

Garh DouL: An Archaeological and Cultural Window into Ancient Assam

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Abstract- Garh DouL, situated in Tarajan Kumargaon, close to Tezpur in Assam, is an exceptional archaeological site where early medieval urbanization, religious architecture, and regional mythology converge. This article presents a critical study of the historical, cultural, and mythological aspects of Garh DouL based on archaeological evidence, ancient texts like the Kalika Purana, and rich oral traditions passed down by local populations. Dated as having been constructed in the 7th–8th centuries CE, perhaps by the mythical King Banasura of Mahabharata renown, Garh DouL consists of brick temple tumuli, moats, and fortifications indicative of it having had both sacred and strategic functions in the past. The site is strongly rooted in local mythologies, with legends describing it as the focal point of divine passion, cosmic struggle, and miraculous intervention. Garh DouL today is still a "living monument," maintaining lively worship and cultural festivals through grass-roots efforts, even as it has struggled with extensive degradation owing to environmental exposure, abandonment, and scarce conservation resources. By combining archaeological investigation with local folklore, this article sheds light on Garh DouL as a timeless centre of Assamese identity and insists on the critical need for sustainable, community-based heritage conservation.

Index terms- Garh DouL, Tezpur, Salastambha dynasty, Kalika Purana, archaeological conservation, living heritage.

I. INTRODUCTION

Located at the intersection of South Asia and Southeast Asia, Assam has a terrain rich in archaeological sites that spill out levels of millennia-old civilization, legend, and syncretism of cultures. Of these, Garh DouL in Tarajan Kumargaon in proximity to Tezpur in Sonitpur district is a very evocative reminder of Assam's wealth of heritage. As a State Protected Monument, and also as monument number SAS-95 in the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) list, Garh DouL harmoniously integrates early medieval urban architecture, mythological legend, local faith, and current issues in heritage protection.

This article presents a holistic overview of Garh DouL—its prehistoric roots, mythological connotations, architectural revelations, and current conservation challenges—by combining archaeological remains, textual narratives, and contemporary faith of the local population. By putting all these together, Garh DouL appears not just as a historical relic but as a living symbol of Assam's shared memory and regional identity.

II. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

1. Geographical and Chronological Context

Garh DouL stands at a location which is 5–7km to the south-west of Tezpur town where the Brahmaputra River flows on the north bank. The site stretches across a 250 by 250 meter expanse with its perimeter marked by Parbotia to the south and Kumargaon to the north and Deurigaon and Sat Pukhuri to the east and Besseria and Kaushik Nadi to the west. The site receives its name "Garh DouL" from the Assamese word "Garh" (fort/embankment) which describes the soil embankment that used to encircle the site.

Archaeological stratigraphy and architectural analysis date the site's origins to the 7th–8th centuries CE, coinciding with the prominence of the Salastambha dynasty. This pulse of early medieval urbanism aligns Garh DouL with broader patterns of organized settlement and political ascendancy in the Brahmaputra Valley. Ancient Tezpur, historically known as Sonitpur, bonded to Garh DouL through both spatial proximity and cultural narrative, underscores the site's pivotal location within networks of power, trade, and cultural exchange.

2. Architectural Features

Garh DouL features two large brick mounds together with defensive walls which define its main structure. The archaeological findings of temple foundations show advanced brick construction methods and expert use of local cement which proves traditional engineering capabilities. The main construction elements of the site include fired bricks bonded with local lime-based mortar.

Garh DouL exists as a fortified structure because its defensive walls and broken gateways and moat remnants prove its defensive nature. The fortifications at this site point toward its usage as a regional power base or sacred place or military base. The planned placement of brick mounds alongside moats and temple bases demonstrates purposeful urban design that considers both defensive needs and ritual accessibility. Seven substantial tanks including Satpukhuri and Salibali exist around Garh DouL together with six

others which span about five bighas each. The ceremonial tanks at the site demonstrate the organized settlement pattern of early Assam according to historical interpretations.

3. Archaeological Investigations and Findings

Systematic archaeology at Garh DouL began to flourish in 2009-2010 under Dr. H.N. Dutta, Director of the Archaeological Survey of Assam, though preliminary interest and local explorations predate this. The ASI conducted detailed mapping, stratigraphic burials, artifact recovery, and architectural analysis.

