CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The overall impression we have gained from the on-the-spot study of the temple architecture of Assam is that Assam had a glorious past in raising temples. It is true that it did not have a formative stage as clear and resourceful as Orissa or central India. The available materials enable us to trace the style of the temple architecture in Assam from the rise of the Imperial Guptas, except the later medieval period, which is also not without lacunae, the entire architectural history of Assam is a tale of incoherent achievements and scattered components of stone buildings, stylistically assignable to a period ranging from the Guptas to the beginning of the later medieval era. Lying in abundance throughout the Brahmaputra valley, these ruins speak of high watermarks of proficiency of a bygone plastic tradition. But non-existence of a single structure intact from this period poses an unsurmountable problem in the authentication of the actual type. Nevertheless, the surviving heaps of ruins and relics contain evidence which enables us, with appreciable amount of surety, to conjecture the style or type that took shape in this region.

Our foregoing examination of the available source materials shows that the origin of the Assam temple architecture is yet to be unveiled. We have nothing to show that
the temple architecture in Assam originated with the back-drop of a highly developed impermanent architecture with timber and straw as its basic constructional components. Our starting point coincides with what was standardised in case of Indian architecture. The earliest record of a temple has been mentioned in the undated Umashala rock inscription of circa 5th century A.D. Incidentally, this is also the earliest record of any architecture in the State. The inscription speaks of a cave temple, but the site points to the existence of a natural cave which is now found disturbed. It appears that this natural cave was improved to be used as a temple like the cave temples at Udaigiri, the earliest example of the Gupta temples. It may be mentioned that in the beginning the Gupta temple architecture was confined only to the excavation and improvement of caves to be used as temples. That the Umashala temple came under the influence of the Gupta architecture could be further conceived from the use of the Gupta script in the inscription found there.

We have nothing to show that Assam in the beginning developed an independent type of architecture. Rather, we have convincing proof to establish that the temple architecture in Assam developed as an offshoot of the Gupta architecture and whatever was standardised in the Gupta mainland found its way to this region. The earliest architectural evidence

1. EI, XXXI(II), p. 68.
in Assam bears the Gupta impress. Apart from the cave temple of Kāśīkhyā, we have noticed the prototype of the Bhumi-ra floral scrolls of 4th-5th century A.D. in the Kāśīkhyā ruins. The Da-Parvatiya temple, the only example of a fully developed Gupta temple in Assam, has striking similarity with the Gupta temple-plans of Bhurjan, Nashna-Kuthara and Deogarh. Nay, the temple door-frame attached to this Assam temple has been acclaimed as one of the finest of its class of the Gupta period. Thus, in the absence of a formative phase of architectural activities namely in Assam before the Umāchala and the Da-Parvatiya temples we take the architectural activities of the State of the Gupta origin as an outcome of the close collaboration between the Varmans and the Guptas.

The Varmans of Assam enjoyed a continuous rule from 4th to 7th century A.D. On the other hand the Gupta rule witnessed disruption and internal dissection since the end of Kumar Gupta's rule in A.D.455. It is, therefore, possible that while the art activities started by the Guptas suffered set-backs in their own land due to internal turmoil and disorder, it continued to be uniformly practiced in Kāśīrūpam for much a longer period under the active patronage of the

3. SANN, pl.XXIII.
4. BASN, pp. 36 ff.
5. UTA, p. 45.
6. HCPA, pp. 128ff.
7. CA, pp. 25 ff.
stable ruling dynasty. This time factor, in all probability, is the secret of the unique standard achieved in the making of the temple door-frame at Da-Parvatiya.

The dark period intervening the rule of the Varmans and the Sālastambhaśas was short lived. The change over was set as disastrous as after the Guptas. The art activities in Assam started by the Varmans appear to have continued uninterruptedly in the reign of the Sālastambhaśas. It is found that certain features of the Gupta temple architecture continued to be adopted for fairly a long time in the state.

