

# Monuments at Karen-Ghar Complex in Sibsagar, Assam - An edifice in dialect with Mishing House

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## Abstract

Unlike other states in India which had a long reign of multiple rulers belonging to various cultural and religious backgrounds so much so that monuments of that era bore a strong influence of those rulers. Such is the case with Assam, and it was ruled by the *Ahom* for six hundred years. The capital town of the *Ahom* Dynasty at Sibsagar holds the ruins of that period, giving the insight to the architecture of that era. This paper is a compilation of two monuments in Karen Ghar complex - Talatal Ghar and Rang Ghar, which investigates its connection to the Chang houses of Mishing tribes and the ancient text of Bhuranji. The monuments at Karen Ghar have taken elements from both Hindu and Muslim style of architecture. The paper is an attempt to establish the influence of Chang houses on the built form and plan of these monuments.

**Keywords:** KarenGhar, Sibsagar, Chang Ghar, Mishing house.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sibsagar is one of the oldest cities located in Upper Assam. The erstwhile Rangpur, Sibsagar or Shivsagar was an important capital of *Ahom* rulers. The *Sukapha*, a Tai-prince of Mungrimungram was said to have migrated to Assam in the thirteenth century. During their six-hundred-year old regime, *Ahom* rulers have shifted capitals from Charaideo, Saragua, Gargaon, then to Sibsagar and finally for some time Jorhat. All the capitals were located in Upper Assam and several historic monuments were constructed during this period defining *Ahom* style of Architecture. Most prominent of these monuments are located in Karen Ghar complex namely Talatal Ghar and Rang Ghar. These monuments have also been mentioned in the *Ahom* chronical called *Bhuranji*. Rang Ghar which lies west to Talatal Ghar, is a pavilion with open-air amphitheatre constructed by *Ahom* king Swargadeo Pramatta Singha in A.D. 1744-51. The second monument Talatalghar, also named as 'Karenghar' by Archeological Survey of India (ASI, 2010), here will be referred as Karen Ghar as stated by ASI. Talatal Ghar was a palace built as an army base by *Ahom* king Rajeshwar Singha in AD 1751-69.

