

# A Comparative Visual Study of Design Elements of Social Cultural Institutions, 'Namghar' with Monuments in South East Asia

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## Abstract

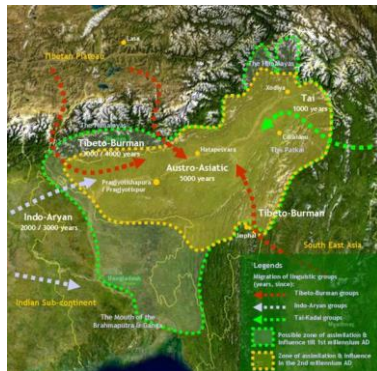
Namghar is an important socio-cultural institution, which plays a significant role in bringing together diverse communities especially from urban and rural areas as well as those who had fled to Assam from different South East Asian countries in the past. Many studies have shown the influence of East Asian Countries in Assamese music and culture. However, studies looking at the influences of other countries on the design elements of Namghar are hard to find. The objectives of this study are to provide visual documentation of design elements of Namghar and other institutions in South East Asia and to compare and discuss any differences in forms among them. One monument each from Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand was selected for a comparative study. Field observations using a high-resolution camera were made. It was found that though the outer forms of design elements of these social-cultural institutions are different, their symbolism and significance have profound similarities. Moreover, the influence on design elements of Namghar is related to Hinduism and also historical movement of tribes from Nagaland and Ahom kingdoms. While monuments in Indonesia are closely related to Hinduism, those in Bangkok and Vietnam appear to be influenced by Buddhist and Chinese architecture respectively. This comparison will help to preserve heritage, respect and promote culture and also any further re-design under rapid urbanization.

**Keywords:** Namghar, Social-cultural institution, South-East Asian cities, design elements, multidisciplinary culture, vernacular architecture

## 1. Introduction

Namghars are socio-cultural institutions in the form of vernacular building structures introduced to Assam by the *Vaisnavite* Saint Srimanta Shankardeva between 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. These were introduced as a consequence of *Vaishanava* Bhakti movement, which was initiated after 'Inequality'; suppression of lower class and mal-practices in Hinduism reached its peak in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century (Neog, 1998). This movement aimed to bring everyone to the same level and gave birth to 'Equality'. During that period, Namghars were essential structures, considered the basic building blocks of the Assamese society. It is not only a place of worship but also a central meeting point, where all the people come to discuss issues related to their society. Namghar also called *kirtan ghar* functions as meeting points of congregations, as well as theatre of dramatic performances like *Bhoana*, *Raas Lila* and many others (Neog, 1998).

The *Satras* institutions are unique within multidisciplinary socio-religious, cultural, art and architectural domains with their distinctive characteristics derived from the Bhakti movement (Borkakoti, 2005). From an architectural point of view, the design of the above institution has been also influenced by various external (or foreign) tribes, who have travelled from different parts such as Bhutan, Thailand, Mongolia, and other parts of East Asia (Guha, 1984; Taher, 1993). Figure 1 illustrates the movement of people (Bhagawati, 2002) from different neighboring parts around Assam. Assamese culture is developed under the great dynasties of *Pragjyotisha - Kamrupa*, during the first millennium AD. “The modern name of the province, Assam, is actually of quite recent origin. It is connected with the Shan invaders who entered the Brahmaputra Valley in the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D., and who were known as Ahoms” (Barua, 2011). According to Gait (2013), it is developed due to acculturation of different ethno-cultural groups under various socio-political systems in different periods of history.



**Fig. 1:** Map illustrating directions of movement of tribes into Assam  
(Source: Bhagawati, 2002)

It can be observed that the multi-dimensional institution (i.e., Namghar) was inspired from *Murang-ghar* or *Deka Chang*, which was actually originated from Nagaland Tribe (Bhuyan, 2008). *Lai-Khutta* as name of pillars were from Namghar has its roots in Ahom, which is the main language of *Tai* people of *Ahom* kingdom (Dutta, 2011). The uses of Garudra motifs are auspicious, guarding and destroyers of pride. They are very common in the monuments in South-East Asian countries, especially Mongolian culture (Mahanta, 2007). Similarly, *Mukh bhaona* (*Ankiya* plays) has its origin in South East Asian countries. Gong is a musical instrument, which also has its roots in the South East Asian countries such as Thailand, Myanmar and China (Haopik, 2015). Some similarities with the Buddhist monasteries or Viharas (Neog, 1998) can be found in terms of architectural aspects. “The arrangement of *Satras* as described above often evokes comparison with the Buddhist monasteries or Viharas with the provision of monk’s dwelling. But the influence of two other types of religious institutions, more than Buddhist viharas, seems to have gone deep into the origin of Assam *Satras*. Those are the great *Vaishnava* shrine, the *Jagannatha* temple in Puri being the chief amongst them, and secondly, the residential institutions of various monastic communities of India, chiefly those of the schools of Sankaracarya and Ramananda. It is however to be noted that the *Vaishnava* establishments of Assam are generally called *Satras*, and not *maths*. This name seems to have been taken from the Bhagavata - purana, where it occurs in numerous places (Neog, 2004).