The Kālpavrśika motif appears to be one of the most popular motifs of Kāmarūpa from the 7th to the 12th century A.D. During the 7th and the 8th century A.D., it was used on the door-lintels alone and with the passage of time it was more popularly used in the centre of the door-sills. The earlier examples of its use not only gave it a prominent position, but also a divine status, earlier by conspicuously enshrining it within decorative arches, single or multifoiled, or putting it as a finial on the top of an arch. The origin of this motif has been assigned to the Buddhist faith.

9. BI, pp. 227 ff. The origin of the Kālpavrśika does not relate to the tree-workshop, but to the Bodhivṛkṣa under which the Buddha attained his enlightenment. The Kālpavrśika as a motif in the Hindu architecture must have been derived from the Buddhist reliefs.
It is, possible that its enshrinement on the lintels has a link with Buddhism, the popularity of which could not be ruled out in Kāmarūpa during the Salastambha period.\(^\text{10}\)

It has already been mentioned that the architectural activities of the Brahmaputra valley could be systematically traced from the 5th to the 10th century A.D. only in and around Tenspur, as the other centres of development are badly disturbed. Our investigations have revealed the following major trends of the building activities in the Tenspur area: (i) They were undertaken in a circuitous route from west to east with the Brahmaputra as its diameter, the earliest and the latest points of developments being the diametrically opposite points of Da-Parvatiyā in the west and Bannupahar in the east; (ii) the condition of the sites chronologically change from alluvial plains of Da-Parvatiyā to harder elevation with its climax in the selection of the rocky hill-top of the Bannupahar; and (iii) with the passage of time the larger and taller buildings were undertaken: the smallest and the largest sanctums being respectively of Da-Parvatiyā and Bannupahar.

These trends must have been governed by two major factors, such as, (i) the change of course of the turbulent river Bharali, a tributary of the Brahmaputra, and (ii) the bearing power of soil. We have already mentioned that popul-

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10. The Buddhist stūpas are found in the 7th-8th century A.D. sites of Pancharatna and Surya-Pahar of the Goalpara District.
arity of the Hindu gods and goddesses during the Gupta period caused erection of temples in populous areas of the plains. In Assam Da-Parvatiyā was selected as a site for the construction of the earliest fully developed Gupta temple. The site was not only nearer to the Brahmaputra, but was probably situated on the western bank of the oldest course of the river Bharali, a tributary of the Brahmaputra. This river, now flowing into the Brahmaputra about two kilometres east of Tezpur, has changed its course several times. This change of the course of the river has affected the building activities of the region. It appears that the builders were compelled to shift their centres of activities from the alluvium of Da-Parvatiyā to elevated plains of Majgaon because of the change of the course of the Bharali. Though the builders were faced with some natural hindrance their craft went ahead with development and incorporation of new techniques and ideas. As this growth was marked by accentuation of height, which involved larger and heavier structural members, the river built plains, such as that of Majgaon proved unfit for erection of stone-masonry structures. In its next phase, therefore, the modern court-building premise in the heart of Tezpur with its elevated rocky outcrop was selected for the construction of the temples. Incidentally, the river Bharali was flowing at that time along the western side of this site, the dead course of which is still seen nearby and

11. GTA, p. 28.
part of which has been converted into a number of ponds, locally known as the Podum Pukhuri, Bar Pukhuri, etc. When the hard soil of the court-building also proved a failure due to subsidence of the heavy walls and columns, the truncated hill-top of the rocky Bannimpahar in the east of Terpur was preferred for construction. This shifting probably synchronized with the deviation of the river Bharali towards the Bhairebi Pahar on the east of the Bannimpahar. Here we find not only the largest of the structural members of Terpur, but also the largest edifice with its megalithic floor hewn out of an enormous rock originally standing as a precipitous mass at the site.

Our investigations of the post-Supta architectural developments in Assam bear out that they were more akin to central India than Orissa. We have depended upon the material evidence to show that the construction of the Assamese Nilkara of this period was domical like that of Khajuraho, and not pyramidal like that of Orissa.

