

## Temples of the Sun-God in Early Assam

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### I

Temple demonstrates the will of the community and thereby shows the religious condition of the period. It represents in concrete form the prevailing religious consciousness of the people.<sup>1</sup> Temples are considered as the symbolic representation of God. Temple-building was regarded as a sacred act and meant to enhance one's fame and renown in this world and one's eligibility for a place in Heaven. "One wishing to enter the world attained by performing sacrifices and sinking wells and the like, should build a temple, whereby one should get the fruit of both."<sup>2</sup> The Hindu temple is a *tirtha* made by art.<sup>3</sup> There was no scope for a temple in the solar religion of the Vedic tradition because of the worship of the atmospheric Sun by means of oblations and libations in the sacred fire. However, terms indicative of the temple start occurring in the *Grihyasutras*.<sup>4</sup> The cult of *bhakti*, which inundated India after the 5th-4th centuries B.C., was responsible for the adoption of the temple-tradition.<sup>5</sup>

As regards the Sun-cult, we do not find any reference to a temple of the Sun in the orthodox literature before the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D. For the first time, there are references to a Sun-temple established by *Samba* at *Mulasthan* (modern Multan) in the *Samba*, *Bhavisya* and many other later Puranas.<sup>6</sup> The temple of Multan may have been built in the Saka-Kushana period (2nd cent. B.C.-2nd cent. A.D.). The tradition of public worship of the Sun in temples was introduced in India by the Magas as is attested by the literary evidences.<sup>7</sup> From the archaeological evidences, it is clear that many temples with the sun-icons may have been constructed in India under the influence of the Magi Priests.<sup>8</sup> The Puranas mentioned above also refer to other temples at Konark and Kalapriya established by the Magas.<sup>9</sup> Many Gupta inscriptions also refer to Sun-temples.<sup>10</sup> Thus, by the Gupta period the temple tradition came to be incorporated in the Sun-cult by the orthodox Hindus too. From the same period onwards, the Sun-temples also came to be built in bricks and stones. That is why we start getting archaeological evidences of Sun-temples from the Gupta period onwards.<sup>11</sup>

### II

Sun-worship prevailed in Assam from very early times, which is indicated by the reference to the very name *Pragjyotisa* of ancient Assam in the *Grihyasutras* and the Epics as well as by the nomenclatures like Navagraha and Sri-Suryapahar. The earliest reference to *Pragjyotisa* as a centre of sun-worship is found in the *Grihyasutras*. The *Markandeya Purana* gives details about sun worship in *Guruvishala* in *Kamarupa*. Of the sixty-four important images of Surya in India as referred to in the *Skanda Purana* three existed in Assam. The *Kalika Purana* refers to Sri Surya Pahar in Goalpara as the perpetual

abode of the sun and the worship of the Navagrahas at the *Chitrasaila*. According to Taranatha, the people of *Kamarupa* were sun-worshippers before the introduction of Buddhism. The *Adicarita* refers in details to the prevalence of Sun-worship in early Assam. There are also a few references to the deity in epigraphs, though with no definite invocation. Above all, a wide-spread solar cult is attested to by a good number of Surya images found throughout Assam, which belong to a period from A.D. 6<sup>th</sup> to A.D. 12<sup>th</sup> century, particularly A.D. 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### III

The reference to a sun-temple in Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa is found in the *Brihatsamhita*, based on the geography of the *Parasara Tantra* of the 1st century A.D.<sup>12</sup> Kamarupa is mentioned in the *Markandeya Purana* as an especially appropriate place for the worship of the Sun. The *Purana* in question gives details of the worship of the Sun at *Guruvisala* in Kamarupa (109/59-61). In narrating the account of King Rajyavardhana, the *Markandeya Purana* (109) states that when this king began to grow old, he retired to the forest to perform austerities. Seeing this, the Brahmanas of his kingdom, who were very much attached to him, started austerities for propitiating the Sun to get the king restored to youth. Then a *Gandharva* named Sudaman appeared and advised the Brahmanas to go in haste to the forest of Guruvisala in the very mountain of Kamarupa and perform their propitiation of the sun to obtain all their desires. Accordingly, the Brahmanas proceeded to that forest in Kamarupa and beheld there the sacred and beautiful shrine of the sun. By continued austerities, they succeeded in propitiating the sun and obtained from him a boon prolonging the life of Rajyavardhana.<sup>13</sup> Thus *Markandeya Purana* (58) informs us of a sun temple in *Pragjyotis-Kamarupa*, whose fame was spread far and wide.

