

Ganeśa Cult In Assam: A Study Of The Deity With Special Reference To The Nazirakhat Archaeological Site

Akash Chetia
M.Phil Research Scholar
Department of History
Gauhati University, Assam

Abstract: *The worship of the elephant-headed deity Ganeśa is widespread in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Yet it is in Assam that rock cut representation of the deity is found in abundance. The worship of a popular deity of western India in the interior of Assam in northeast India merits enquiry. The Yogini Tantra, a 16th century text composed in Assam states that Ganapati (Ganeśa) resides in the four corners of Pragjyotisapura, as Assam was known in ancient times. It is contended that the worship of Ganeśa was popular in the region of the present city of Guwahati and its outlying areas inhabited by various ethnic communities. This appears to be indicated by the numerous rock-cut sculptures of the deity found in the city and its vicinity. Many of these sculptures have been enshrined in structural temples. To trace the historical roots of these temples, there is a need to explore both the historical evidence, as well as oral myths regarding the sites where Ganeśa sculptures are found. Nazirakhat, is an archaeological site located to the south of Guwahati in Sonapur, Kamrup Metro district, which has evidence of a temple of Ganeśa of the early medieval period. In this paper an attempt has been made to reconstruct the history of the site on the basis of archaeological as well as oral sources.*

Introduction: Nazirakhat is a place in Sonapur, under Tepesia revenue circle in Kamrup Metro district. In the north it is bounded by the Naokhulia Hills., in the south is the N.H.37; in the west is Kamarkuchi and in the east is Jogdal. This area is inhabited by different ethnic communities like the Bodo, Karbi, Tiwa (Lalung) and Rabha. Following the discovery of the remains of the Ganeśa temple in Nazirakhat the site was brought under the protection of the Directorate of Archaeology, Assam.

The site has three rock-cut-caturbhuja images of Ganeśa. Of these two rock-cut figures are found carved together in the northern part of the site. The sculptures were 95 cm X 60 cm and 107cm X 72.5cm in height and breadth respectively. Both the deities were

carved in a dancing position. The images are four-armed and hold a *parasu* in the upper right hand and a lotus bud in the upper left hand. The lower right hand is in *varadamudra*. The lower left hand appears to hold a *modaka*. The deity is in *atibhanga*, i.e. they are representations of *nritya* Ganeśa.



The three rock-cut Ganeśa images indicate that there may have been patronage by the ruling autochthons of the region of the cult of Ganeśa. It is also probable that merchants from distant regions may have had them carved as they carried their beliefs with them. Another probability is that, due to the presence of elephants in the nearby forests, there might have been a cult of worshipping elephants locally to seek their protection. But the tribes of Assam do not have a history of worshipping Ganeśa. According to H.K. Barpujari, in Assam, the land of elephants, Ganeśa has been a popular divinity from the earliest times.¹

The deities wear a *Yajñopavitamālā* and are depicted in accordance with canonical norms found in the *Puranas*. This indicates that there has been the influence of the beliefs of Hinduism. So the cult of locals worshipping elephants is not valid.

The isolated rock-cut sculpture of Ganeśa, like the other two Ganeśa sculptures, was also carved in dancing posture. It holds a *japamala* in right lower, and a *parasu* in the right upper, a *trisula* in left upper.

The deities wear a *Kiritamukuta*. The *Kirita-makuta*, according to *Manasara* 'is a conical cap sometimes ending in an ornamental top carrying a central pointed knob'.² According to R.D. Banerjee, it is especially appropriate for *Narayana*.

Ganeśa Cult in Assam in the Early Medieval Period

According to the *Yogini Tantra*, by worshipping the deities anywhere in the land of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, one can attain equal fruits of desire, be in its air, river, lands or wind. There has been an enduring influence of the pan- Indian deities over the culture of Assam. Foreign travellers like Yuan Chang mentioned about the existence of Deva temples in Kamarupa. The *Kalika Purana* also describes about the mother goddess Kamakhya and her abode. The evidence of *Nagara* temple components in the Brahmaputra valley indicates that the temple architecture in Assam was largely influenced by pan-Indian tradition.

The Doobi copper plate inscription of Bhaskarvarma mentions King Ganendravarma as influential as Ganapati. In the same inscription the name of Ganapati is again mentioned as the Ganaptiśiva.³ King Bhaskaravaman's copper plate also mentions other deities like Śiva, Indra, Surya, Chandra etc.

In Assam, the land of elephants, Ganeśa has been a popular divinity from the early times.⁴ The Kanauli plates of Vaidyadeva bears on the seal a figure of Ganeśa, while the Tezpur plates of Vallabhadeva start with an invocation to Lambodara (Ganeśa, the god with the distended abdomen). According to Barpujari, The importance given to Ganeśa by the Assam rulers might have been due to the pre-eminence of the god in the rituals of Hinduism. Images of Ganeśa are fairly common in Assam. Such images are depicted in standing, seated and dancing attitudes. The image from Pandu holds *parasu* and *padma* in its two hands and the emblems in the other hands are not clearly recognisable. The god has a *jatamukuta*. The earliest figure of Ganeśa in Assam is found in the centre of the lintel in the fifth century CE Da-Parvatiagate way in Tezpur.

