

# A Historical Analysis Of Biswanath Temple, Biswanath District, Assam, India

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**Abstract:** In the growth and development of human civilization, the contribution of religion is very significant. If we illustrate human civilization from the very first stage to date, we can remark that human society is unworthy in the absence of religion. So we may say that religion is the base of our existence. The word 'Religion' derives from 'Re' means 'again' and 'Legare' means to bind/compel. Hence the 'religion' means the system that binds us to the very source of our being. To form a complete and strong society religion plays a significant role. It is true that the prevailing superstition and blind rites and rituals that create mental and physical difficulties need to be rectified. The importance of religion cannot be ignored in a scientifically developed society. Religion and science are both sides of the same coin for achieving humanity in its complete sense. Religion is colligated with different practices, rites and rituals, and faith. As a result, a number of worshiping places emerge like Temples, Dewaloy, Than, Satra, Church, Mosque, etc. These institutions inspire people to remain united and disciplined in their respective societies. Assam a North-eastern state of India is a special land with respect to its rich cultural heritage. Biswanath of Assam is one of the important districts. This place is located on the North bank of the Brahmaputra River and in the middle of the state. Natural beauty and fertility of the soil attract people towards this land and have become the habitation of diverse communities and tribes irrespective of their religion. This study will attempt to comprehend the customs and beliefs related to the Biswanath temple which is known as the 'Ditiya Kashi' or 'Gupta Kashi' located in the Biswanath district, Assam based on field survey and historical approach.

**Index Terms:** Religion, custom, belief, Biswanath temple, Gupta Kashi

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Biswanath District was the headquarter of the undivided Sonitpur district before it was declared an independent district. It is situated on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and in the middle of the state. The area is from 92°52'30"-93°50'0" East longitude and from 26°14'00"-27°0'00" North longitude. Its land area is about 19,503 km<sup>2</sup>. According to the 2011 census, its population is nearly 8, 13,671. Biswanath Chariali has immense importance as a pilgrimage ever since the days of the prehistoric era. Butu Pal, son of Dharma Pal of the Pal Dynasty who ruled in Assam in ancient time was the ruler of Biswanath. Moreover, Pratap Chandra, the king of the powerful Jitari Dynasty made Bishwanath capital of his kingdom. He constructed huge stockades in the surroundings of his capital to protect it from attacks of the invaders. The remaining of those stockades like historic 'Pratap Garh', 'Majuli Garh', 'Nukhar Garh' are still there bearing the marks of magnificent history. Some Pal's foster son Bhaluk Pung or Pratap Singh was a mighty ruler. He was the founder of the Biswanath temple. It is known that Pratap Garh was also constructed by him. This stockade is spread from 'Nukhar Garh' tea garden to Biswanath. Observing those stockades we can assume that once Biswanath was a secured city [1]. Biswanath got importance even in the time of the Ahoms who defeated the Mughals. During the days of Rudra Singha a the court was set up in Biswanath to settle friendly relations with the Kachari king. The Jayantiya king also accepted Rudra Singha's hospitality in the same court. With the demise of Ahom's rule, Biswanath too came under British rule like other parts of Assam. The largest army base camp of the British Empire in India was set up in Biswanath in 1826-1832 [2], [3].