During the Pālas of Kāmarupa, the architectural trends appear to have much changed in comparison to their predecessors. The two main features developed during this period were: (i) the temples grew smaller in stature but became more numerous, and (ii) they were studded with profuse ornamentation. Unlike the previous period no more experiments appear to have been made with the geometric shape of the ground-plan and only the ratha type dominated the
architecture. Such temples are seen in ruins in place like Madan-Kamāleva, Pingaleśvar, and Chaygaun in the Kamrup District; Baman, Jorukhuri and Barua Hawli in the Jorhat District; Matharberi and several other places of the Dihing region of the Nagaon District; and Numaligarh of Sibsagar District. Numerosity and decorative profusion of this time not only indicate the climax of stone-craft in Kāmarupa, but also show the popularity of the Hindu divinities. Emphasis on erotic sculptures as an element of external decoration on these temples may imply popularity of the Tāntric cult in this region. The compilation of a few Tantras in Kāmarupa during this period and the discovery of at least one copper-plate charter of a king of Kāmarupa of this period showing Tāntric inclination12 corroborate our views.

Use of a raised platform for the erection of a temple complex was not popular in Assam. Kamāleva pīṭha or jagati in the north Indian terminology, this feature is very common with the Khajuraho temples, but is almost absent in the Orissan architecture. Its earliest use in Assam is seen in the Ganesa Mandir of Abhayapuri of the 8th-9th century A.D., which is now in ruins. The only other example of its use from the pre-Khas period is in the largest edifices of the Rajbari group of temples at Jogiān. During the 15th century A.D., the Kochari architecture of the district of Cachar showed some fascination for its use in a few brick-built temples.

but they do not appear to be of any significance.

In its medieval experiments with architectural innovations, Assam, in addition to the common Indian practices, appears to have introduced certain geometry of planning not practised elsewhere. In spite of the dilapidation of the early medieval temples, a few limited instances are there where we could notice such an attempt. They point to the use of shapes unusual in the context of the Indian architecture. In the planning of the ground-plan of a temple, the Indian architects modelled it out of a square. It does not, however, mean that the method of triangulation was not known to them, but the graphic plan of a temple did not include triangle as a major component. There is at least one temple in Assam surviving from the aforesaid period with its lower half intact which exhibits triangulation as the basis of its planning. Known as the Manikarneswara temple and located at North Gauhati, this 11th-12th century A.D. temple stands on a stellate plinth with a twelve sided base over it. The plinth here is done by arranging proportionately two concentric equilateral triangles, while the dodecagonal temple plan has been brought about by joining the vertices of four concentric equilateral triangles, equal to one another but smaller in dimensions than the triangles of the plinth. Geometry has been very successfully applied in certain building components also. A peculiar wedge-shaped stone piece is often

13. LAI, pp. 3 ff, 44.
met with in the early medieval stone ruins of Assam. On examination it was revealed that it formed a segment of a toothed circle, obviously the Kusuma of a temple. An interesting observation made in this connexion is that the circle of the Kusuma of all temples of Assam from the 5th century A.D. (as borne out by the ruins of Tespur) to the 12th century A.D. (as borne out by the ruins of Madan-Kamdeva), contain invariably thirty-two teeth with one tooth or more teeth in each wedge-shaped component. This number not only appears much more in case of the Orissa or Maharastra temples, it also differs in total number from temple to temple in these regions.