In the rock carvings of Pandu, seated images of the deity are seen.⁵ In the islands of Umananda and Urvashi also the god is seen in a seated posture. In the Mikir Hills, in Kamakhya and at Vasundhari Parvat of Tezpur, we find seated images of the deity. In such rock carvings, the deity is usually shown with four hands with such characteristic emblems as *parasu*, *padma*, *modaka*, *mulaka* etc. Sometimes the *vāhana* (vehicle) of the god is seen to be present.⁶ The divinity in the sitting position can also be seen in the stone image from Charduar and a miniature image from the Narakasur hoard. In such seated images the god is seen to bear in his four hands such variable emblems as *trisula*, *mulaka*, *pot of sweets*, *varada*, *rosary*, *parasu*, etc.⁷

A rock-cut Ganesa in Ganeshghat, Tezpur is seen seated in the usual posture. The *ayudhas* in his hands are in *Varadanmudra*, and hold the *pāsa*, *gadā* and *modāka*. He is seated in the *maharajalilaāsana*⁸ The general characteristics of the images noticed in Central Assam are: seated in *maharajalila* and *ardhaparyanka* postures, having four arms and pot bellied. The *ayudhas* seen are *aksamala*, *ankusa*, *parasu*, *gada*, *lotus bud*, *modaka*, *pasa* etc.⁹

Apart from the seated figures of Ganesa, icons depicting dancing postures are also found. At Barpukhuripar, near Tezpur, one image carved on a block of basalt is found. The deity has eight hands and is shown dancing on a full brown lotus. The deity is decked with the usual *alamkaras* as *karandamukta*, *kundalas*, *kankanas*, *upavita* etc.

At Akasiganga another miniature image of *Nrtyaganapati* or dancing Ganeśa is found carved on a lintel. The deity has four arms, the *ayudhas* are: *varadamudra*, *ankusa*, battle-axe and *modaka*, which he is swallowing with his trunk. The deity is adorned with *mukuta*, and lotus buds serve as *kundalas*.¹⁰

Independent images of dancing Ganeśa are also not rare in Assam. In these, the god is seen to be dancing, either on a lotus or in his mount, and has two or four or six hands. Mention must be made of the image of dancing Ganeśa in Haleswar Mouja (Sonitpur district). The head is surmounted by a *jatamukuta*. The god is seen to be dancing on a lotus accompanied by two musicians. P.C. Choudhury also refers to a rock cut image of dancing *Ganehsa* on the Kamakhya hill, but he describes the god as seated on a rat.¹¹



In the island of Urvasi, the rocky plinth of a temple shows *Ganeśa* in a violent dance with the right and left hands held up and down in the cadence of the dance and the other two hands bearing possibly a snake and a pot of sweets.

According to N.D. Choudhury, sufficient evidence is not available to prove the prevalence of the Ganpatya cult in Assam. A copper plate grant of 1392 C.E., opens with the adoration of Ganapati: ‘*Namoganaptyebande*’.¹²

Quite a good number of images of Ganeśa have come to light in Central Assam, belonging to a period from C. 6th to 12th Century CE or still later. Almost all the temples have images of Ganeśa particularly on the centre of the door lintel. Besides these, stray icons and rock cut images of Ganeśa occur in large numbers. Without the prevalence of the Ganapatya cult, it would not have been possible to find large numbers of the images of this deity. The worship of Ganeśa as a minor deity is still popular in Assam.

In Assam, one of the earliest examples of Ganeśa image can be seen in the Dah-Parvatiya ruins, in the door jamb as mentioned earlier. At Deopani, Golaghat, The figures of Ganeśa and Kartikeya can be seen in the rock structure found.¹³

In Karbi Anglong, at Langhing, a Ganeśa image can be seen which is dated 10th-11th century. In interior places like Langing, the image of Ganeśa shows the popularity of the deity among the Karbis and the Kachari kings in the medieval age. The Hindu pantheons might have penetrated deep into the heart of Assam in the 10th -11th century. The chieftains and the royalty also might have favoured the sect.

The deity in Boha Pahar range near Mayong is assumed by N.D. Choudhury to be the biggest ever sculpture of the Ganeśa found in Central Assam. The Ganeśa's figurine has very distinct eyes and the ‘*yajñopavita*’. It is situated on the bank of Kapili River. The image is huge, eleven feet tall. There are distinct carvings on the figure. It can be observed that the lower and middle parts of Assam had yielded a number of rock-cut Ganeśa figures. The local communities worship the rock figures as a living deity. It is considered one of the biggest rock-cut Ganeśa in the North East of India. It is a seated image but lacks proportion.

