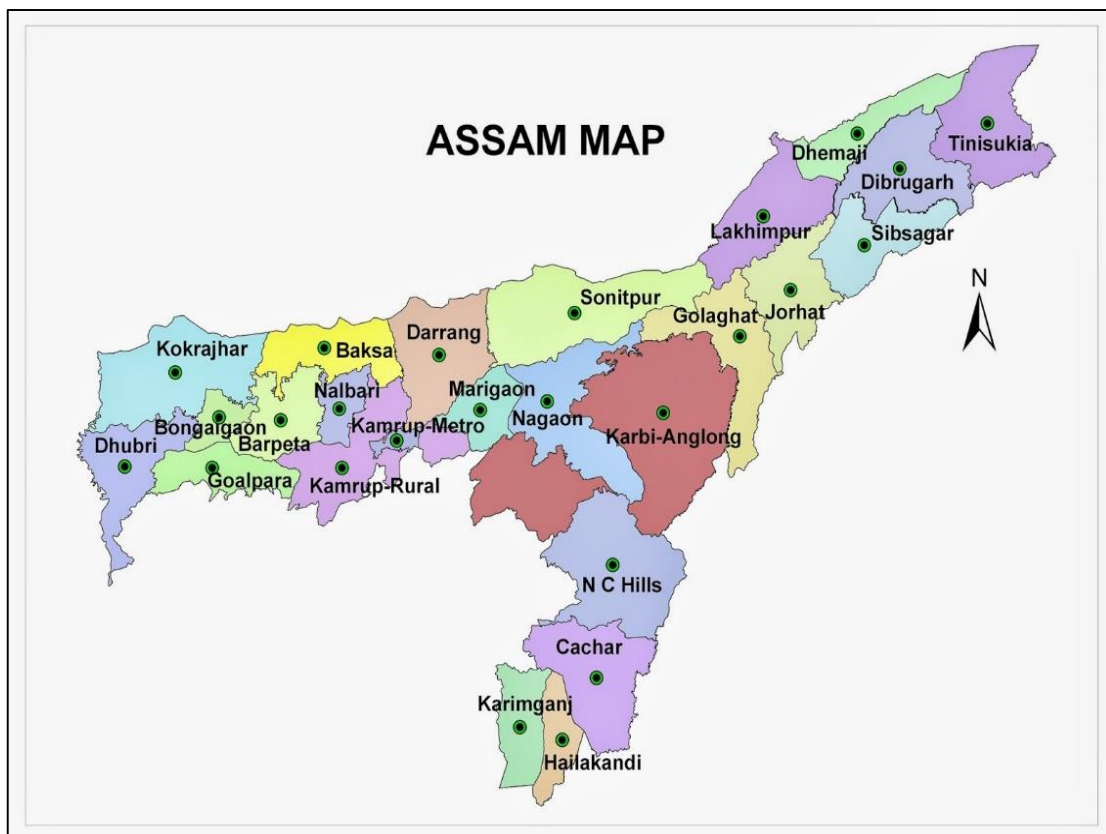
In this context, this study delves into the iconography of Brahmanical deities in Assam, offering a nuanced exploration through a regional lens. A succinct overview of the landscape, political history, and monumental landmarks of the study region has been provided to illuminate the intricate interplay between these elements and the evolution of iconic representations. Through this comprehensive examination, we aim to unravel the profound connections between the socio-religious history of Assam and the enduring legacy of its Brahmanical deities.

Geographical Delimitations: The Locational Parameters and Landscape of Assam

Situated in the northeastern part of India, the state of Assam occupies a strategic position between latitudes $28^{\circ}18'$ and 24° N and longitudes $89^{\circ}46'$ and $97^{\circ} 4'$ E. Encompassing a sprawling expanse of 78,523 square kilometers, Assam is characterized by a diverse and geographically intricate terrain.

To the north, Assam is flanked by the sub-Himalayan ranges of Bhutan, along with the tribal territories of Aka, Dafala, Miri, Abar, and Mishmis hills. The eastern border is demarcated by the imposing Patkai range, while to the south-east, the Naga Hills form a natural boundary, extending towards Burma. Moving southwards, the Lushai Hills define the southern frontier. On the south-west, the Tippera Hills and Mymen-sign delineate the border, while the western boundary is marked by the Garo Hills and the Miner Sonkasa, serving as the demarcation line between Assam and Bengal.