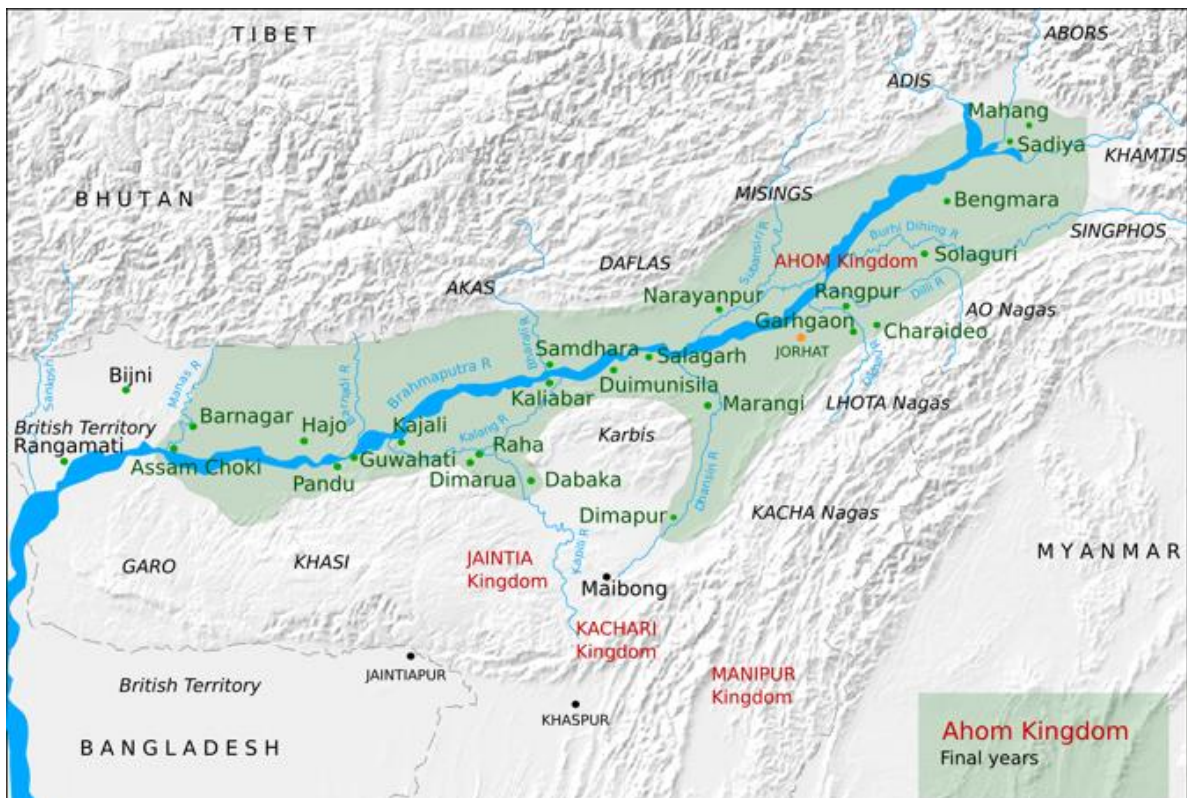


Figure 1: Ahom Kingdom (Chaipau, 2010)

Assam has many tribes who migrated during the *Ahom* rule. The *Ahom*, who ruled the Brahmaputra valley from the second quarter of the thirteenth century A.D. to the first quarter of the nineteenth century A.D. had the commendable habit of maintaining chronological records called as *Bhuranji*, (hence is referred in the paper often). These chronicles not only recorded the social-political events, but also cultural and architectural pursuits which are of immense importance for the study. Among the different tribes that inhabit the Assam plains are Bodo Kacharis, Mishing, Sonowal Kacharis, Tiwas, Rabhas etc. The Mishing or *Miris* tribe is found in Upper Assam's area of Sibsagar, Jorhat and Lakhimpur (Figure 1) and finds a mention in the *Ahom* chronicles (*Bhuranji*'s) which makes frequent references of the *Miris* in connection with their relations with the Vaishnava saints and the *Ahom* kings. In this paper, a study is presented on Mishing houses, their design and types to draw a conclusion on the influence these houses had on the *Ahom* monuments located at Karen ghar complex.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Mughal Influence

The development of the *Ahom* artistic style of Architecture to present day is still unknown to many. Among the different dynasties that ruled Assam, the architectural contribution of the Kochas, the Kacharis and the *Ahom* are of great importance. Many studies have confirmed that the *Ahom* architecture in its initial stage came under the Islamic influence. This can even be seen on the temples built in this era. Though the construction dates of these temples are controversial, the earliest example is of the temple *Gorokhiya Dol* of Nasira on the banks of

*Dikhou* River. This temple is a single room structure with no plinth. The octagonal base is crowned with a pointed dome and bears Islamic influence (Sarma P. C., 1981).

It was in 1662, Mughal commander Mir Jumal could invade Garhgaon in Upper Assam for a brief stint of time and left after the treaty of Ghilaj Hari Ghat between Mir Jumal and then *Ahom* king Jayadhvaj in 1663. The Mughal's receded back after Lachit recaptured Guwahati in 1667 (Ali, 2002). The monuments at Karen Ghar were built a century after this battle and lesser influence of their style in the monuments to a large extent can be observed. The popularly referred *Bhuranji* mentions about Karen Ghar construction, by then King Rudra Singha (1696-1716) employing Bengali masons to construct these brick monuments (Saikia, 2005). It is also mentioned that Karen Ghar was also made by these masons. The monuments in the later phase have incorporated features from both Hindu and Muslim style of architecture, not one in totality (Sarma P. C., 1981).