In Gachtal, near Dabaka, in the lintels of a temple, Ganeśa images can be seen.

Ganeśa sculptures in the Greater Guwahati area

The Ganeśa temples in and around Guwahati city were probably built at sacred sites marked by the rock-cut Ganeśa sculptures which are quite common in undivided Kamrup district where we find spurs of the hard granite rock of the Shillong Plateau. In Guwahati the rock-cut tradition predates the structural temples.

We shall now examine the Ganeśa images (Rock-Cut) in the Greater Guwahati area.

Sukreśvar



The Sukreshwar temple complex that includes the Visnu-Janardantemple has five rock-cut images of the *panchadevata* – namely Ganeśa, Dhyanī Visnu, Śiva, Durgā and Sūrya carved upon the rock face above the *ghāt* facing the River Brahmaputra. At present the images are eroded due to long exposure to the elephants, and are now protected with a shade.

The Ganeśa figurine is in the sitting posture with a hanging belly. The figure is wearing the sacrificial thread, *yajñopavita* from the ear to the belly. It holds an *aksamālā* in its right hand. The figure shown here can be identified with the ‘Lambodara’ (Hanging Belly).

Kamakhya

There is a dancing Ganeśa upon the seventh century *bada*(plinth) of the famous Kamakhya Mandir. The deity resembles the ‘Lambodara’ form. The figure is without a *yajñopavita*.



Ganeshguri



There is huge Ganesha figurine on the foot of a large stone. The deity here is in sitting position. Below the image there is an inscription which bears the name of a king called '*Hedambadhipati Dhununtarai*'. The inscription mentions the excavation of a pond called '*Ganesvara Pushkarini*' by the king. It is one of the most popular *Ganesha* temples in Guwahati.

LalGanesa



There are two huge images of *Ganeśa* on a single flat rock on the slope of a tiny hillock. The distinct features of the deity like the '*Kirita-Mukuta*' the '*ayudhas*' are visible here. The deity holds a '*Parasu*' in one hand, a lotus in the another. Both the images have very large ears and a '*yajñopavita*' hanging from the upper shoulder to the lower belly.

Boha Ganeśa

There is a rock cut *Ganeśa* sculpture in the Boha Parbat, of present Morigaon District. The image is huge, nearly eleven feet in height. There are distinct carvings on the sculpture. It is located on the bank of the river Kapili as discussed earlier.



Hatisila Rock Engravings

It is at a distance of 25 KM from Guwahati towards Chandrapur. Here a big stone cluster is seen lying over another stone resembling an elephant trunk. There are also engravings in the nearby Stone.

Khanapara



This temple is located at the Assam-Meghalaya border at Jorabat. The newly built temple was the abode of a much earlier rock-cut image of Lord Ganeśa in sitting posture. The deity is a Lambodara, with his hanging belly.

Near Mirza town, to the west of Guwahati, on the outer part of the BagheswariDevalaya, a rock cut image ofGaneśa is seen.

On the North Bank of Guwahati, in the Sita Parbat, there is a Shakti Shrine called Dirgheswari. On the way to this shrine, there can be seen eight rock-cut Ganeśaimages . There is also a huge rock cut statue in the sitting pose by the stone staircase to the temple.

Conclusion

There has been a primary observation so far of the above images that these Ganeśa images have been sculpted on the routes leaving Guwahati where there have been trade or other activities. It might be due to the belief that Ganeśa wards off all the obstacles from the path in his role as *vighnidātā*. Most of the Ganeśa images were located in major trade routes and confluences. Their presence is seen in river banks (BohaGaneśa,Urvashi, Kamakhya etc.It might be due to the belief about the Deity who wards of all the evil influences in the journey. The presence of Ganeśa even in the interior places like BohaParvat proves the popularity of Ganeśa in the early medieval age.

The Rock-Cut Ganeśa images predated the existing temples. Except Nazirakhat and Kamakhya temple, the deities are in sitting position. In Nazirakhat site, the deity is in dancing position.

References

-
- ¹H.K. Barpujari, *Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol I*, Publication Board, Assam
- ²Cited in J.N. Banerjea, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, 1941, p
- ³D. ,Sarma, (ed) *Kamarupasasanavali*, Publication Board, Assam, p
- ⁴Op cit, p 364
- ⁵*Ibid.*
- ⁶*Ibid*
- ⁷‘H.K. Barpujari, *op.cit*, page 365
- ⁸‘N.D. Choudhury *Historical Archaeology of Central Assam* , p 219.
- ⁹*Ibid*
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*
- ¹¹Cited in H.K. Barpujari, *op.cit.*, p
- ¹²N.D. Choudhury, *Historical Archaeology of Central Assam* , Pg
- ¹³*A Source Book of The Archaeology of Assam And Other States of North-Eastern India*, KamarupaAnusandhanSamiti