This geographical configuration not only imparts unique topographical features to Assam but also underscores its strategic positioning within the larger Indian subcontinent. Understanding the intricacies of Assam's location and geographical attributes is fundamental to appreciating the richness of its cultural, historical, and environmental tapestry.



Map 1: Map of Assam

The Geographical Significance of the Brahmaputra River in Assam: A Catalyst for Physical and Cultural Distinctions

The Brahmaputra River stands as a pivotal force in shaping the geographical and physiographical distribution of Assam, coursing its way from Sadia in the northeast to Dhubri in the west. This majestic river, in its meandering journey, delineates Assam into three distinct parts:

- i) Upper Assam or Uttarakula
- ii) Lower Assam or Daksinakula
- iii) The Majuli Island in the Brahmaputra

These physical divisions have played a fundamental role in the emergence of distinct ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups within Assam. The hills, occupied by tribal communities, and the plains have become distinctive realms, fostering unique identities among their respective inhabitants. The inhabitants of Assam, from ancient times, have comprised proto-Mongoloid, proto-Australoid, and Tibeto-Burman people, with various tribes migrating through diverse routes.

The mountainous terrain of Assam has been a crucible for the growth of civilization and the development of diverse cultures. Conversely, the plain regions, predominantly the Brahmaputra valley, have become densely populated, housing a mosaic of ethnic groups. Central to the economic lifestyle of Assam is agriculture, with the alluvial soil and the nurturing embrace of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries rendering the land exceptionally fertile for agricultural pursuits. This intricate interplay of geography and culture underscores the multifaceted tapestry that defines the dynamic landscape of Assam.

Climate and Etymology: Unraveling the Meteorological Patterns and Historical Nomenclature of Assam

Climate:

Situated along the trajectory of the southwestern monsoon, Assam experiences substantial rainfall throughout the year, creating a humid environment that characterizes the region.

Origin of the Name Assam:

In antiquity, Assam bore the appellation of Pragjyotisa. P.C. Choudhury contends that interpreting Pragjyotisa as a place associated with 'eastern astrology' finds validation in references linking it to solar cults and planetary worship (1966). This nomenclature is echoed in epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (Barpujari 1990).

Another historical epithet for Assam was 'Kamarupa.' P.C. Choudhury posits an Austric or Alpine origin for the terms 'Kamarupa' and 'Kamakhya' (1941). B.K. Kakati suggests that 'Kamarupa' signifies a novel cult and reflects a rechristening of the land (1941). The Gopatha Brahmana hints at a connection between the cult of magic and sorcery with the Austric-Alpine culture of Assam (Choudhury 1966). The Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta marks the earliest epigraphic mention of 'Kamarupa.'

The contemporary name 'Assam' derives from the Anglicized form of the Assamese term 'Asama.' The Shan invaders, initially known as 'Asam' or 'Asan,' potentially a derivation from the Ahoms, later referred to themselves as Tai. B.K. Kakati suggests that 'Asama,' meaning peerless or unparalleled, could be a Sanskritization of an earlier term like 'Acham' (1941). This linguistic evolution hints at the Shan people attributing the name 'Assam' to the region.

A Comprehensive Overview of the Political History and Religious Affiliations of Assam's Ruling Dynasties

Political History:

The annals of Assam's political history are shrouded in obscurity prior to the Varman dynasty, which ascended to power around the fourth century A.D. While numerous inscriptions and literary records shed light on the Varman era, the antecedent Naraka dynasty, ruled by Asuras, is veiled in mythological narratives and oral traditions. Legend has it that Narakasura, the progenitor of the Asura dynasty, established himself in Pragjyotisa after defeating Ghataka (Choudhury, 1966). Bhagadatta, a key figure in the Mahabharata war, hailed from this enigmatic Naraka lineage, referred to as the King of Kirata. However, the details of this dynasty remain elusive. Some scholars, drawing upon references to Kirata in the Mahabharata, suggest a potential Mongoloid association with ancient Assam (Kakati, 1948).

The Varman dynasty, inaugurated by Pusyavarman in the fourth century A.D., played a pivotal role in Assam's political landscape. Mahendravarman, a prominent ruler, curtailed Gupta influence during his reign (A.D. 450-485), achieving territorial expansion into Southeast Bengal.

Subsequent kings like Bhuti Varmana and Bhaskar Varmana (600-650 A.D.) furthered the dynasty's influence, forming alliances with Harshavardhan and contributing to the growth of civilization. Bhaskar Varman, a devout follower of Lord Siva, facilitated the Chinese Mission led by Wang Hiu-en-Tsoe in 648 A.D. His reign marked a zenith for the Varman dynasty, concluding with his demise in 650 A.D.