The modern town of Tezpur contains some of the most ancient and best remains of temples and buildings. While digging for Deputy Commissioner's buildings, a huge lintel (118 cm X 51 cm) of the principal entrance to an enormous temple was found.<sup>14</sup> The size of the lintel is enough to determine the size of the door frame and consequently of the principal entrance to the sanctum. The lintel (*sirapatti*) has three raised panels, one in the centre and one on each side; each of them is divided into a large niche (*khattaka*) in the centre with a smaller one on either side. The panel on the left contains a standing figure of Brahma in the central niche with an attendant on either side. The central panel is occupied by a beautiful figure of the Sun-god. The deity is seated cross-legged, holding lotus flowers in both of his hands. He has two attendants in seated posture; the one on his left holds a pen and inkpot and the other on his right carries a staff of the orthodox description. The attendants are perhaps *Danda* and *Pingala*. However, the panel on the extreme right contains a standing figure of Siva with an attendant on each of the side niches. The space between these raised panels is divided into six niches, three to the left of the central panel and three to the right. They contain six figures, which represent some *grahas* (planets). All these niches are separated from each other by a round pilaster (*laghustambha*).

According to the general practice in Hindu temples, the central niche or panel of the lintel of the stone-door-frame of the sanctum is generally occupied by the presiding deity of

the temple. The lintel of the ruined temple bears the figure of Surya in the middle. Also it bears some Navagraha *murtis*. The nature of the representation of the deities thus shows that the gigantic temple was dedicated to the Sun-god.<sup>15</sup> And this huge sun temple existed in the locality. This finds commendation from an inscribed expression ('*aditya-bhattaraka*') on a piece of stone, evidently from the basement of the temple.

The sill of the door-frame of the same temple is also of gigantic dimensions and shows a vase in the centre, flanked by two lions. Each end is occupied by a niche containing a male and a female, flanked by a smaller and narrower niche on a recessed corner, containing a single human figure. The vase and the retreating lion motif are commonly met with in the *silalis* of the pre-Ahom ruined temples of Assam. It seems from the *sirapatti* and *silali* that the height of the *dvara* could not have been less than 438 cm. R. D. Banerji further conjectures that if the height of the *dvara* of the main entrance to the *garbhagrha* was 438 cm, the height of the *jangha* must have been from 652 c.m. to 815 cm. In that case, the total height of the temple up to *sikhara* was considerably over 3260 c.m. The temple, according to K. L. Barua, belonged to A.D. 9th century and the lofty ruined temple might have been the Himalaya-like one.<sup>16</sup> However, R.D. Choudhury thinks that the architectural piece referred to above belong to 9th-10th century.<sup>17</sup>

Sri Surya Pahar about 14 kms. east from Goalpara Town is, according to *Kalika Purana*, the perpetual abode of the sun. Ruins of several old temples are scattered all over the hill. There are relics of Surya temples, including those of Visnu, Siva and Devi.<sup>18</sup> At Sri Surya Pahar there is a tank to the right bank of which is a small modern sun temple. This temple enshrines a circular stone tablet, four and a half feet in circumference, with carved images representing the twelve *Adityas*. It may be also called an *Adityachakra*.<sup>19</sup> Here Kasyapa who is often called Prajapati or creator of beings (Brahma)<sup>20</sup> is shown seated in a cross-legged posture in the middle. Around him are seen in same posture miniature figures of twelve *Adityas*,<sup>21</sup> sons of *Aditi*, wife of Kasyapa. Each of the twelve miniature figures seated cross-legged is depicted one-faced and two-armed holding some object, possibly lotuses. The *Adityachakra* in question was possibly used as a ceiling slab of a temple.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, that site has old bricks and brickbats of the pre-Ahom style scattered around. In many ruined temple sites of the pre-Ahom age, a *Visva-padma*, i.e., a huge lotus inside a circle on a huge slab of stone used as ceiling slab of the original temple is seen. It is likely that the present *Adityachakra* slab was used as ceiling slab of such a temple instead of the common *Visva-padma* motif. If so, this piece of *Aditya-chakra*, (not earlier than 9th-10th century A.D. on stylistic consideration) was used as a ceiling slab of Sun temple after which the Sri Surya Pahar might have been designated

Sun worship was, no doubt, popular in this locality in the pre-Ahom period. We find a stone *dvara-sirapatti* showing some solar deities, a *dvara-sakha* depicting some *avatars* of Visnu and a *dehali*<sup>23</sup> – all dug out from a temple site at Marnoi, about a mile east of Sri Surya Pahar. The middle seated cross-legged figure on the *sirapatti* with traces of lotus on either side possibly represents Surya. On either side of the figure, six cross-legged, seated miniature figures possibly representing twelve *Adityas* are seen, each holding lotuses in both hands. Surely, the *dvara* belonged to some ruined temple in the same locality dedicated

to some solar deity. Stylistically, these architectural pieces may belong to c. 10th century or so.