It is generally believed that the sculptural developments of the Brahmaputra valley up to the 13th century A.D. came under direct influence of North India, and more particularly under the Pala and Sena styles of Bengal.14 But, discovery of a peculiar style at Despuni near Golaghat in the Sibsagar District of roughly 8th-9th century A.D.15 tends to show that Assam, at one time, developed a style of its own, which, while Indo-Aryan in its basic concept, attained certain special and uncommon features. This may indicate the development of an architectural style which had features peculiar and uncommon to itself. Large bricks of unusual proportions were unearthed a few decades back at Despuni. They appear

14. ANA, pp. 141 ff.
more close to the modern bricks, save for the volume, than to the old bricks of standard form. 16

It is a historical truth that the density of monuments as well as the decorative exuberance of buildings speak for the resourcefulness and stability of a ruling dynasty. That the Pālas of Assam were the patrons of numerous temples, the ruins of which are mostly found in and around Guwahati, is undisputed. The period following the decline and fall of the Pālas from A.D. 1159 17 to the last quarter of the 17th century A.D. is eventful for the Assamese architecture. However, the fall of the Pālas did not abruptly put an end to their building activities. The temples continued to be built with some structural standard, but the standard of the sculpture faded away. This may be noticed in the stone door-frames of the Guptesvara and Milleesvara temples. The brick constructions of the Dabok region of pre-Āhom origin may also be cited as the reminiscences of this declining tradition.

A feature in the architectural developments of the early medieval period of Assam is that, though the first structural building of the land i.e. the De-Parvatiya temple, was built in bricks, the entire succeeding period was

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16. The breadth of an old Assamese brick seldom comes down to the half of its length and its thickness is less than one-fourth of its width. In comparison, a modern brick appears elongated and bears a thickness equal to at least half of its breadth.

17. HCPA, p. 251.
dominated by stone masonry. This does not, however, mean that brick-masonry remained an unknown craft in this region during this period. Brick ruins unearthed at places like Deopani, Dabokā, Gauhati, etc. show that it was in use in a moderate way. The presence of brick remains at a few sites, such as Abhayapuri, Ramunikhar, etc., further point out that the bricks were used, not for any structural purpose, but for secondary work, such as, piṣṭa, retaining-wall, etc. Bricks in combination with stone are seen to have been used in temples like Guptesvara, Rajbari (temple No.1), etc. But they are used either for repairs to stone masonry, or for the addition of a new chamber to the garbhagṛha in a later time.

The Pālas of Assam appear to have introduced the use of bricks only towards the later half of their rule. This might have been necessitated due to three major factors, such as (i) non-availability of quality rocks at or near a construction site; (ii) frequency of earthquakes in the region, which damaged the numerous stone-temples built by the Pālas; and (iii) as the brick-masonry is a speedy craft compared to the stone-masonry and as more and more temples were in demand during the Pāla period, the later rulers of the dynasty switched over to the brick-masonry. The use of bricks during the 11th and 12th century A.D. is seen in several sites at Teapur and Gauhati, and also at Sualkuchi, Phulbari, Dabokā, etc. While the remains do not bear out
any significant attempt for creating something novel and outstanding, the use of terracotta sculptures in the temple architecture carries immense importance. The few terracotta panels of this period discovered at places like Bhaibari, Baghpara, Sualkuchi, Guwahati, etc. bear out the nature of the plastic art that was practised in this region.

The history of Assam starting with the 13th century A.D. is comparatively clear. The Ahoms, who ruled the Brahmaputra valley from the second quarter of the thirteenth century A.D. to the first quarter of the nineteenth century A.D. had the commendable habit of maintaining chronological records. These Ahom chronicles incorporated in them not only the socio-political events, but also cultural and architectural pursuits which are of immense importance for our study. May, the chronicles include facts about the other contemporary monarchies of Assam also, such as the Chutiya, the Kacharis, the Kochas, etc., the details of whose rules are otherwise lacking.