III. MAJOR DISCOVERIES

The evidence recovered from the archaeological site suggests brick temple foundations, remnants of ancient cement, building materials, walls, moats, and perhaps gateways, imply there was a sacred use to the site that endured through centuries. The evidence shows religious activity on the site and may provide some understanding of the technologies rated to constructing, repairing, and rebuilding by past builders. Regardless of period, the evidence of a defensive nature and sense of planned urbanism, which emphasizes the need for defence without neglecting a ritual rite of passage to the ceremonial enclosure, and the site occupied for any duration as suggested by any number of possible artifacts ranging from potsherds to terracotta and iron - to some extent at least offers some insight to the longer-term transformational and possible permanent nature of these episodic uses related to material architecture (e.g. domestic, ceremonial, and administrative uses). The layout planimetric with mounds and water bodies suggested some planning and design, which was also noted in other early medieval structure sites in Assam and with comparative structures of nearby sites, like Da-Parbatia and Bamuni Hills, indicated some emergent primarily through use of shared architectural vision (and/or cultures) throughout the Brahmaputra corridor as well as an integration of divine and temporal structures.

IV. MYTHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

1. Kalika Purana and the Legend of Banasura

The cultural essence of Garh DouL embodies Assamese mythological tales which find their roots in the Kalika Purana alongside resonances in the Mahabharata and Bhagavata Purana. Banasura who controlled Sonitpur in Tezpur during ancient times built Garh DouL as a protective structure to shelter his daughter Usha.

The core of the story revolves around Usha's dreamlike connection with Krishna's grandson Aniruddha. Banasura discovers the clandestine connection between Aniruddha and Usha so he detains Aniruddha which leads to Krishna's violent attack on Garh DouL together with his divine army. The final battle between Shiva and Krishna known as the "Hari-Hara Yudha" occurred during that time. The city received its name Tezpur through the combination of "Tez" which refers to blood and "pur" which indicates a city or town.

The narrative reaches its end with Usha and Aniruddha's wedding which represents the combined power of divine opposites and the resolution of universal dualities present in Assamese spirituality.

2. The Tapestry of Living Legends

Beyond written texts, Garh DouL's mythic aura is kept alive through local legends and rituals:

Ritual bathing and worship: It is said that Banasura would bathe in the Kaushik Nadi (just west of the site) before visiting the Mahabhairab temple, reflecting a mytho-geographical landscape still recognized by villagers.

Marriage legend and tanks: Local tradition holds that Banasura excavated the Satpukhuri tanks to celebrate Usha's wedding, and nearby douls (shrines) hosted ritual ceremonies for Usha and her confidante, Chitralekha.

Miraculous and cautionary tales: Numerous stories caution that disrespecting the douL invites disaster, while devotion and offerings to the site can grant boons such as fertility, healing, or relief from hardship.

Artisan legacy: Another belief recounts how Chitralekha trained Usha and the daughters of Shiva in weaving at Garh DouL, with some stones identified locally as their ancient looms.

Such legends are not static relics but active forces that shape community practices. Rituals like lighting oil lamps, offering flowers, and prayer at the douL or its associated naamghar (community prayer house) are ongoing, infusing the site with contemporary spiritual relevance.

3. The Power of Symbolic Geography

Garh DouL's position as a "liminal" site—straddling both architectural evidence and allegorical narrative—means that it serves as a locus for the merging of fact and legend. This dual reality deepens its appeal, ensuring its continued presence in festivals, oral histories, local theater (bhaona), and family traditions.

V. CULTURAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

1. Tezpur: City of Blood

The very name "Tezpur" (city of blood) enshrines Garh DouL's mythic past within regional identity. The symbolic shedding of blood in the divine battle gives Tezpur both historical gravitas and sacred valence, reinforcing Garh DouL as the heart of an ancient, drama-filled landscape. This story permeates the city's consciousness, influencing everything from arts and literature to festival cycles.

2. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE OF GREATER TEZPUR

Garh DouL functions within a cluster of monumental sites:

Da-Parbatia: Famed for its early stone temple gateway and exquisite Gupta-era sculpture—an index of evolving religious art and cross-cultural influences.

Bamuni Hills: Home to sculpted temple ruins and remnants of urban design, echoing the combination of sacred space and civic planning found at Garh DouL.

Agnigarh: Celebrated in myth as the fortress of Usha, reinforcing the theme of fortified, legend-steeped urban centers along the Brahmaputra Valley.

The proximity and shared architectural features among these sites point to both a continuous history of occupation and dynamic exchange—in politics, art, and ritual—that characterized early and medieval Assam.

3. Social Life, Faith, and the Naamghar

Modern Garh DouL functions as a living heritage site beyond its historical origins. During 1984–85 Prafulla Saikia together with local villagers established a naamghar before the douL to restore both spirituality and heritage. The 1994 'Axom Bhaona Samaroh' together with other festivals have revitalized cultural pride together with stewardship practices. The site committee organizes regular rituals while maintaining the precincts and works with the ASI to preserve monuments while enabling accessible worship practices which serves as a model for maintaining the relevance of living traditions.