While there has been numerous studies studying the influence of foreign elements in cultural and musical instruments (Haopik, 2015), there are hardly any comparative studies on the architectural design elements of Namghar with the monumental institutions of similar themes in different countries. There is a lack of visual comparison of design elements for in-depth interpretations and analysis. Such studies will help promote respect for different

communities and their culture as well as in the design process of modernization of these structures.

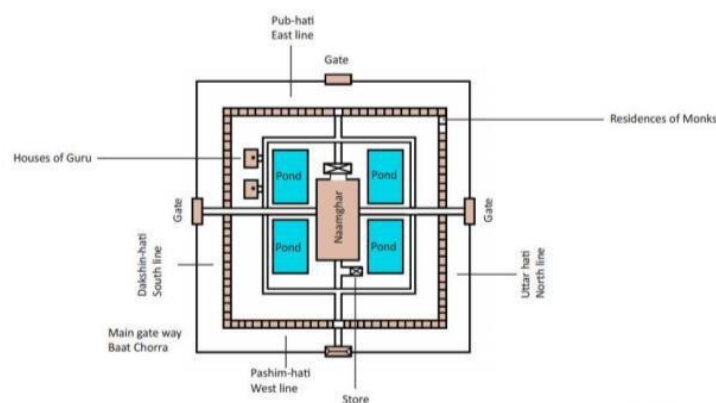
The objectives of this study are to explore the design elements of Namghar as well as compare them with those of selected monuments in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand (Bangkok), Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh) and Indonesia (Bali).

## 2. Methodology

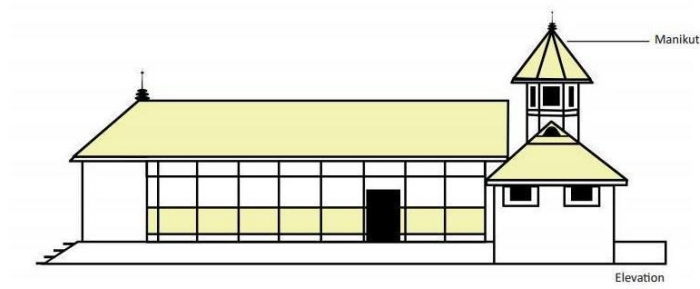
Since some of the principals of Namghar (including architecture) were inspired from Buddhism (Goswami, 2005; Smith, 2007), the structures that are mostly associated with Buddhism were selected. Goswami (2005) has said that many of the teachings in Vaisnavism resembles the doctrines in Buddhism. Further, Goswami (2005) states that except the Sarana in Hari or God-head, the other three Saranas in Buddhism are exactly identical to that of Kamarupa Vaisnavism. These studies report similarities in principals but less attention have been paid to architecture. The methodology includes historical research on Namghar and relation to elements of design in Namghar with other selected monuments in South East Asian Countries. The main Namghar (Barpeta) was chosen for comparison with other South East Asian countries. Monuments such as “Grand Palace Structure in Bangkok”, “Cao dai temple in Vietnam” and “Ubud Batuan in Bali” with a similar theme of Namghar were selected. Interior as well as exterior elements of these institutions with that of Namghar are compared. Any similarities and differences along with their significance are discussed with respect to their culture and religion. Figure 2.1 shows the overview of Namghar and Fig. 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 illustrate the plan view, side view and arrangement of elements inside Namghar respectively. Field observations were conducted using high-resolution cameras to capture exterior as well as interior elements of monuments in Indonesia (Fig.3.2; Ubud Batuan in Bali), Vietnam (Fig. 3.3;Cao Dai temple) and Thailand (Fig. 3.4;Grand Palace Structure). Images were compared and visually analyzed to identify and compare the forms and aesthetics of key architectural (inner and outer) elements of Namghar. Differences and similarities observed were interpreted and discussed.