Predominant influence Islamic architecture was not observed because of the absence of an active and continuous Islamic tradition in Assam. However, the adaptation of few characters of Islamic architecture on these monuments could be seen, because of gaining popularity of the Islamic architecture in North India during this period. If Islamic monuments of North India are studied exclusively then the symmetry in their building design becomes apparent. The plans were geometrical in shape i.e. square or hexagonal and the symmetry was followed on the elevations as well. The plans were symmetrical along the axis. The façade and the wall elevation were decorated by Arabesque. Other features like domes, arches on the front façade were in odd numbers, so that symmetry could be achieved along the central axis of the plan. The Mughal gardens were also symmetrical, as they were divided into equal parts along the same central axis of the plan giving a feeling of an avenue with water channel as a median (Khan, 2016).

## 2.2 Mishing Influence

Mishings are the second largest tribe in the plains of Assam. As per the Census year 1971, Mishings constitute 1.77% of the total state population, further 16.31% of the total population in plains and 19.31% in the hills of Assam. At present, the Mishing people are distributed throughout the districts of upper Assam. The riverine areas of the northern and southern banks of the Brahmaputra stretching from Sodia in the East, down to the Jia Bhoroli in the west lying approximately between 93° E and 97° E longitude and 27° N and 28° N latitude may be regarded as the areas of habitation of the Mishings (Sarma A. , 2000).

The Mishing, (Mising or Miri) tribe belongs to the Tibeto- Burman family of the Mongoloid group and originally migrated to India as a hill tribe who inhabited the Abor, Miri and Mishimi hills in Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as (North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). The Mishing people belong to one of the earliest group of races migrating to the Brahmaputra valley and their migration started before the advent of the *Ahom*. E.W. Gait observed that the Mishings had their first contact with the *Ahom* king Pratap Singha in A.D 1615. There are many myths about the cause of migration but chiefly they migrated toward the plains of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur after the annexation of the Chutiya Kingdom by the

*Ahom* King Suhungmung around 1522 AD. The *Bhuranji* mentions that Mishing and the *Ahom*'s socio-economic activities date back to the seventh century. Reference to the *Miris* (Mishings) has also been found in 'Nama Ghosha' that by the sixteenth century they were an important tribe in northeast Assam (Swaroop, 2015). Therefore, it was established that by the sixteenth century Mishing were recognized as citizens of the *Ahom* kingdom. This link had a far-reaching impact on the building form and planning during that period.



**Figure2:** Mishing village settlement.

Mishing village settlements (Figure 2) were found to be of compact pattern and there exists a tendency to shift the site of settlement along the sides of the rivers. The structures in the settlements were closely placed in an unplanned manner. Three major types of architectural structures are seen in the village – Domestic, Religious and Recreational. The Mishing tribe has the largest family size of all the tribes in the region. The average size of the family is 11 (Lakhimpur) and 10 (Jorhat). They live in the joint family system. The Mishing houses are called *Chang Gharor*. These are the houses on stilts which are located near the banks of the river Brahmaputra. They are generally north-south oriented. The houses are long and are single room structures.

### 2.2.1 A Typical House

The dwelling house of the Mishings varies in the construction according to the family. The better-built houses, though rather few, are comfortable and multipurpose. The ground plane of their ordinary dwelling house is rectangular in shape of about 4.5 to 8 meters in length and 2.5 to 3.5 meters in breadth (Sarma A. , 2000). The bigger houses with huge family have a length varying from 15 to 30 meters and normal width is 6 to 7 meters, generally in a proportion of 1:2.5 to 1:3.5 (Group, 1989). The plinth of the house is gradually raised by the platform of bamboo or wood. The wall posts are about 2 to 3 meters in height. As the plinth of the house is between 1 to 1.8 meters, wooden stilts from the ground level are constructed, the area under the stilt is used for domestic animals such as pigs, dogs etc. This type of stilt

structures is iconic in Mishing houses and is not seen in other tribal houses in Assam. The covered portico in the front portion of the house was used to welcome and entertain the guests (Figure 3).

