CHAPTER- III

SOCIO CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TEMPLES AND SHRINES

The word temple is derived from the Latin word *templum*, which simply means religious places of worship. In Greek language the meaning of *templum* is also the “holy place of God.”

Generally, temples or shrines means the places of worship where the God or the supreme power resides in full honour and respect. It, thus means a structural construction where the image of a deity worshipped by a particular religious sect is installed. In fact, temple is considered as a medium of communication by which one can feel God’s existence.

The temple was unknown in the Vedic period. In fact, the tradition of temple building was started with the concept of physical representation of worshipful deities. According to Kuppuswamy, “In this age, sacrificial alter gave place to the temple and image worship.”

On the other hand, the temples are not only the places of

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worship but also an exquisite product of art. It is observed since the dawn of our civilization that religion and art were always associated with each other and go hand in hand in our country. Hence it is well-said that Indian art is a hand-maid of Indian religions. According to Dr. B. K. Barua, “it is the religion which fostered the growth of temples and images.”

In ancient times, the towns were adorned with many temples, which were considered as the centre of many attractions and amusements. But gradually, the places of worship gained more and more popularity with the introduction of music, dance and drama as an added form of devotion. All these activities helped to a great extent in the field of interchange of idea and diffusion of knowledge among the people of all walks of life.

In the past, village school sometimes used to be held in the porch of a temple, which turned to be the centres of popular education through the constant recitation and explanation of the epics like the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata, the Purāṇas, etc. Occassionally, the priest or the religious leaders also used to explain the principles and philosophy of their own sects in the temple premises. Hence, the temples were considered as the places of festive gathering and communal rejoicings since the

2. Barua, Dr. B. K., *A Cultural History of Assam* (early period) p.150.
early times Though the festivals are based on different forum, they invariably include musical and dramatic performances, too. In this way, the temple played a remarkable role in the cultural life of the people from the dawn of our civilization. Besides music, playing of a musical instruments formed an integral part of rituals in religious worship. Dancing was an indispensable part of some temples in the medieval period. There was a general custom of keeping dancing girls as *Devadāsī* in the temple complex. Decorative dancing figures in temple architecture (in sculptural form) are seems to be very common during this period. The walls of the temples are decorated with friezes either in group scene or independently in different poses. Even the figure of Lord Śiva was depicted in temple architecture both in *Tāṇḍava* and *Naṭarāja* form. The later development in worship of Śiva with sex and dances originally came from the tribal society, which gradually became a cerimonial as well a devotional aspect of Śiva. Other than Śiva, the dancing figure of Gaṇeśa is also a fairly popular theme in the eastern Indian School of sculpture.3

The concept of the temple, the church, the mosque or any other shrine means house of the divine and to shelter the devine.

In fact, the image of God or even the emblem of God is the representation of actual spirit of God. It may be considered as only a symbolic medium that connects devotees to their deities.

Basically, Indian peoples are religious minded and religion with idol worship is a part and parcel of life of the people in general. So it is natural that there should be an abundance of icons and images (vigraha) made either of metal, stone or any other materials, such as wood, clay etc., found not only in the temple premises, but also lying scattered anywhere in the locality. In the historical period, it is found that the rulers, kings and emperors came to play the most significant role in building temples and making facilities for pilgrims as a part of their regal function. The powerful Koch king Naranārayana and Chilārāi is said to have reconstructed the temple of Bhairava in the erstwhile Goalpara district. Besides, many more sites of religious importance are associated with the Koch kings. Unfortunately, however, none of them are in situ.

Reference to hybrid architecture also are made in the Darraṅg Rājbaṅśāvalī. It informs us that the Koch king Naranārayana sent artisans and craftsmen from Coochbehār under Meghamukudam, probably an officer in charge of architecture, to the Ahom kingdom. Ghanāśyām Khanikar was one of the
architects among them.

Regarding temple architecture of Assam, eminent antiquitist, R. D. Banerjee observes: "Assam is the only province of India, the history of the architecture and sculpture of which is still practically unknown. The chronology of the dynasties of Assam from 12th century is full of confusion, but the architecture of this period and the history of the plastic art of Assam which are closely related to the general architecture and art of Northern India." 

From the beginning of the 13th century A.D. to the end of 17th century A.D., Assam passed through a state of political disturbance. So there was very little scope for cultural progress.