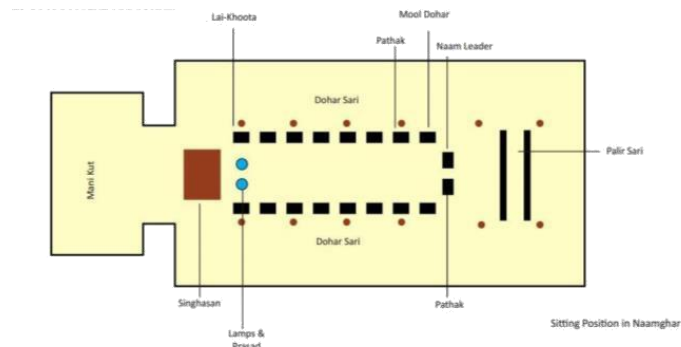
**Fig 2.1:** Overview of Ramdiyar Namghar in Sualkuchi, Assam, India  
(Source: C. Monga)



**Fig. 2.2:** Plan view of Satra in Assam  
(Source: C. Monga)








**Fig. 2.3:** Side view of Namghar in Assam



**Fig. 2.4:** Plan view showing interior design elements in Namghar

### 3. Results and discussion

In this section, captured images were analyzed. Results are categorized into outer and inner architectural design elements.





Namghar of Assam	Temple of Vietnam	Temple of Thailand
		
<b>Fig. 3.1:</b> Namghar in a Satra, Assam	<b>Fig. 3.2:</b> Ubud Batuan Temple Structure in Indonesia, Bali	<b>Fig. 3.4 (a):</b> Grand palace structure in Bangkok
		
	<b>Fig. 3.3:</b> Cao dai temple in Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam	<b>Fig. 3.4 (b):</b> Grand palace structure in Bangkok

**Fig. 3:** Comparison of structures of buildings between India, Vietnam, Thailand and Bali  
(Photo credit: C. Monga)



### Comparison of exterior design elements

Figures 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 show the overview of outer structures of selected monuments in India (Namghar, Assam), Vietnam (Cao dai temple), Thailand (Grand Palace) and Indonesia (Ubud Batuan). It can be observed that the shape of the roof exterior for monument in India is closer to hip, while in Indonesia and Thailand it is gable shaped. The rooftop of Namghar is rectangular with a hip roof raised on pillars. However, in the case of monuments in Indonesia, the rooftop is a traditional thatch roof with lateral support from bamboo. On the other hand, in the case Thailand, the roof top is more curved on the edges and is made of concrete unlike that in India and Indonesia. The rooftop and outer structure of monuments in Thailand has multiple ornamented roof tiers. The use of multiple roof tiers makes it more aesthetic than functional. The presence of multiple breaks in each roof enhances lightning.

Namghar of Assam	Temple of Vietnam	Temple of Thailand
		
<b>Fig. 4.1:</b> Gate of Namghar in Assam	<b>Fig. 4.2:</b> Gate of monument in Vietnam	<b>Fig. 4.3:</b> Gate of Grand palace monument in Bangkok, Thailand
		
		<b>Fig. 4.4:</b> A door in Tirta Empul Temple, Bali, Indonesia (Source: Kerri Ryan)

**Fig. 4:** Comparison of structure of gates between India, Vietnam, Thailand and Bali  
(Photo credit: C. Monga)

Figure 4 compares the outer structure of gates of monuments in India, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia. It can be observed that the forms of outer gates are distinctively different for monuments in India, Vietnam and Thailand. There are three gates of Namghar with one in center and other two on sides. The side gates are much wider when compared to that at the center. Though, three gates exist in the case of Vietnam monuments but their size appears to be much smaller than that of Namghar. When compared to that in Thailand, there appears to be a single gate, which is of much smaller size than that of the other two monuments. The gate in Bali appears to be much smaller in width and height.



Namghar of Assam	Temple of Vietnam	Temple of Thailand
		
		
		
<b>Fig. 5.1:</b> Lion on entrance of Namghar in Assam	<b>Fig. 5.2:</b> Lion on entrance of temple at Vietnam	<b>Fig. 5.3:</b> Dragon on entrance in Bangkok