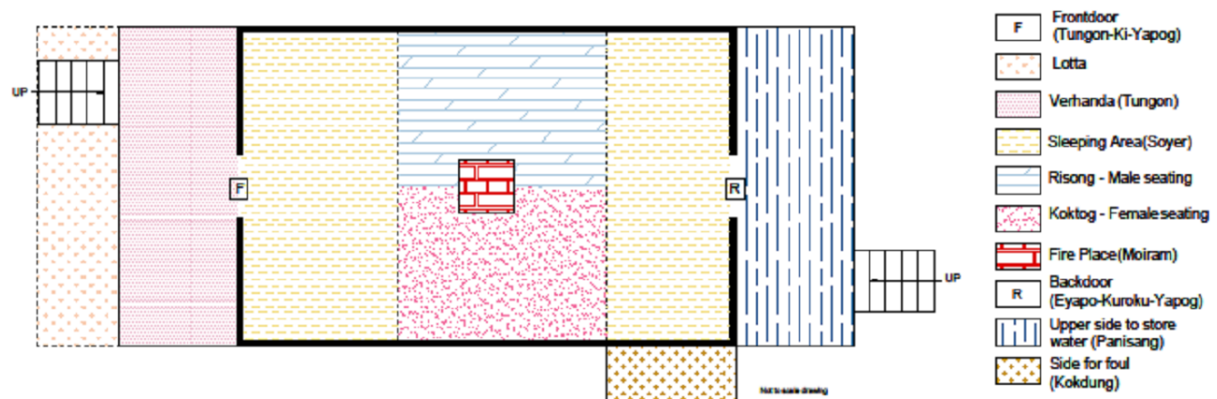


Figure 3: Layout plan of Mishing house (Sarma A. , 2000)

There are no compartments or partitions of the room for different activities. There has been only one house for a family and if the member of inhabitant increases, then the house lengthened to accommodate them. This aspect is seen only in Mishing houses. However, in other tribes, a separate house is constructed. All the household activities including cooking takes place in one room. The middle portion of the room is used as a kitchen. Traditional Mishing house had just two doors – one at the front and the second on the opposite end. Fewer windows have been provided in their houses.

### 2.2.2 Front Portion

Most of the houses have a front verandah called *Lotta* which is covered by the extended part of the roofs of the main house. This portion has no side wall and platform. *Lotta* is followed by *Tungong* which can be reached by climbing the ladder (*Kobung*) with the help of the side handle rod called *Lakgun*. *Tungong* is an open space at the front portion of the main house having a platform but no side wall (It is five to six feet high from the ground). In some houses the *Tungong* is big enough to accommodate ten to fifteen people.

### 2.2.3 Entrance to the main house

Immediately after *Tungong*, the door Yapog of the main house is fixed. A typical Mishing house contains two doors for entrance and exit and no window. Doors are placed on the right side of the wall. Windows, ventilators and chimneys are not provided in a traditional house. There are several reasons for not providing windows and ventilators: First, during winters, the cold breeze enters the house; second, the rainwater may enter inside the house; third, windows and ventilators may harm the side walls.

### 2.2.4 Division of the house

There is no partition in a traditional style of house, but different portions of the house have different names and use. The system of the bamboo partition wall in Assam is not found in their traditional residential house. At the middle of the house, the fireplace *Moiram* or *Mcram* is constructed. The fireplace divides the house into two, on either sides of the *Moiram* is a

sleeping area called *Soyers*. *Moiram* is considered a sacred part of the house as it serves for cooking. *Moiram* provides comfort against the chilly winter nights.