Among the different dynasties that ruled this land during the later medieval period, the architectural contributions of the Kochas, the Kacharis and the Ahoms could be marked out. Of their six hundred years of rule in Assam, the Ahoms took up masonry with earnestness only with the beginning of the 18th century A.D. We have already brought out

18. A few terracotta pieces from these sites are now displayed in the Assam State Museum, Guwahati.
elsewhere that the early phase of their building activities ended with A.D.1661. Most of this phase proves to be vacant. We find during this lengthy period of more than four centuries that a limited number of temples were built, the dates of whose construction are controversial. The earliest extant temple among them, the Garakhiya Del of Namira, bears Islamic influence. This influence was possible because of the absence of an active and continued architectural tradition in Assam at that time, and also because of the gaining popularity of the Islamic architecture in North India during this period. In our presentation in the preceding chapter we have made an effort to determine the time of construction of some temples of unknown date by comparing their architectural features with temples of known date. We have further noticed the influence of the pre-Ahom elements in the planning of certain temple lay-out of this period.

The last four decades of the first phase, i.e., from the end of Svargardeva Pratap Singha's rule to the beginning of Svargardeva Gedadher Singha's rule in A.D.1661, appear to be a period of architectural stagnation. The fact that as many as eleven kings ruled during this small period proves the political instability that prevailed at that time. Such a period could by no means be congenial for the development of cultural activities. Incidentally, this period also witnessed the worst of the Mahamadana war campaigns in Assam, including the great Battle of Saraighat.
We have credited Svaragadova Rudra Singha (A.D. 1696-A.D. 1714) with the honour of the real architect of the Khon architecture. He experimented with numerous geometric forms and achieved standardisation. His successors simply reaped the benefit of what he had projected. His adoption of the "Milaśala type" in the construction of the Jaidhol paved the way for the popularity of this form in Assam. While the Islamic influence was prominent in a few temple architectures of his time, the indigenous do-galī type was given much more importance. A peculiar plan adopted in his time was the apsidal shape similar to the caityans.

The greatest of the innovations of Rudra Singha was probably the Fakwā Dal. This structure is a type by itself and its use is restricted only to one type of ritual. The development of the Fakwā Del type took place in Assam, although similar structures with different ground-planes are seen elsewhere. This is the only type in Assam which does not maintain any link with the Indī-Āryan style which had dominated the architectural developments of the State.

When the formative experimentations of Rudra Singha attained standardisation of the temple architecture, Siva Singha (A.D. 1714-1745), his successor, proceeded to take up grandiose schemes. The two major achievements of his period

19. The Neo-Vaisnavites of Assam use the Fakwā Del during the delul ṛtasa (i.e. the Holī, the festival of colours), by the installation of a ādbhā-Kṛṣṇa image only for the period of the festival.
are, (i) discipline in architectural planning and (ii) successful execution of the tallest and the largest edifices of the entire Ahom period. The two groups of temples constructed by him at Gaurisagar and Sibisagar, exhibit the highest sense of his architectural planning. These temples are superior not only in their architectural features, but, also in their balanced decorative treatment. Siva Singha is the builder of the Siva temple at Sibisagar, the tallest (height, 40 metres) among the existing historical monuments of the State. Unlike his predecessor, he had restricted the forms of temples to only two types, i.e. (i) the "Nilambara type" and (ii) the rokhā deul type. A quaint but challenging attempt of Siva Singha is his distortion of the traditional ratha plan which resulted in the formation of a new type of ground-plan which may be described as tri-ratha-pañcaratha, or pañcaratha-pancaratha. Though this form goes against the principles laid down by the vāstuśāstra, it did not seem to have created any structural or architectural problem. What made Siva Singha to change the age-long tradition is not recorded anywhere, but credit must go to him for this innovation which is not seen anywhere throughout India during any period of history.

The period succeeding Siva Singha is marked with the development of secular architecture, and temple building could not show any innovation, or improvement worth the name. The temples constructed during this period were not
only smaller in stature, but they were mostly confined to
the work of renovation and restoration of the older temples. 