**Fig. 5:** Comparison of lion on structural entrance of India, Vietnam, Thailand and Bali  
(Photo credit: C. Monga)

The gate of the monument in Vietnam is adorned with sculptures of dragons at the top and lions at the bottom (Fig 5.2). The monument structure is influenced from Chinese architecture (Cai, 2011). Lion symbolizes power and grandeur. It is believed to protect monuments from evil spirits. There are two lions (one male and another female - Fig 5.2). The importance of two distinct genders is that the male is guarding the structure and the female protects those dwellings inside the building. The presence of lions at the entrance are also there in Namghar, although the form is completely different (Fig. 5.1). There is no distinct gender difference in lions in the case of Namghar. Moreover, instead of dragons as in the case of Vietnamese, there is a large bird like creature or humanoid called Garudas, which appears in both Hinduism and Buddhism at entrance of Namghar (its being called here Udantu Singha or Flying Lion). Garuda was believed by *Vaishnavas* to be the keeper of the *Satra* and protects it from misfortunes. Two Garudas appear to face outwards unlike the dragons at the top of the monument in Vietnam. These are also found to be present at the top of Gate. For the case of Bangkok, there are no such

creatures at the top of gate. However, there lions (similar) and a dragon-bird like creature at the gates (Fig. 5.3). Unlike that in Vietnamese, the forms of these are distinct and there is no gender distinction in lions for monument in Bangkok. The influence of these forms of animals came from Chinese architecture (Keswick et al., 2003; Cai, 2011). In summary, there appears to be similarity in concept of guarding the monument from misfortune or spirit using creatures in all three structures (India, Vietnam, and Bangkok). However, the forms and design are distinct, which might be due to differences in external influences as well as religious practices such as Hinduism majorly in the case of Namghar, (Chihara, 1996; Sathapitanon and Mertens, 2012) and Buddhism and Chinese architecture (Keswick et al., 2003; Noppe and Hubert, 2003) influence in case of Thailand and Vietnam respectively.

### Comparison of interior design elements

Namghar of Assam	Temple of Vietnam
	
<b>Fig. 6.1:</b> Interior space of Barpeta Namghar	<b>Fig. 6.2:</b> Interior space of Cao dai temple monument in Vietnam






**Fig. 6:** Comparison of interior hall space between India and Vietnam  
(Photo credit: C.Monga)

Figures 6.1 and 6.2 show the comparison and overview of the main hall of monument of *Barpeta Namghar* and *Cao dai* temples respectively. It can be observed that for Namghar, the main hall is a rectangular one, where devotees sit along the two sides for offering prayer. In addition to this, it also serves as the meeting place of the village panchayat systems that are common in India. The hall has an outer wall (in this picture but not necessary for open ventilation) with the main entrance at the west end. It can be seen that the two parallel rows of pillars run along the length. The northeast most pillar, called the *lai khuta*, whose name has its roots in Ahom, which is the main language of *Tai* people of *Ahom* kingdom (Dutta, 2011). *Satradhikar* usually sits against the *laikhuta* whereas the *deka-adhikar*, the *bhakats* the musicians and lay devotees are all pre-determined. The use of space is a formal one and highly ordered. The hall also contains idols of mythical figures like Garuda and Hanuman. These are mythological *Vaishnava* devotees that face east near the western end or north and south near the eastern end. The floor is made of concrete here, which was traditionally mud in ancient Namghars (Gogoi, 2016). The devotees usually sit along the length of the outer wall.

On the other hand, for monuments in Vietnam, the shape of hall is rectangular too, but the sitting arrangement of devotees is spread throughout the room facing the east end. Similar to that of Namghar, the pillars run along the length, however the carvings are different from that of Namghar (Fig. 6.2). The carvings on pillars are that of Dragon, which has its roots in Chinese architecture (Cai, 2011). Ceiling (not shown here) is usually made of tin sheets in case of Namghar (Gogoi, 2016), whereas it is of traditional thatch supported with steel beams







(instead of wooden for Namghar) for Indonesia. The original ceiling for Namghar that was thatch has been replaced by Tin these days. Ceiling is supported by pillars are usually erected with wooden beams (in this case it is concrete for Namghar) or *chati* supporting an architrave over which rests the roof/ceiling. The *chatis* were used for hanging large bamboo masks and other accessories of the cultural performances inside Namghar.

Namghar of Assam	Temple of Vietnam	Temple of Thailand
		
<b>Fig. 7.1:</b> Pillar of Namghar in Assam	<b>Fig. 7.2:</b> Pillar of Cao Dai temple in Vietnam	
		
<b>Fig. 7.3:</b> Ornamental design in the ceiling of Auniti Namghar	<b>Fig. 7.4:</b> Ornamental design in the ceiling of monument at Vietnam	<b>Fig. 7.5:</b> Ceiling design in Thailand Bangkok in Buddhist temple shrine inside interior gold Buddha Asian

**Fig. 7:** Comparison of Pillars and Ornamental design on ceiling of monument in India, Vietnam, Thailand and Bali  
(Photo credit: C. Monga)



Figure 7 compares the ornamental design of the ceilings in interior hall of monuments in Vietnam (7.2 and 7.4), India (7.1 and 7.3) and Bangkok (7.5). The form of ornamental ceiling is circular in the case of Namghar, whereas it is concentric rectangles and circles in the case of Bangkok and Vietnam respectively. There are obviously distinct differences in their forms and shapes of ornamental design. This might have to do with the religious symbolism.