### 2.2.5 Size of the house

The length of the house depends on the size of the family. Depending upon the length and breadth of the house the Mishing house is divided into two types – first, a small house for a small family having one fireplace; second, a big house which is extraordinarily bigger than the general category of houses (Houses are owned by the joint families having three or four fireplaces). However, all this seems to be changing with time (Group, 1989). The traditional houses are fast losing their identity due to the socio-economic impact of development. Stilts are now made with concrete instead of bamboo. Traditionally, the sloping roof with two eaves was made are now being converted to G.I sheets. *Chang Ghars* are built on the large homestead, in which the percentage of house area to homestead being 3%.

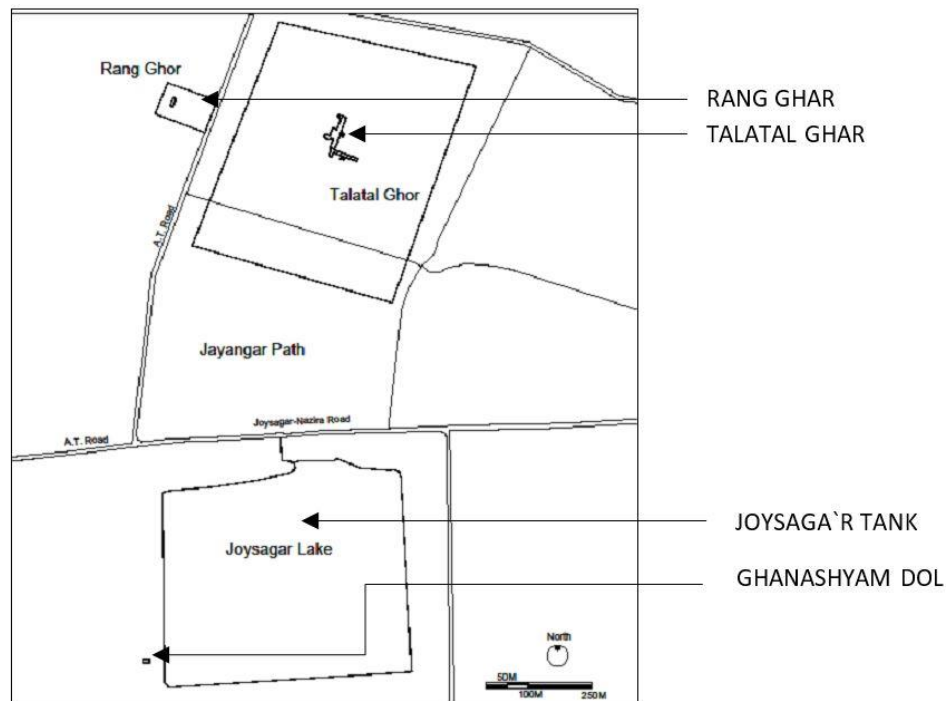
## 2.3 Inference

The analysis to find out the source of popular architecture of *Ahom* dynasty starts with the evolution architecture in the region. In the beginning, it was influenced by the Indo-Aryans. King Rudra Singha (AD 1696-1714) should be credited for being the architect of the *Ahom* architectural styles; he developed numerous forms and achieved standardization. His adaptation of the ‘Nilachala’ (Juthika, 2017) type of construction may have led to the greatest invention of Do-Chala roof and formation of apsidal shaped structures. The unusual style of *Ahom* architecture was further popularized by King Rudra Singha successors. Though the actual source of the octagonal shaped plan cannot be ascertained, the shape is popularly used in temples constructed during *Ahom* rule. The use of octagonal plans in Islamic Architecture is only seen in tombs. The possibility of influence by the south-east Asian architecture is cannot be ruled out. If the influence of the local evolution is examined, the Mishing tribal settlements with houses on stilts, single big room, and haphazard settlement along river banks are very strong examples and are contextual.