VI. CONSERVATION CHALLENGES AND CURRENT CONDITION

1. Protected Status and Ongoing Degradation

Despite official recognition—state protection, ASI cataloguing (SAS-95), and periodic awareness activities—Garh DouL suffers from steady erosion and social neglect. Early efforts after major excavations (2009–10 and before, with renewed ASI intervention in 2005) saw improvements such as signage and fencing, but follow-through was limited.

Contemporary challenges include:

Neglect and maintenance lapses: Absence of routine care leads to the overgrowth of vegetation, destructive animal grazing, and the build-up of garbage and litter.

Human and environmental threats: Grazing, unauthorized cultivation, anti-social behavior, and lack of security personnel result in progressive damage to exposed structures.

Loss from modern development: Expansion of nearby settlements and infrastructure threatens archaeological layers and foundation integrity.

Climatic erosion: Monsoon rains and seasonal flooding expedite the deterioration of brickwork and unprotected surfaces.

Underlying causes involve insufficient funding, lack of official monitoring, brief tenure in conservation management, and an endemic indifference toward archaeological resource preservation across much of rural India.

2. Community Initiatives and Opportunities

Local committees that operate with limited financial means have taken on informal guardianship duties to protect these areas. The naamghar creation together with self-managed festivals demonstrates an emerging grassroots approach which balances traditional rituals with tourism requirements. The development of Garh DouL into a dual-purpose academic and tourism destination demands continuous support for these initiatives.

3. The Case for Sustainable Conservation

The Garh DouL experience highlights urgent needs:

Formal/informal collaboration: Partnerships between heritage authorities, academics, civic groups, and local residents are crucial for long-term preservation.

Community engagement: When villagers feel invested in a site, as through regular festivals and naamghar management, their vigilance helps deter vandalism and ensures continued cleaning and small-scale repairs.

Tourism and education: Developing responsible, low-footprint tourism can channel resources into conservation while spreading awareness of Garh DouL's significance. Interpretive centers, digital archives, and guided tours are essential steps.

On-site staffing: Dedicated security and visitor management staff are urgently needed to protect physical remains and enhance visitor experience.

Modern documentation: Digital mapping and archiving must be prioritized to preserve site knowledge, especially given the enduring threat of environmental and human damage.

VII. ANALYTICAL SYNTHESIS: PLACE, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY

Archaeology Meets Myth: Beyond Bricks and Stones

To study Garh DouL is to engage not just with architecture and artifacts but with the dynamic interplay between material remains and symbolic meaning. Oral tradition, folklore, and community practices continually reshape the site's significance; Garh DouL is simultaneously an ancient artifact, a place of worship, a locus of local legend, and a vector for collective identity.

The Perils and Promise of Heritage

Garh DouL's ongoing vulnerability mirrors structural shortcomings in heritage management throughout India and wider South Asia. Legal protections are necessary but insufficient without public engagement and government commitment. Yet, Garh DouL also demonstrates the power of communal action in heritage stewardship: festivals, community prayer, and educational outreach have kept the site within local consciousness, creating a buffer against oblivion.

The Living Monument: Intertwining Fact and Legend

What makes Garh DouL especially compelling is its function as a "living monument"—a site where history and legend co-exist, mutually reinforcing the region's sense of ancient lineage and spiritual purpose. By anchoring narratives of divine conflict, celestial marriages, and miraculous healing to the site, Garh DouL fosters a sense of pride and continuity that is mostly absent from monuments mere physicality in other regions.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Garh DouL stands as an essential historical site which provides insight into Assam's architectural excellence together with its spiritual customs and mythical traditions. The brick structure with its ritual tanks and storytelling atmosphere documents Assam's evolution from military fortification to spiritual performance space to present-day living heritage site. The site's future survival depends on a balanced approach between scientific studies and strong conservation efforts together with community engagement and imaginative storytelling practices.

The teachings which emerge from Garh DouL extend past Assam's borders because heritage reaches its highest value through factual and belief-based connections and when specialists work alongside laypeople for shared stewardship and when places are understood as developing historical narratives of location and cultural remembrance.

Note on Sources and Credit

The information presented in this paper comes from the combination of archaeological investigations and state monument documentation and local oral history and detailed excavation reports and mythological narrative summaries from Kalika Purana, Mahabharata and Bhagavata Purana. The preservation of Garh DouL's stories and rituals owes much to the dedicated local community members while researchers and officials have contributed by documenting and interpreting the site for both scholars and public audiences. This synthesis presents the current state of knowledge about the Garh DouL while identifying present-day difficulties and prospects for protecting Assam's cultural heritage.