## 2 ANCIENT TALES RELATED TO BISWANATH TEMPLE

The Biswanath Temple is situated just 10 km away in the North of Biswanath town. Its surrounding was like Nangaleswar in the East, Kal Bhairab in the West, Bir Bhadra (Baralasil) in the North and the Brahmaputra River in the South [4]. Biswanath has three other names known as 'Ban-Baranashi', 'Ban-Kashi' and 'Ditiya-Kashi'. The Biswanath temple is believed to be set up by king Baan. According to the folktale, King Baan who was a passionate devotee of Lord Shiva prayed his deity wishing that he wanted a 'Kashi' (a sacred pilgrimage of Hindus) in his name. Lord Shiva appeared before him and blessed him with his wish. Lord Shiva established 1 crore 'Shiva Lingas' in Kanyasham. Though Lord Shiva granted king Baan his wish yet he never wished for two 'Kashis'. Lord Ganesh stole and hides one of those 'Lingas'. King Baan searched for the missing 'Linga' when he could not find out, he prayed Shiva once again. This time Lord Shiva asked him to go to the 'Saranga Giri' hill to enquire about from Kumud and Kushtav, two sages dwelt there. Baan met them and asked where would be his desired 'Kashi'. The sages who were in meditation felt to be disturbed by Baan and said, "Where is your 'Kashi' here? Go and seek in the west." King Baan was utterly distressed thinking that Lord Shiva played a trick on him. In his hopelessness and grief, he was about to commit suicide jumping in a fire when Lord Shiva appeared before him and asked him what had happened. King Baan told everything. Lord Shiva was annoyed with those sages and cursed them to turn into stones as they didn't behave like Brahmins. When Kumud and Kaustav meditated deeply to discover the 'Kashi', they found the pilgrimage in a hidden state and they cursed that the 'Kashi' would remain hidden (Gupta) always. Since then the 'Kashi' is hidden and the two sages have remained in a state of two large stones known as 'dui muni sila' (two sage stones) standing on the bank of the Brahmaputra River in Silghat. Kumud and Kaustav asked Shiva how and when they would be freed from the curse and regain their human body. Lord Shiva said, "There would be a war among seven barbarians (Mlesh) in the North East of Dikrang River's east direction during the end of 'Kaliyug'. Blood of dead soldiers, elephants etc would flow in the river

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Brahmaputra, and touch you. Then you will regain your original being. When you would bathe me with water from your waterpot after regaining your life, I would too become free from your curse". The sage said, "When is the end of 'Kaliyug'?" Lord Shiva said, "When fruits tree will bear fruit in the off season, jacksels would walk across the Brahmaputra, people would be indifferent to everyone, people will have little restrictions in terms of food and sex; these restrictions too would extinct. This would mean the end of 'Koliyug' [1]." Another legend says, Biswanath was 'Purna-Kashi' (complete 'Kashi') with one crore Shiva 'Linga'. Fearing that two pilgrimages with the same name, 'Kashi' would be dangerous for human civilization, the gods and goddess stole one of those 'lingas' and set up in the Hatimura hills. As one 'Linga' fell short, Biswanath could not gain the status of 'Purna-Kashi' (complete Kashi). Every stone here is considered to be Lord Shiva and people believe no stone can be turned or broken. Devotees worship hard to get blessings from their esteemed deity. King Baan was restless until he found the lost 'linga'. He started measuring the mighty Brahmaputra from the Rudra pad. Finally, he found the hidden/concealed 'Linga' but the God and goddess conspired so that it becomes visible only for six months in a year. It remains hidden underwater for another six months. As Baan used to worship there the place came to know as 'Baan-Kashi' or 'Baan-Varanasi' [5]. One more legend says once Baan, the son of King Bali was a doorman in a temple in Biswanath. In the meantime, he got united with a young maiden named Kirti. According to historian Nagendra Nath Bose, an Indian lady or Bahalik maiden escaped to Assam due to the severe attack of the Sithiyans in seventh century BC. She set up worshiping places in Biswanath. She loved and married a prince named Baan. The 'Pallab' tribe came to existence as a result of their union. King Bhagadutta hired soldiers from this tribe to join the Kurukshetra War. The Biswanath Shiva 'Linga' and 'Yoni' (female genital) shaped mother goddess Biswadevi are there where the interaction between the Brahmaputra and the river Burhigang, (Bridha (old) the Ganges) takes place [6]. There is a saying that Uma meditated in Umaban or Umatumoni, a place situated in the east of Biswanath to get Shiva as her husband. Shiva appeared before her in the same place. Since then the place is known as Biswanath. 'Gupta Kashi' of Biswanath got mentioned in Kalika Puran also. According to 'Kalika-Puran', just at the point of interaction between the river Bridha Ganga and the Brahmaputra, the Biswanath Shiva 'Linga' and 'Yoni' shaped goddess Biswadevi dwell underwater. It is also mentioned that Bridha Ganga is as blissful as the sacred river Ganga [6]. Where there is 'Bhairab' Shiva, there is Bhairabi. Kamakhya is Bhairabi, just at a distance, there is Umananda, the Bhairab. It is Mahabhairab and so there is the Bhairabi temple at a close distance. Hence as Biswanath is Bhairab, so there must be Biswadevi somewhere nearby [5].