## 3. DESCRIPTION OF KAREN GHAR COMPLEX

Talatal Ghar or Karen Ghar is a house having several stories and is probably the largest monument from the *Ahom* regime. It was constructed as an Army base camp. The structure is Z shaped with north-south axis with a longer axis in the middle and the flange facing north-south direction (Figure 4). As in *Chang Ghar*, the house has been divided into two activity zones – the stay for large family and an animal house. Compared to *Chang Ghar*, the first floor of Talatal Ghar was a habitable space having two entries-one from the front and another from the back. It is approached by an uncovered straight flight stair from the front and another covered stair from mid-western portion abutting the large hall.

First floor houses have an octagonal shaped Temple dedicated to lord Shiva, one guard room and three large halls (Figure 5). All these spaces have single activity and have no compartments or partitions. Similar to *Chang Ghar*, all rooms are rectangular in shape. In Talatal Ghar, the rooms are placed without any planning, possibly influenced by the settlement pattern seen in the Mishing tribal villages.

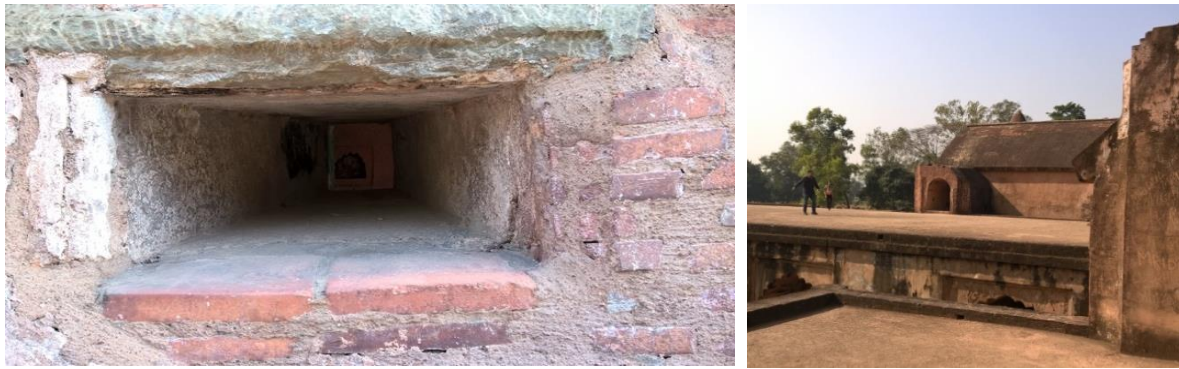


**Figure 4:** Area Map of Keren Ghar complex and Ghana Shyam Dol



**Figure 5:** Talatal Ghar, showing ground structure

The rooms next to the Shiva temple have been connected as the extension to the first room similar to Mishing houses. The rest of the rooms on the first floor do not have common walls and have not been connected through the roof, but paced closely. All this implies that these rooms were added as an afterthought or may have been influenced by Mishing village settlement. The first-floor terrace area (Figure 6), has rainwater spouts at the edge of the parapet. The extended plinth on the first floor is similar to Mishing houses. Other similarities are that the windows are small and very minimal (Figure 6), the rooms also have one door. Interestingly, the ground floor has been used to keep animals similar to *Chang Ghar*. The ground floor at Talatal Ghar (stilt house) has been used to keep animals like elephants, horse etc. for the cavalry. The animals and their breed also find a mention during the treaty of Ghilajhari ghat between Mir Jumal and Jayadhvaj in 1663 (Ali, 2002).