The temples usually show inferior workmanship and are aesthetically dull. Attempts for adding new features often proved architecturally unscientific. This period also witnessed a gradual degradation in the outer profile of the temple as well as in external decorations. Sincere attempts at inducing some novelty were seen to have made during this period in a few structures, such as the apsidal Nāţa Mandir of the Kānkiya temple (A.D.1739), the mausoleum-like Undesavar temple (A.D.1749), and the Paṇḍavaḷa Nagheriting temple (A.D.1769), etc. But none of them could inspire a single monument constructed after them.

It is a fact that architecture takes refuge under religion and flourishes with time. But, in effect, architecture has its own religion,—religion above a particular belief, country or racial barrier. In its usual course religion expedites its development. But, in practice, it assimilates into it whatever is architecturally logical, structurally perfect and aesthetically superb. A wide gulf between them, fails to restrain this universal interaction. The iconoclastic zeal of Mohammed Gheri and his successors could not resist them in utilizing Hindu method of construction in the erection of their first edifices in the Kutub area of Delhi.²⁰ A Hindu temple with its Islamic look²¹ and

²⁰. IAI, p. 11.
²¹. Bt, pl. XVII.
a Masjid with Hindu appearance\textsuperscript{23} could be noticed even in a period of utmost animosity between the two religions. Among the Ahom temples also we find blending of Islamic elements. It is not only utilized for external decorations (such as, in the battlements of Renganath Del or the devakheśhas of the Garakhiyā Del), but also in the planning of an entire structure (such as, the mausoleum-like Rudreswer temple), or a major member thereof (such as, the dome of the Wilāla-Mala type.). The Islamic influence on the Assam monuments is more conspicuous with the Kachari architecture. Of their three capitals, the earliest at Dinapur on the Assam-Nagaland border displays prominent Islamic influence\textsuperscript{23} The Saṣa Mandir of Khaspur, the last capital of the Kacharis, is a typical Islamic architecture.

Our investigations have indicated the possibility of the South-East Asian influence on certain monuments of Assam. We have avoided a detailed study on this aspect, but limited evidences we find infer at the blending of the two styles, i.e. the Indo-Aryan and the South-East Asian, in the soil of Assam. The racial movements from the east to this land in its pre-historic time have been reflected upon by the anthropologists\textsuperscript{25}. The fertile alluvium of the Brahmaputra seems to have inspired the races to scale the lofty ranges of the east and enter the region of North-East India.

\textsuperscript{23} IAI, pl.xxvi (2)  
\textsuperscript{24} GAIT, p. 302.  
\textsuperscript{25} HCPA, pp. 81 ff.
while the all-weather-navigable waterway of the Brahmaputra made easy propagation of the Hindu ideas from the west, the fertile plains with a net-work of river, must have lured the South-East Asian tribes to cross over and settle down in this region from time to time. Naturally with their movement the races brought their socio-cultural elements which in contact with local culture effected a synthesis now represented by the Assamese culture. Though the archaeological evidence found with regard to this blending is not sufficient, ideas can be developed with whatever material we have on hand. Banerji has marked a typical Javanese kālamakara image among the 10th-11th century A.D. ruins of Deeparvat in the Sibsagar District.\(^\text{25}\) The kirthimukha with horn-like sockets similar to those found in South-East Asia are seen in a few temple ruins of Assam, e.g. At these sculptures are, in fact, part of structural components, such as pillar-capitals, cornices, etc. we may presume that the architecture of Assam was also influenced by the style of South-East Asia. This influence appears to be greater in degree in the later mediæval period. The architecture of the Pākaw Dol of this period is a peculiar structure in its Indo-Aryan context, but is identical with several monuments found in Burma and Java. Even the expression "Dol" so popularly used to denote an Assam temple is found to have come from a Pagan race of Malay.\(^\text{26}\)

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\(^{25}\) ARAB, 1936-37, p. 50.
\(^{26}\) PUMP, p. 635.
Though we do not have sufficient material on hand to be affirmative in tracing the foreign influence on the architecture of Assam, we may, however, add that the temple architecture of the period of our study in Assam represents a blending of the styles, as the people in North-Eastern India represent a blending of the races.