### 3 HISTORY OF THE TEMPLE'S CONSTRUCTION AND PATRONAGE

During the reign of the Salastambha Dynasty (650-990) in old Harupeswar or present-day Tezpur, the stone temple was constructed in the name of Biswanath Shiva. The Pal dynasty (990-1138) too got patronage of this temple. The history of the Biswanath temple got noticed during the time of the Ahoms. But there is no evidence of Ahom Kings' patronization of this temple before Pratap Shingha. It is said that Swargadeo Rajeswar Shingha visited eighteen temples (dewalayas) in

Biswanath. In 1615 Mugal general Satrajit invaded Sala and looted the gold and silver articles of Biswanath. He also captivated two 'Devadashi' (female attendants). Since then Biswanath got notice of the Ahom Kings. The Biswanath temple was broken by lightning in between 1615 to 1620 during the days of Susenphang or Pratap Shingha. He ordered Mumai Tamuli Borbaruah to construct a new temple replacing the broken stone temple [3][7]. The place where the wrecks of this temple are found today underwater of the Brahmaputra was once highland and full of stones. In 1957 Ahom king Joydhawaj Shingha arranged a large yagya in the Biswanath temple for his territory's security and wellbeing. Swargadeo Gadadhar Shingha had a deep faith in the Biswanath temple. He wrote two bronze plate inscription in 1683 for regular worshiping in the temple. In 1667 Swargadeo Chakradhwaj Shingha organized a huge Yagya in Biswanath temple when Lachit Borphukan made Kamrup fee from Mughal capture. He offered the prayer for the wellbeing of his subjects. The head priest of the Yagya was Gabharugiri Babu[8]. In his book 'Pabitra Axom', Maheswar Neog has mentioned of two bronze plate inscriptions where the inscription was made of land and people donate to the Biswanath temple by Gadadhar Shingha. On the first plate, it is mentioned that the Swargadeo donated 80 acres of land and Bher Bheri Bheel to Gobinda Chakraborty along with three 'Gayan' and one 'Koibartta' person. Gadadhar Shingha engaged the Brahmin to worship Lord Shiva there. The second bronze plate inscription states that the 'Swargadeo' made all the types of equipment of worshiping Lord Shiva from Bezdoloi's grandson Borkalati and appointed Narayan and Kamala as 'Thakur' for practicing the daily rituals. Moreover, he gave Narayan 'Thakur' four Brahmins, forty non Brahmin pikes, eight 'Nartaki' (dancer) and 26 acre of land [9]. Swargadeo Gadadhar Shingha constructed the Biswanath temple in 1685. He fell seriously ill in 1689 and promised of doing a Yagya in the Biswanath temple to get well soon. As his wish was fulfilled, he organized a yagya in 1690 under the guidance of Katyayan Bhattacharya and Mukoli Muriya Gohain along with 108 Brahmins [10]. The Biswanath temple constructed by Pratap Shingha was broken for which king Pramatta Shingha constructed the historic Thapana Daul in 1750. It is known that the temple constructed by Pramatta Shingha was destroyed by flood of the Brahmaputra during the days of Rajeswar Shingha. The ancient location of the temple submerged underwater. In 1774 Ahom King Lakhmi Shingha reconstructed the Biswanath temple in a place just 200 meters west from the old one. Durga Ram Brahman, the brother of the old temple's 'Thakur' was appointed 'Thakur' in the shifted temple and was bestowed with two attendants. Moreover, in the funeral rituals of Raj Mata (Royal Mother, Bogi) 20 acre of land in Kathkatiya and Pani Bharal was donated to Durgaram Thakur. A bronze letter of Lakhmi Shingha appointing Brahman, Non-brahman paik to work in the temple has also been found [11]. According to folklore, this temple's sanctity was lost when Maan (Burmese) invaded Assam. They broke the golden pitcher of the temple and it was left abandoned. The present-day Biswanath temple was reconstructed during the days of the British. The Ahom Kings reconstructed the temple to place Shiva 'Linga' there. The temple was half-built when the king dreamt of the god's existence just at a distance in the west from the constructing temple. He constructed a temporary temple there for daily worshiping (According to myth).

