Identification of Design Elements in Naamghar of Assam

Thesis submission in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Charu Monga
Roll No. 146105002

Under the supervision of
Professor Amarendra Kumar Das

Department of Design

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY GUWAHATI

Guwahati-781039, Assam, INDIA

April, 2019

ABSTRACT

Design is considered as a creative human activity and envelops all aspects of social life. Religious places howsoever simple, complex, small or gigantic they may be, are also benefited by the creative human urge. Design have a complex mutual relation with the social setup and changes. In this context the design and architecture of religious places of Naamghar (in Assam) at different periods of history had been transformed by design. The study looks at this significant relation between design elements of Naamghars and changes over time. The change in the religious expression from Brahminical to simpler and more simpler form of Bhakti or Naam was a phenomenon spread over large part of North India as also eastern part of the country. The bhakti movement represented by Nanak, Meera Bai, Kabir, Ramkrishna, Sufis and other saints to name a few was a distinctly different pattern of religious belief and specific in contrast to the Brahminical style and faith during the medivial period in India.

There are a large number of Naamghars in active existence in Assam. The participation of society continued to be substantial irrespective of major changes in terms of social, political & economic dimensions. Naamghar as a movement may also be viewed in the context of religious changes taking place in the country particularly in Northern and Eastern part. Moving away from the Vedic design style, the religious practice during the later Mughal evolved bhakti & Sufi movement pioneered by Nanak, Meera Bai, Ramkrishna, Surdas and Khusro.

Naamghars were introduced in Assam by the Vaisnavite Saint Srimanta Shankardeva (1449-1568) between 15th and 16th century AD. Shankardeva was a great social reformer. He initiated new ideas and it gave a fresh turn to new faiths, which in certain part of the country took the shape of a revolution. Under the corrupting influence of power, wealth and the ritualism that had to some extent taken over on the Hinduism and the ruling classes of the Hindu society, various mal-practices were committed in the name of the religion, which violated the social structure. These factors impelled the Hindu thinkers and reformers of the day to evolve a simpler and liberal faith that would be acceptable to all alike. These sequences of movements came to be like a Vaishanava Bhakti movement. It brought a renaissance in the social & religious life of the people. It was open to all classes, caste and religion. The motivation behind the movement is to bring everyone into the same level and promote equality.

The word "Naamghar" consist of two words called "Naam" means "Name" and "Ghar" means "House"; is a place of congregational worship and other activities associated with the Ekasarana religion of Assamese society. Naamghar is a movement associated with the basic building blocks of Assamese society. It's not only a place of worship but also a central meeting point where all the people discuss about the issues related to their society. Naamghars function in the society is intense as they are the meeting points of congregations, as well as theatre of dramatic performances like bhawona, raas lila and many others. The Naamghar are also called Kirtanghar. They are the central core structure of Satras of Assam (monasteries of the Eksarana religion). One can find them spread across Assam in every village. These are widespread in Assam and one can find more then a single Naamghar in a village, which signifies many congregational communities. This is also reflected in the simple design structure of Naamghar.

This research explores the layers of cultural re-construction of design elements, which brings people of Assam together. The Naamghar tradition has been taken as a case study for the above.