Temple of the Stars

Ravijyoti Deka*

The Navagraha Temple, landmark of the present-day Guwahati, is situated on the western crest of the Chitrachal Hill. Though it is a popular destination of thousands of pilgrims, who visit it in the hope of warding off evil planetary influence, its origin is shrouded in mystery.

Except for brief references in the Kalika Purana and the Markandeya Purana, history is silent about the temple. But according to folk tradition and legends, the original temple is as old as the Kamakhya temple, i.e., 4-6th century A.D. Others claim that the area was a major centre of astrology and was visited throughout the ages by many prominent exponents of this mystic science, including the great Varahamihira. But there has been no written evidence to corroborate these beliefs.

The present temple was rebuilt after it was devastated in the earthquake of 1897 A.D. The earlier temple was built by the dictate of the Ahom King Rajeshwar Singha at around 1752 A.D. But according to popular belief, the temple is at least 1000 years old, as the Shiva lingams inside the sanctum sanctorum, representing the individual planets date back to the pre-medieval period of 4-10th century A.D.

The writer in this article dwells on the various theories that the temple continues to generate about its origin over the years and the lackadaisical attitude on the part of the authorities and the local populace in preserving intact the temple and its surroundings.

High on the western crest of the Chitrasal hill, overlooking the mighty Brahmaputra on one side and the city of Guwahati on the other, surrounded by tall trees, stands the mighty Navagraha temple. From a distance, a person unacquainted with traditional Assamese beehive domed religious architecture can easily confuse the prominent Shikara of the temple, for a large modern telescopic observatory. Strange as it may seem, the temple has more than its design, which connects it to the subject of the stars.

The Navagraha temple is supposedly built on an ancient astrological site, and is dedicated to nine planets, which are represented by nine stone Shiva lingams. These nine planets do not exactly correlate to the nine planets that circle the sun, but only five of them, which are Budh (Mercury), Sukra (Venus), Mangal (Mars), Brihaspati (Jupiter) and Sani (Saturn). The other so-called planets include the Sun and the Moon, and two astrological conjectural bodies called Rahu (North Node) and Ketu (South Node). These nine celestial bodies are personified and assigned with positive or negative energies, which are supposed to rule the ups and downs of our lives. In order to counter the influences of malevolent planets and increase the influence of benevolent ones, Hindu believers regularly worshipped these deified heavenly bodies.

The temple can be reached by both a vehicular road, as well as by a flight of steps leading up from the bottom of the hill. It is a relatively modern construction, which had been rebuilt after it was devastated in the earthquake of 1897 A.D. The earlier temple was built by the dictate of the Ahom King Rajeshwar Singha at around 1752 A.D. It is, however, believed that the temple is of much earlier origin, and is at least 1000 years old, as the Shiva lingams inside the inner sanctum, representing the individual planets are dated to the pre-medieval period of 4-10th century A.D.

The origin of this pilgrimage place, which is the second most important in the region, after the Kamakhy temple, and the only one of its kind in Northern India, is shrouded in mystery, as absolutely nothing is known about its background. Sparing a brief report in the Kalika
Purana, and a fleeting reference in the Markandeya Purana, no aspect of the temple is covered in any of the other ancient texts of the region, and neither are there any comprehensive religious myths associated with it. One folk tradition says that the original temple is as old as the Kamakhya temple, i.e., 4-6th century A.D., and existed since the time of King Bhaskarvarmana who also reigned in the early part of the 6th century A.D. Others claim that the area was a major centre of astrology and was visited throughout the ages by many prominent exponents of this mystic science, including, none other than the great Varahamihira. Both the legends may be true, but as they are not validated by any historic text, we are again left in the dark about the actuality.

The stone inscription in the temple placed by the Ahom builders, refers to the temple not as Navagraha but as the Navaratna temple, and adds that the temple is built on the Chitrasal hill, upon a peak called Navagraha. It does not mention about any earlier temple being located on the spot, as in the case of other reconstructed sites, like the Kamakhya or the Hayagriva Madhav temple.

Nabagraha Temple

The Kalika Purana, which had been compiled at around the 9th century A.D., refers to Assam as an ancient seat of astrology. Firstly it says that Pragjyotisha, the ancient name of Guwahati, came from the Sanskrit words Prag and Jyotisha, which means the Eastern Star, and that the place got its name, because Lord Brahma meditated here and later created a star, thus establishing a mythological link in between the place, and astrological or astronomical work. It also mentions that the Navagrahas are worshipped on the Chitrasal hill. As no coordinates were given for the Chitrasila, it is assumed to be the Arvak or the Eastern hill of Guwahati, where the present Navagraha temple is located.

The Kalika Purana’s claim that Kamrupa, i.e., ancient Assam was an astrological centre is not incorrect, as there are many traces of both an ancient solar cult and the practice of worshipping stars being strongly prevalent in the region. The traditional Assamese system of astrology, which is known as Kamrupa-nibandhaniya-Khandasadhya, and is now all but extinct, except in a few pockets in lower Assam, also exemplifies this tradition. This method of astrological calculation is completely different from every other school of Indian astrology, as instead of using mathematics, the various permutations and combinations are achieved by orally reciting sutras.
The Navagraha temple today is only a place of worship, and no astronomical or astrological calculations are done inside, but the area around the shrine is crowded with a large number of astrologers offering consultations, thus in a way preserving the original theme of the temple.