#### 4 OTHER TEMPLES BELONG TO THE BISWANATH TEMPLE

A number of small temples related to the Biswanath temple are found here. There are ancient folktales about these temples too. The breast and arm part of Sati fell in Biswanath. Two shrines came to existence as Uma and Chandi respectively in those places where those body parts of Sati fell. Moreover, in 'Umatumoni', a riverine land of the Brahmaputra, there are a few temples named- 'Sakreswar', 'Harihar', 'Kardameswar', 'Basudev', 'Nangaleswar', 'Bhairabeswar', 'Bagheswari', 'Sidheswari' etc. On the north bank of the Brahmaputra, there is river Burhigang. On the west side of the river there are shrines of Biswanath, 'Chandi', 'Kamaleswar', 'Shivanath', 'Muktinath', 'Baneswar', 'Bordaul', 'Jagra', 'Burha-Madhav', 'Kalbhairab', 'Birbhadra' (borolasil), 'Junga-Sil', 'Purba-Shankar', 'Surjya-Madhav', 'Annapurna', 'Ganesh', 'Biswanath', 'Kashinath', 'Udreswar', 'Gauriballav', 'Vishnu', 'Durgashakati', 'Mullika Chandi'. In his book 'Pabitra Axom' Swarbananda Rajkhowa has mentioned of 30 shrines. Rejeswar Shingha visited 11 temples here. Commissioner Jenkins mentioned 27 temples in a letter written by him in 1842. Whatever the number of temples mentioned here and there only 11 temples physically existing today [9].

#### 5 THE SCULPTURE AND ARCHITECTURE OF THE TEMPLE

The Biswanath temple is made of bricks and stones and is about 10 meters high above the ground level. The temple is four-sided back to back. The temple is small in size but once it was beautifully adorned with flower, seal and stamp of the Ahom kingdom, thorn designed with flying lion etc. The Shiva temple of the pre-Ahom era was destroyed by the mighty Brahmaputra. But the 'Garvagriha' is still existing and visible during the day season. In the east of the temple, there is lying door stone in North-South. In the middle of the stone, the fabulous tree of heaven (Kalpabrikhya) is beautifully decorated. (Field Study) The 'Sang Rung Phukan's History' describes the temple as - The Biswanath temple was constructed in 1672. The temple's surrounding is 85 cubits in length, 45 cubits in height, the red wall is 9 cubits thick, the cave is 15 cubits wide, the roof is 14 cubits high. The temple was colorfully painted with various birds and animals, flowers, dragon etc during the days of Lakshmi Shingha [12]. It is remarkable that the Biswanath temple is embodied with so many dragon marks of terracotta that we hardly find in any other Ahom construction. A number of statue sculptures are also found in the Biswanath temple. Statues of Lord Shiva, Buddha and ten-handed Shiva, (Dashabhuja) are worth mentioning [5]. The 63cm tall Buddha statue and 91cm tall Shiva statue are preserved in the Sonitpur District Museum. In the premises of the main temple, a statue of four back to back lions sculpted on an igneous stone is also found. This statue resembles Ashoka's lion pillar of Sarnath. But the sculpted ox, dharma chakra and the horse on the pedestal are not found in this statue. This resemblance to the statues makes us believe that Buddhism was preached in the land of Assam also. The quadrangle statue of Lord Ganesh kept in Surya Madhav or Ganesh temple belongs to the eighth to ten century. Moreover, 71 centimeter a quadrangle statue of God Surya of Ahom age with a crown on head, a rudraksha bracelet in hand is also found here. A bronze statue of Laddua Gopal (lord Krishna)

and a 46 centimeter Vishnu statue are also found. Some argue these statues to be of Lord Buddha [13]. The architecture practice of Jageswar SadaShiva was purely the Assamese. Its dome is designed with a pitcher of the Nag custom. 'Umaban' or 'Umatumoni' is located in a triangle shape. The two main idols of 'Uma' and 'Maheswar' here are two pieces of stones [9]. In the idol of 'Uma-Maheswar', 'Uma' placed her right hand on Shiva's neck very attractively. In this statue, Lord Shiva is looking at his wife 'Uma' in the gesture of 'Lalitashan' (lalitashan) sitting on his 'padma-pith' (lotus seat). 'Uma' is sitting on his left lap in the gesture of Lalitashan.