Epigraphic reference to sun temple is also not wanting in Assam. In Line 51 of the Guwahati grant issued in the 8<sup>th</sup> year of Indrapala's reign (roughly mid-11<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) occurs the expression *âditya-bhappâraka*,<sup>24</sup> which Hoernle<sup>25</sup> takes to mean "Holy Aditya" or in other words, the Sun-god. *Bhattaraka* is actually a name of the Sun god himself. Vidyavinoda has opined that the word *Tathagata* mentioned in the above grant might refer to King Ratnapala; from the text itself it appears likely that the king himself made a donation of land for the purpose of a Sun-temple near which the land of present gift lies.<sup>26</sup> The word '*Tathagata*' leads N.N. Dasgupta to infer the existence of a Surya temple.<sup>27</sup> The same word occurs also in the Puspabhadra grant of Dharmapala.

The enormous architectural ruins of the Madan Kamadeva temple in Kamarupa appear to be the same of a temple of the sun-god.<sup>28</sup> The sculptures of the temple resemble as in the architectural pattern of Orissa in the thirteenth century. A standing sun-image - made of black stone, two meters in height and clad in *udichyavesa* (Northerner's dress) - has been discovered from Galchepa of Gahpur Mouza in Tezpur district. It is thought that it must have been installed in a sun-temple.<sup>29</sup> A few years back a beautiful Surya-image was discovered at Chalachal in front of the Nehru Stadium. Probably in the elevated portion of land there was a temple in which the image was installed.<sup>30</sup>

The Navagraha temple near the Kamakhya temple deserves mention. The temple, which is surrounded by a big wall, consists of a large circular room where the nine *grahas* are placed. The *grahas* are represented by nine cylindrical pieces of black stone, each one of which has been erected on a wide elevated base. The central pillar is supposed to represent Surya, (the Sun) and around it, there are the other eight planets, Chandra, Mangala, Rahu, Sani, Ketu, Brihaspati, Buddha and Sukra.<sup>31</sup> Probably, the *Grahas* are symbolically represented by their numbers at this place. This temple must have been built before the definite reduction of the Kalika Purana.<sup>32</sup>

At Negriting or Negheriting, some 17 miles from Jorhat, was a centre of sun-worship. However, at this place, Sun god had perhaps a subordinate position. In the campus of a big Siva temple of the 11<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> century A.D., a subsidiary shrine has been dedicated to Him.<sup>33</sup> Other subsidiary shrines surrounding the main temple are dedicated to Visnu, Devi (Sakti) and Ganesa. This temple is of the *Pancayatana*-type, constructed in many parts of India to show regard to all the main gods of Hindu pantheon.<sup>34</sup> Every shrine has a separate portico attached to it. The smaller or subsidiary shrines resemble the central one in all the architectural details. Built on a small hillock on a grand scale, the temple in its vertical elevation consists of the basement, the *garbhagriha*, and the curvilinear *sikhara* with tri-dent at the top. The middle portion of the temple outside contains a number of niches to house some graceful and exquisitely beautiful sculptures.<sup>35</sup>

#### IV

The *Brahma Purana* prescribes Sun worship for all the castes - *Brahmanas*, *Ksatriyas*, *Vaisyas* and *Sudras* - to get all the worldly and non-worldly pleasures.<sup>36</sup> No

restriction because of caste is imposed on Sun worship in the *Brihaddharma Purana* too.<sup>37</sup> Religious privileges were extended to women and men of lower castes by the Magas as well.<sup>38</sup> As is well known, Sun worship did not receive royal patronage in Assam as elsewhere. But, large numbers of Sun-images in stone from different parts of early Assam speak in favour of the existence of a good number of temples for the divinity. Perhaps most of these temples were built by the rich people as well as the residents.