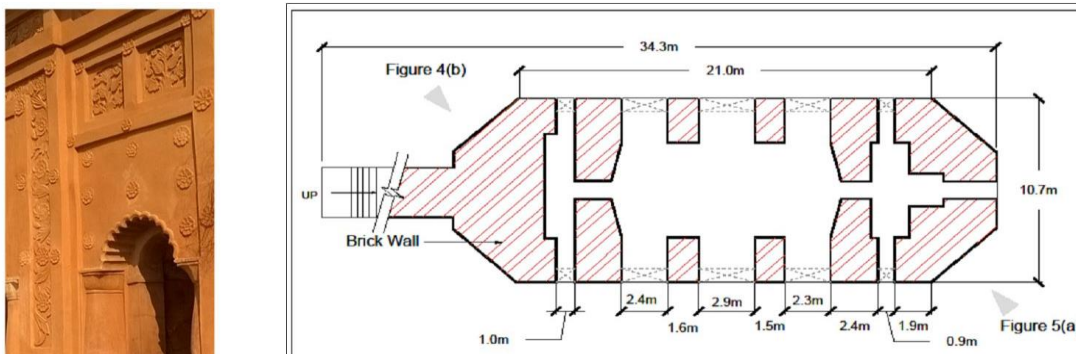


**Figure 6:** Talatal Ghar, First Floor window detail and Terrace with a water outlet.



**Figure 7:** Talatal Ghar (Debasisbora, 2009) and Rang Ghar

The Talatal Ghar structure is built on columns and stylobates, with arches also resembling Mughal architecture (ASI, 2010). However, the plans are neither symmetrical nor a square or hexagon which are typical of Islamic architecture. Bricks were used to construct wall and the roof in the *Do-Chala* (two eaves) style (Figure 6). It is made out of terracotta, resembling the roofs of temples in Bengal. Researchers have also drawn a resemblance between Bishnupur temples of Bengal and the *Ghanashyam Dol* monument located in close proximity to Talatal Ghar (Buragohain, 2015).—Rang Ghar an east-west oriented monument, is a double storied, oval or apsidal shaped structure with brick masonry; it is adjoining an amphitheatre for entertainment (Figure 7). As the earlier described apsidal shaped structure was one of the experiments carried out in King Rudra Singha reign, it is a twelve-meter-high masonry structure with a parabolic type roof, supported by rows of massive columns and semi-circular arches (Figure 7). It has a rectangular plan with both short sides annexed with trapezoidal ends (Shashank et al., 2013).



**Figure 8:** Rang Ghar: Arabesque (Author); Plan [adopted from (Shashank et al., 2013)]



A steep straight flight from the trapezoidal end facing south side leads to the first floor. Both the floors have similar plans and are used for gathering and viewing games, sports and animal fights etc. If compared to Chang Ghar, a straight flight leading to front portico which is a raised floor (an improvised version as per requirement) was for the *Ahom* kings as a viewing gallery. The ratio of length -27m to breadth -10.7m (Shashank et al., 2013) of the structure is 1:2.5, which similar to the ratio used in Chang Ghar. The structure is neither symmetrical nor the roof draws any influence which prominent feature of the Islamic Architecture. The resemblance to Islamic Architecture can be seen in the Arabesque (Figure 8) extensively used on the façade. The arches are odd in number and show to resemble Islamic Arches. The Rang Ghar compound and the approach to the main structure is symmetrical and divides the landscape symmetrically as in Mughal gardens.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Although *Bhuranji* makes a mention of Mughal artisans and mason being brought from Bengal for construction in seventeen and eighteen centuries it also mentions that the *Ahom*'s integrated the *chow chala* roof of Bengal and cone-shaped *mastaka* of Buddhist stupas (Saikia, 2005). The other features borrowed were arches and the octagonal plan of Islamic Architecture, which is seen in the Shiva Temple at Talatal Ghar (ASI, 2010). The uniqueness of the *Ahom* monument at Karen Ghar complex may not be completely contributed by Islamic Architecture as established by earlier studies. The other reference may be drawn from prevailing tribal structures in the region of Mishing tribes. The proportion of the monuments, one big rectangular room, approach through single flight stair, raised plinth, covered portico, huge home shed with three percent built area, rearing animals under the house are very similar to *Chang Ghar*. Though, both the monuments have drawn considerable influences from Hindu and Islamic Architecture, the link between these structures with respect to the planning and the form which are not symmetrical, helps in understanding the influence of tribal houses have had on the *Ahom* monuments. Not only the monuments but tribal houses and their settlements should be conserved as they have a direct impact on the identity of the *Ahom* monuments.

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