#### 6 RELIGIOUS TRADITION OF THE BISWANATH TEMPLE AND ITS DAILY RITUALS

The temples of Lord Biswanath is in the middle of the river and on the bank as well. So Biswanath is worshipped both in water and land. During the rainy season the Biswanath 'linga' goes underwater. In the dry season the Shiva 'linga' is drugged out of the sand, a temporary temple is constructed and is worshipped regularly for six months. The Biswanath of the bank is worshipped or the whole year. The Ahom 'Swargadeos' and other high ranking officials were welcomed to the temple playing the musical band of 'Gayan' and 'Bayan'. The Borthakurs (temple priest) of the temple welcome the dignitaries with a holy lamp lighted in a 'xorai' (traditional bell metal product). The "Ojapali" danced and sang at the same time. The other 'Gayan-Bayan' laid the cloth on the road to lead the high ranking courtiers to the podium to sit on a red sheet and upright pillow. The 'Thakur' (God) of the temple offered the 'prasad' to the courtiers in 'Maihang' (traditional metallic plate of the Ahoms). Everyone had to sit on their knees during the presence of the high ranking dignitary in the temple. Only 'Sewasalak' could sit like left knee upright and right knee on the soil in a sheath of betel. The deity is brought out from the temple for the first three days of the Bohag Bihu and on the day of the 'Goxai' Bihu (2<sup>nd</sup> day of Bohag Bihu) with a musical band of 'Gayan-Bayan'. The idol is placed again in a similar manner. This ritual is still practiced since the days of the Ahom rule. Two families namely 'Gayan' and 'Bayan' have been serving duties of the temple generation after generation (hereditarily) since the days of the kings. The names of the 'Gayan' and 'Bayan' in Bhirgaon were Dukhiya or Gunabhiram Saikia and Hemeswar Koch respectively (Field Study).

#### 7 FESTIVALS OF THE BISWANATH TEMPLE

Many festivals are observed in this temple like all other temples of Sonitpur. 'Goxai Phurua utsav', 'Shiva Ratri', 'Bol-Bom', 'Janmastami', 'Ashokastami', 'Daul Yatra', 'Annaprasanna' (rice eating ceremony), 'Upanayan' (divestiture with the sacred thread) wedding ceremony etc. are worth mentioning.

##### 7.1 'Ojapali' : (Choral Singer, A Choir)

'Ojapali' is a semi-dramatic performing art form of Assam. 'Ojapali' is an astringent and conveyor of Indian traditional exposition of mythological stories. It is a popular art of Assam. The Biswanath temple is not only a great and ancient shrine of Assam but also a 'Natghar' (drama house) of Assamese art and culture. This temple was famous in the North East of India for 'Ojapali' and other dance forms.

Nothing can be said about the antiquity of 'Ojapali' in the

Biswanath temple. The 'Ahom Buranji' (history of Ahoms) and Copper-plate inscriptions are also salient in this regard [14]. But in Copper-plate inscriptions, it is found that 'Ojapali' was practiced here since the days of Gadadhar Shingha. This 'Swargadeo' appointed 40 paiks in this temple for worshipping lord Biswanath and among them, there were people who could perform 'Ojapali'. This information was scripted in a copperplate in 1683 [5]. In the ancient time, the 'Ojah' recited 'Shiva Shruti' and then danced 'Dashavatar' (the ten primary descent of god Vishnu in Hinduism) every morning and evening in the temple after the 'Thakur' finished his worshipping. After the 'Dashavatar' hymn singing, the 'Ojah' sang 'Dasham Kirtan' etc. The 'Ojah' with his 'Palis' wearing Special kind of shirt, headgear, girdle, 'seleng' (a thin cloth wrapped around the body or over the soldier) etc danced singing some hymn. Nowadays, 'Ojapali' is not prevalent in the Biswanath temple.