Namghar of Assam	Temple of Vietnam	Temple of Thailand
		
<b>Fig. 8.1:</b> Windows in Assam Namghar	<b>Fig. 8.2:</b> Windows in Cao dai monument at Vietnam	
		
<b>Fig. 8.3:</b> Berpeta Satra jali work		<b>Fig. 8.4:</b> Bangkok monuments jali work



**Fig. 8:** Comparison of windows and jali work on ceiling of monument in India, Vietnam, Thailand and Bali  
(Photo credit: C.Monga)

Windows are located on the outer wall of the hall. Figure 8.0 shows the comparison of the overview of windows and *jali* works design between monuments in India (8.1 and 8.3), Vietnam (8.2) and Bangkok (8.4). It can be observed that the windows in the case of Namghar occupy a small section of the wall in the shape of a semi-circle. The design of the window appears to be of lotus flower petals. On the other hand, for monuments in Vietnam, the window occupies almost full portion of the wall. As seen in figure 8.0, the walls are left with *jalis*, which allow light and air at the same time and embellish. Forms and function are adeptly utilized in *Jali* works of Namghar.

Namghar of Assam	Temple of Thailand
	
<b>Fig. 9.1:</b> Miniature version of palki Namghar, Assam	<b>Fig. 9.2:</b> Miniature version of temple in Bangkok

**Fig. 9:** Comparison of miniature version of Palki at monument in India and Thailand  
(Photo credit: C. Monga)

Figures 9.1 and 9.2 show the overview of miniature version of sacred thrones (Guru Asana for Namghar) for Namghar (*Manikut*) and monument in Bangkok respectively. The concepts of both the thrones are similar and these are often found to be placed not only in monuments but also in homes of individuals. These are also mobile, where people in a village

Namghar of Assam	Temple of Thailand
	
<b>Fig. 10.2:</b> Sarai in Namghar, Assam	<b>Fig. 10.1:</b> Sarai in Bangkok temple

**Fig. 10:** Comparison of Sarai in monument in India and Thailand  
(Photo credit: C. Monga)

often offer prayers at this throne during festivals. As appeared from the shape, the sacred throne of Namghar has a single roof whereas that of Bangkok has multiple roofs with curved edges. The interior is much more spaced and ornamented in the case of Bangkok as compared to a more simplified version of *Manikut* in Assam. Prayers are often conducted in the form of Sarai (Fig. 10.1 & Fig. 10.2) for Namghar and that in Bangkok. In the case of Sarai of Namghar, it contains leaves, *diya*, banana (or other fruits) and some sweets whereas for Bangkok, it is mainly garland. Though, there are differences among design forms in these offerings, the concepts remain more or less similar in these monuments.

## Conclusions

The importance of socio-cultural institutions plays a very important role in integrating the urban society and maintaining harmony among them especially during the times of rapid urbanization in developing countries. This has motivated the need to study some of the important social-cultural institution namely *Namghar* in India as well as its comparatives with similar institutions in Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia. This study provides a visual documentation of the exterior and interior elements of these socio-cultural institutions. These are highly important for the preservation of cultural heritage. It was found that though there are distinct differences in the physical forms of interior (pillars, praying or discussion hall, ceilings, windows, jail works) and exterior elements (presence of animal creatures as guards, gate forms, roof top) of monuments in these countries, the symbolism and significance of these elements are more or less similar.

The difference in physical forms of exterior and interior elements can be related to the external influence coming from religious practices (or history of ruling country) such as Buddhism associated with those institutions. It has been found that except for Sarana in Hari or God-head, other three *saranas* of Buddhism is strikingly identical to that of *Vaisnavism* of Namghar. Further, many of the teachings in *Vaisnavism* have found similarities with the doctrines of Buddhism (Goswami, 2005). Smith, (2007) shows the other similarity by connecting *Bhakatas* role in Namghar with that of Buddhist Monks residing in the Monastery. Namghar in India and Ubud Batuan in Indonesia are more closely related to the practices in Hinduism as well as culture coming from the Ahom kingdom and Naga tribe, while in Vietnam it is more influenced by Chinese (Weswick et al., 2003) and Bangkok by Buddhism (Sathapitanon and Mertens, 2012).

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