The 13th and 14th centuries of the Christian era witnessed a period of constant warfare which resulted in political instability in the Brahmaputra Valley and the western boundary of Assam fluctuated from time to time. According to Dr. B. Kakati, the Western boundary of ancient Kāmarūpa though fluctuated from time to time the tract of land now covered by the Undivided Goalpara District which was a part of Ratnapīṭha has always remained an integral part of it. The impact of the first phase of

any new idea from the west was first felt by this tract in the Brahmaputra valley.⁵

There was a general belief among the devotees that hills and mountains are the original abode of the deities. To imply Hindu temple, a number of terms and epithets such as Prasāda, Devālaya, Devagṛha, Devakūla, Mandira, Do’l (Deul), Thāna, Dhāma, Pāta etc. are applied. Whatever literary meaning they may carry, for the common people of the locality temple means Gosāighar or Thākurghar. In lower Assam the common term of temple is Mandir (Skt. Mandira). The term thāna (Skt. sthāna - a place) is equally popular in Dhubri district. Among these Mahāmāyā-thān, Āiśakhāti-thān, Burā-Burī-thān, Ālokjhārīr-thān, and many other thāns of Dhubri district are very popular and flourishing. The Śākhāti-thān of Sapatgram originally was a cave temple. Recently, a building has been constructed on the site.

The term pāt and dhām are also used to denote a temple in Dhubri district. A good number of holy places are dedicated to different deities of Brāhmaṇical pantheon. They are known as Kālir-pāt, Āir-pāt, Pāglār-pāt, Dhumsiār-pāt, Mahāmāyār-pāt etc. in Dhubri district. The word bārī is simulatenously used to mean a temple, viz., Dūrgā-bārī, Mahāmāyā-bārī, Śiva-bārī, Kālī-bārī,

⁵ Kakati, Dr. B., Purani Kāmrūpar Dharmar Dhāra, p. 3.
Gopal- bāri, Śītalā- bāri, Manasa- bāri etc. The reason for applying the term can be easily understood in that the undivided Goalpara district is always inter-linked with West Bengal (more particularly North Bengal), and thus Bengali influence in its dialect and usages can easily be marked.  

The terms like Dhām, Pāṭ, Matha, Ākhrā etc., do not indicate always a building type of structure, but certainly considers a holy place of worship maintained by the devotees of the surrounding areas of the locality. These type of holy places are nothing but a community shrine where a number of gods and godlings are installed. These may be compared with primitive temples as defined by William Crooke, that “under a sacred tree or grove stands a heap of stones or a mound; this may be replaced by mud platform or a mud hut with thatched roof, or by a small building of masonry with a domed roof and platform. These form an abode for the deity and thus form a primitive kind of temple.”  

For the purpose of our study, we have used the term ‘temple’ to mean a masonry structure, complete or in ruin bearing antique and archaeological value, which was used or still in use for

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religious purposes. Due to the non-availability of any text (śāstra) in vāstu-vidyā (the science of architecture), we have to depend on the existing components and other structural remains, lying scattered in and around Dhubri district, for our study to determine the type and chronology of the temples. Because, systematic as well as scientific excavation has not yet been undertaken in any of the archeaological sites of the district. Only a few of the historical sites covered with jungles had been cleared and dug out by unskilled and unauthorised agencies. Because of this type of haphazard digging, a number of sites or ruins have been destroyed. From the scattered archaeological objects of various types, it is prove beyond doubt that this region witnessed a good number of temples in her past. But, unfortunately, not a single ancient or medieval temple or any other religious building in its original form is now in situ available in this region. The nature of soil and climatic condition are mainly responsible for the damage and destruction of the monuments. Vandalistic activities and lack of conciousness for ancient monuments is another factor for the destruction of the monuments. The climatic condition of this locality is extremely humid. Heavy rainfall resulting in devastating of flood, and frequent earthquakes have a telling effect on the original structures
of buildings, and thus caused them crumbled down and turned into heaps of ruins. The rapid growth of vegetation in the hills and mountainous areas added to the destruction of structure. According to the Geological Reports of the state, “Goalpara (undivided) District was well known as a land of earthquakes.” Since 15th century A.D. to 19th century A.D., there occurred several earthquakes, which are also responsible for the damage of temple buildings of this locality.8 Due to these frequent earthquakes the course of rivers also changed. In some cases renovations were made by the contemporary local rulers or in some cases new temples were erected on the old structures. In case of temples in dense forests or mountain areas, daily worship has been ceased in most of the temples as vigrahās (icons) were missing in the Sanctum Sanctorum (garbhagṛha). These are as good as dead temples.