Following the Varman era, the Salastambha dynasty, with Harshavarman as a notable ruler (725-45 A.D.), emerged as a prominent force. The subsequent rulers, such as Harjaravarmana, Vanamala, Jayamala, and Balavarman, continued the legacy. The decline of the Salastambha dynasty paved the way for Brahmapala, ushering in the Pala dynasty of Bengal in Assam's history around 1000 A.D. Flourishing art and sculptural styles, indicative of the East Indian school of art, characterized this period.

Rise of the Ahom Dynasty:

In the thirteenth century A.D., the Ahom dynasty, an offshoot of the Tai or Shan race, migrated to Assam, establishing their kingdom in 1228 A.D. Their rule endured for almost six centuries, marked by successful resistance against Mughal invasions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Ahoms' reign persisted until their subjugation by the British through the "Treaty of Yandaboo" on 24th February 1826 A.D.

Archaeological Antiquities and Religious History:

The exploration of Assam's antiquities commenced with early British administrators and military personnel accidentally encountering ancient remnants. Lt. Col's F Hannay, Captain E.T. Dalton, and Major H.H. Godwin-Austin were among the pioneers who documented these discoveries. The first archaeological survey, conducted by T. Bloch during 1902-07, laid the foundation for systematic exploration.

Excavations at sites like Da-Parvatiya, Surya Pahar, Vadakaguri, Mikirati, and Ambari unearthed a plethora of historical artifacts. Notable findings include the stone door frame in Da-Parvatiya from the sixth century A.D., indicative of Gupta period sculptural art, and the rock-cut Brahmanical and Jain sculptures in Surya Pahar, showcasing the coexistence of three religions—Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. Religiously, Assam witnessed a diverse tapestry. Megalithic sites in North Cachar indicated early religious practices, transitioning from fertility cult and ancestor worship to phallic worship and headhunting during the Megalithic period. The arrival of Brahmanical influences, especially during the Gupta and Post-Gupta periods, saw a confluence of philosophies between Brahmanism and tribal traditions.

Saktism, with its diverse manifestations of goddess worship, found prominence, notably at the Kamakhya temple, a significant center of Sakti and Tantrik worship. Vaishnavism, centered on Lord Vishnu, gained traction, with a neo-Vaishnavism surge during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D. Buddhism's prevalence remains contentious, with evidence in sites like Surya Pahar and Pancharatna suggesting Buddhist remains, including votive stupas.

CONCLUSION

In unraveling the religious tapestry of Assam, the dominant threads of Shaivism and Vaishnavism emerge prominently, underscored by the multitude of temples and icons discovered. The abundance of such religious artifacts attests to the pervasive influence of these faiths in shaping the spiritual landscape of the region. Notably, the prevalence of temples dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu reveals their paramount role in the religious life of Assam. However, a fascinating aspect lies in the absence of synchronous images such as Ardhanariswara, Naranarayan, and Sivaparvati, commonly found in contemporary temples across the country. This absence hints at a distinctive feature in Assam's religious evolution, suggesting a less symbiotic relationship among deities and a more independent development within their respective spheres.

The intricate interplay between political history and religious affiliations becomes evident, with the dynasties influencing the religious ethos of the region. While Buddhism held sway in neighboring states like Bihar and Bengal, its impact in Assam appears less pronounced, except for exceptional cases such as the Surya Pahar area, where Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism coexisted harmoniously. The possibility of Assam serving as a conduit for interaction between mainland Buddhism and centers in China and Southeast Asia remains intriguing, although the nature and intensity of this participation remain obscured in the Buddhist remains of the state.

Crucially, the influence of Tantrikism, particularly centered at the Kamakhya temple in Kamrup, emerges as a noteworthy cultural force. This center of Tantrikism not only shaped the contemporary Brahmanical religion within the state but also extended its influence beyond regional boundaries.

In conclusion, Assam's rich political history and religious affiliations reflect a nuanced interplay of dynasties, cultural shifts, and religious evolution, each leaving an indelible mark on the region's multifaceted tapestry. This concise exploration of icons and the nature of iconography in the depiction of gods and goddesses serves as a window into the religious activities and philosophical underpinnings of the people of Assam throughout the ages. Each icon tells a tale of the evolving spiritual consciousness and diverse religious practices that have defined the cultural landscape of this region over the course of its rich history.

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