### 7.2 'Devadashi' Dance

A class of young female dancers was assigned in the temple to please the gods through their dance. They were known as 'Devadashi', servants of gods. Engaging Devadashi in the temple was considered as fortunate and the kings of Assam appointed 'Devadashi' in the Shiva temples they set up. It is well-known that 'Devadashi' dance was performed in the Biswanath temple. The dancers had to perform before the deity for his pleasure during the time of prayer in the morning and in the evening. During the reign of the Salastambha Dynasty, they made Harupeswar their capital and from that time 'Devadashi' dance was introduced in the temple. Presence of those dancers in the temple came to light for the first time during the reign of Swargadeo Pratap Shingha [3]. In 1615, Mughal General Strajit invaded Assam. He rowed up the river in 60 boats lashed with armed and armies. He stopped in Biswanath for three days and looted gold and silver jewelry along with three dancers [10][15]. Whether Pratap Shingha appointed another dancer or not is not known. But after his death in 1683 Gadadhar Shingha donated gold, silver, copper etc along with two Thakurs, four Brahmins, 40 Sudra paik and eight dancers to the temple. This is known from a Copper-plate inscription [5]. A pair of Gayan Bayan and a percussionist were also engaged by him. The Biswanath temple was demolished twice after Gadadhar Shingha but the rituals and dancing programs introduced by him were continued at fits and starts till the days of the British reign [10]. During the days of the Ahoms, 'Devadashi' dance was performed after the 'Ojapali' every morning and evening at the time of 'Arati' (prayer). Moreover, every morning water was carried from the Brahmaputra in a pitcher gifted by the royal family to bathe the deity. The 'Thakurs' and Puruhits (Pandits) used to bathe the idol [16].

### 7.3 'Nat-Natuar' Dance

Along with 'Devadashi' dance, 'Nat-Natua's' (male dancer) dance was also practiced in the Biswanath Temple. It is not confirmed when dancing programs were started in the temple but it is sure that 'Nati' dance (dance of female dancer) began in the pre-Ahom era. There is ample scope to consider the fact that Swargadeo Gadadhar Shingha appointed the Nat Natuas (male dancers) in the temple. Even after the Ahom period, these dancers were an integral part of the temple. There was a tradition of dance performance after the 'Ojapali', first by the 'Devadashi' (female dancers) then by the Nat-Natuas. Thereafter the huge drum (Daba) was played and the 'Thakur' and 'Borthakur' along with all

worshippers present prayed in front of the deity for well being of the king and his subjects. Likewise, everyone engaged in the temple had to perform his part of duty every morning and evening. One of the female dancers was killed by the Burmese soldiers when she went out to fetch water from the mighty Brahmaputra. Even after such a hilarious incident, dancing in the temple was not stopped. The 'Nat-Natuas' are believed to be the inhabitants of Bhirgaon. Their predecessors are not to be found [16].

## 7 TRADITION AND FOLK BELIEFS RELATED TO THE BISWANATH TEMPLE

In human society, there are some customary beliefs practiced traditionally generation after generation which are called folk beliefs. These beliefs are some sense of good fortune or ill fortune believed by the people of the society. This kind of belief becomes an integral part of the social system and in turn, people abide by those beliefs. In Indian society, this kind of belief is common since the Vedic Age. There are some traditional beliefs of the community related to the Biswanath Temple. The people of the locality consider Biswanath to be their father, the eternal lord. So they call up lord Biswanath before they start any good work or set out on a journey. They believe that taking the name of Biswanath they can overcome the probable obstacles on their way. Near the temple, there is a statue carved in a rock named Bhaluk Gohain. Its shape is just like the pillar of Ashoka, but there is no wheel. There is a saying that the place is free from beer invasion because of this 'Bhaluk' (beer) 'Gohain' (lord). There is no beer in this area. No ringmaster or circus man has ever brought a beer to Biswanath. People in Biswanath pray Bhaluk Gohain if they lose their cow or goat. They believe that praying this divinity they get back their lost cattle. The couple who have no children pray Biswanath in the hope of getting children. People believe that a ceremonial offering to Lord Biswanath while they buy a new car avert all calamities.

## 8 CONCLUSION

Biswanath temple embodied with spirituality, education, and knowledge is also a tourist place. Pilgrims from outside Assam also visit this temple. Apart from the Indian pilgrims, foreigners use to come every year. From the month of December to January surrounding places of the temple considered to be the best place for a picnic. Concerned departments and the local people are trying their best to develop tourism and infrastructure in this area. Recently one park was built beside the temple for the pilgrims. This study analyzed the origin of the Biswanath Temple and beliefs related to it and traditional linkages as well as its historical importance. From its historic past to the present day, how this temple acts as a place of holiness to mankind is one of the major significance of the study.

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