Only after a close observation of the ruins of the structure and comparative study of the structures with those in the other parts of the country, it may be assumed that they were basically of North Indian Style with certain regional variations i.e. in the matter of shape and structural pattern of the garbhagṛha, antarāla, and maṇḍapa, vimāna of the temples by the super imposition.

of a polygonal sikhāra, which are very common in the entire Brahmaputra valley. They are also seemed to be of the deul type in their elevation.

In most cases, the origin and the back ground of the erection of temples of this locality are mostly based on myths and legends. The purānic story of the self-immolation of Sati, the consort of Mahādeva, and the rise of fifty-one pithas led to the origin of temples like those of Śākhāti, Kāmākhyā, Tukreśwari etc. in and around Dhubri district. But in addition to these factors, royal patronage had always been the most dominating factor for building of the temples. The contribution of the royalty towards the growth of the respective religious structures has been highly appriciated by the devotees as well as public in general of the particular society. It is a fact that, "the entire Brahmaputra valley appeared sacred and enchanting to the kings and the rulers through the ages who dotted the entire region with shrine and temples."  

As regards the materials for construction of temple structures, it is found that bricks and stones were used as the principal building materials. However, timber was also used in some cases. Bricks might have been used for various reasons, such as

the non-availability of quality rocks at or near a construction site or frequency of earthquake in the locality which had damaged the stone temples. But in case of the Gaṇeśa temple of Abhayāpurī, it is found that bricks were used not for any structural purpose but for secondary works, such as piṣṭa, retaining wall etc. As the brick masonary was a speedy craft compared to stone masonary, the later rulers of the dynasty switched over to the brick masonary. The uses of bricks during 11th and 12th century A.D. are noticed in several temples of the south bank of Dhubri district. The fragmentary relics of terracotta panels are unearthed at different sites such as Bhāitbārī, Rājābāla, Chamrāśālī, Bāghāpāra, Cheṅgabengā, etc. all in the south bank, have been of the nature of plastic art practised in this region. "A few number of mutilated terracotta sculptures from Bhāitbārī shows temple designs over the head of the deities. In this sculpture the Śikhara is nicely depicted with Āmalaka, Stylistically, they may be placed to c 10th cent. A.D.10 It is seen that gradually traditional architectural style of the early medieval Hindus died out roughly and new architectural ideas were introduced under the growing Muslim power. The mosque of Hussain Shāh (Panbari) and the

mobile of Chapgarh (Gauripur) in Dhubri district are the best example of it. It is observed that in the late medieval period temples were similar outwardly, but outline was simple and dull. In fact it was not developed in the line of strict discipline of Hindu architecture. By the 13th century A.D., the building tradition of Pāla rulers of Assam died out roughly and the Islamic influence was gradually penitrating into this region. During this period, the western frontier region of greater Kāmarūpa was dominated by the Islāmic architecture.

Though the Mosques and the Churches are not enriched with divine images for the purpose of public prayer, these shrines are included also in our study, since these are also places of worship.

Generally, the temples, the Mosques and the Churches are religious in character. Sometimes inscriptions or architecture of such buildings throw enough light on the different aspects of the people of the contemporary society or the land as a whole.

As a result of Neo-Vaiśṇavite movement, Dhubri district witnessed a good number of Vaiśṇavite Satras and Nāmghars established towards the closing decade of the 16th century A.D. and onwards. These are the residential establishments which may be compared with the so called monasteries or Bauddha
viharas; with the provision for the dwelling of monks. It consist of a square encloser wall with four opening gateways, called karāpāt along with four rows of huts, each divided in a number of rooms at the sides. The central temple composite of shrines, called manikut or bhājghar of Satras and namghars; different parts, such as the walls, the wooden beams etc. of the principal nāmghar are fully decorated with paintings, floral designs etc. sometimes relief plaques were also attached in the walls. In respect of Dhubri district, such type of wooden sculptures are seen in the walls of the Chhatrasal Satra where some mythological stories are depicted through sculptural motifs. The main entrance door is also decorated with floral designs. Another example may be cited from the Do’la-maṇḍapa of Rupsi Rājbari, the wooden sculpture of which is remarkable. (Now preserved in the gallery of the District Museum, Dhubri.) Floral designs depicted on the wooden door of the temple are also noticed in the temple of Burī-Thākurānī of Salkocha Zemindar in Dhubri district.

It is also observed that the temples sometimes represent the artistic activities of the artists as well as architecture of that contemporary period, and their variations also indicate the changing pattern of the society.
The reasons for establishment of temples and shrines, as stated above, clearly indicate that people of different religious sects are becoming conscious to preserve and propagate their religious faith through the agencies like temples and shrines. These religious establishments are closely associated with the respective sect or cult which bears socio-religious significance as a whole.