According to *Bhavisya* and some other Puranas that *Samba*, a son of *Krisna*, brought the Magas from Sakadvipa to appoint them as the priests of Sun-temples. Further, it is expressly laid down in the *Brihat-samhita* (Ch. 59, V.19) that it was the Magas who were entitled to install ceremonially the images of Surya in temples. Assam abounds in images of Surya belonging to the mediaeval and earlier periods. It is presumable that the descendants of Maga Brahmanas settled in large numbers also in this tract. The Brahmanas in Assam are divided into two categories: *Surya-vipra* and *Chandra-vipra*. The *surya-vipras* or *daivika / daivajna brahmanas*, who are also engaged in the study of astrology, looks after as priests the sun-temples as well as the Navagraha-temples such as the one Chitrasaila.<sup>39</sup> Hopefully, there was no exception to it in the past too.

Although no Sun-temples of great antiquity exist in Assam, we get some idea about their general features from the close examination of some extant sun temples in other parts of India. The sun-temples of ancient Assam, which should have belonged to the northern style of Indian architecture, may have been divided into not more than two distinct types: (i) The *bhadra, pida* or tiered type, in which the roof over the sanctum consists of a series of gradually receding tiered stages crowned by the usual finials including the *amalaka*. (ii) The *rekha* or the *sikhara* type characterized by a high curvilinear tower and the usual crowning elements. According to the *Bhavisya Purana*, the entrance of a Sun-temple should face the east<sup>40</sup>; if not possible, it should face the west. The *agnihotragriha* is an integral part of the Sun-temples.<sup>41</sup> They have usually *pradaksina-marga*. These characteristics, at least a few if not all, might have been present in the Sun-temples of early Assam. Sometimes the image of the Sun god was installed in a temple along with those of other Brahmanical deities as well. It is not also rare that the shrine of other divinity had been built up just beside or very close to the temple of Sun god. These developments came to take place either out of the growth of the *Panchayatana Puja* or of the social compulsion of harmonious co-existence for a better survival of the cults at stake.

The Sun-temple at Sri Surya Pahar has still a tank.<sup>42</sup> This tank is most probably a *Surya-kunda*, which is sacred to the Sun god. The presence of a *Surya-kunda* became quite common in classical and mediaeval Hindu India.<sup>43</sup> and was an integral part of the Sun-temple complex. The *Rigveda* (10.142.8) emphasizes the need of digging ponds or tanks for having full-blown lotuses (i.e. a sun-symbol standing for the creative force) besides for the supply of pure drinking water (*Rigveda*, 9.110.5). It is said in the Great Epic that the digging of tanks is very agreeable and beneficial and is "gratifying" to Surya himself and rewarded are those who dig tanks.<sup>44</sup> The presence of big and deep-water source like river or pond is quite significant. It is known from the legend of *Brahma-hatya* and consequent Sun worship by Yajnavalka and his pupils<sup>45</sup> that it was enjoined for those guilty of sin to have a bath

before going to worship the solar divinity. Surya has been worshipped from time immemorial for removal of diseases.<sup>46</sup> In addition, water happens to be the most important of the eight offerings to god Surya. Such a pressing necessity of water in Sun worship explains the location of the solar shrines on the riverbank or the digging of tanks very close to the temple of the Sun god.

## V

In dealing with the Sun temple in early Assam, there is an utter scarcity of material all through the period. Almost no solar shrine of great antiquity exists today. All that is possible to do is to piece together every bit of information from such other sources as inscriptions, literary works, sculpture and extant monuments elsewhere, in order to reconstruct the history of the Sun temples in Assam. A cause for this almost obliteration may be the soft alluvial formation of the land and its damp climate, but also the nature of the building materials. These last were usually mud, bamboo, reeds, wood and fragile but indigenous products. Many temples that might have escaped decay because of the more durable nature of their materials were deliberately razed to the ground by foreign invaders because of their iconoclastic zeal.

Large numbers of Sun images discovered from different parts of Assam are in them sufficient evidences that in ancient Assam there were several temples for their proper enshrinement. Temple came to be an important feature of Sun worship from the Gupta period, which witnessed the increased use of stone and preferably brick in the construction. The roof of the Sun-temple was generally of the shape of stepped pyramids crowned by an *amalaka*. The solar shrines with *agnihotragriha* faced towards east. They were mostly built up on the bank of rivers or elsewhere with a pond (*Surya-kunda*) in front. Thus the sun-temples in Assam not only corroborate the wide-spread of the solar cult there, but also point to the architectural richness of the province.

## Notes and References

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