There are many theories about the inception of this shrine, and the tradition in which it was built. The modern priests of the temple as well as the astrologers living around it, are of the opinion that the temple by itself was meant only for worshipping the deified stars and planets, and possesses no other astrological or astronomical significance. They also believe that both the present temple and the one built by Rajeshwar Singha, were built on the ruins of a more ancient temple.

A few historians on the other hand are convinced that the temple had been an early solar observatory. The basis of their argument is that the nine Shiva lingams inside the inner sanctum are arranged in a circular manner, with the one in the centre representing the Sun, thus suggestive of the pattern also used in the many presumptive ancient solar observatories and calendars, from around the world, starting from Stonehenge in England to the rock circles in North America. Moreover, its location also provides maximum amount of direct sunlight during the day, which is essential for all such work.

The priests and astrologers oppose the observatory theory, by claiming that the Shiva lingams are arranged in a circular manner, and assigned with identities of specific planets, taking into consideration the four directions, adhering to the traditional norms set by the Sage Pratayan. This is a slightly confusing point, as the directional identification of the individual Shiva lingams with respective astronomical planets, in the temple, conflict with the directions assigned to the various heavenly bodies as per the norms of classical Hindu Astrology.

Just as both the camps insist upon their variant, they are equally unable to substantiate their respective theories with adequate and at the same time scientifically acceptable proof. However, a number of factors, when carefully analysed, lead to the distinct possibility that the ancient remains might have never belonged to a temple, or at least not the kind we normally expect one to be.

Firstly, the Kalika Purana only talks of the settings and the hill, and not about a temple. It is not clear, whether the existence of a temple is implied, or it was not mentioned, because none existed. Secondly, it is most unusual for an existent temple not to have any myths or legends associated with it, nor to have any king, mythical or otherwise, attributed to be its builder, as per the tradition of all major ancient Hindu temples. Gauging from the huge floor plan of the temple, the supposed pre-medieval temple, must have been gigantic in proportion, and so its ruins should have been scattered all over the place. However, searching the area for any such archaeological evidences, virtually no traces of any ruins of that age, either in the temple's structure or nearby had been found. The few rock cut blocks, lying around the temple, bear no testimony to the existence of a temple, and can neither be identified as any specific parts of the structure. Another aspect, which counteracts the existence of a temple, is the lack of any old path leading up to it from the plains. Every ancient temple located on a hill, has at least one man-made path or road leading up to it, which can be identified even when totally eroded and washed away, from the incidence of rocks or bricks located in a serpentine manner.

A recent archaeological discovery of thirteen stone Shiva lingams on the south eastern crest of the Chitrarasal hill, a short walking distance from the Navagraha temple, brings in more uncertainty to this already confusing subject. It is difficult to recreate the pattern in which they were originally set, as most of them were dug up from the ground, but it is believed that they were also located in a circle. Here three of them are exactly of the same design and dimensions as those of the Navagraha temple, the rest are considerably smaller in size. As in the case of the latter, no old structural ruins were found in its near vicinity, nor is there any
trace of an ancient trail or path leading towards the site. It was also discovered that the
location is aligned due east of the Navagraha temple, and situated almost on the same
latitude, only on a higher elevation. These Shiva lingams are apparently of the same period
as those of the Navagraha temple, and it is quite probable that while the latter were
discovered during the Ahom period, and a temple was built on that site, these remained
hidden in the jungle till they were re-discovered in this century.

It is also important to mention that due to the slack attitude of the authorities concerned,
and the local population, the Shiva lingams have been shifted from their original place to
make way for a new complex of buildings recently built by a Government Housing
Corporation, and are now positioned near their sanitary tanks. Besides, two of them, one
large and one small are now missing from the site and are now located in two different
temples. Both of the lingams were removed without the permission of the Archaeological
Department, an act deemed illegal by the law.

Considering all the facts at our disposal, it is difficult to sustain the claim of the existence of
the legendary ancient Navagraha temple, while we can only speculate about the mysterious
Shiva lingams located in both the places, on top of the Chitrasal hill, and about the identity of
the people who placed them there, and what their intent might have been. Could it have been
the work of an esoteric Shaivite sect, which chose to live on the uninhabited hills far away
from other human settlements? Or are they the remnants of an unfinished complex of
temples, which featured in the grandiose plans of some long forgotten monarch, but never
saw the light of the day.

It is also possible that both the sites had actually been ancient solar observatories, used by
astrologers, applying them for some astronomical calculations now forever lost to man.
Though no concrete evidence is available in support of this theory, it does seem to be a
realistic option, as both their formations and locations strongly point to this direction. The
circular arrangement is similar to many other pre-historic observatories. Moreover, the
eastern site could get the first sunlight in all the seasons, while the western location of the
present Navagraha temple can catch the last light of the sunset throughout the year. As for,
why Shiva lingams were used instead of just pillars or posts, the Hindu tradition usually
associated all sciences with religion.

This field of suppositions can continue indefinitely, as lack of facts always generates
speculative theories. Moreover, with the lack of any serious study of these intriguing remains
of a bygone era, and the sorry state in which the evidence are lying, there is a great chance
that we will never have any serious answers about them. A state of affairs blissfully ignored
by the thousands of pilgrims who visit the temple in the hope of warding off evil planetary
influence.

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