



THE TERRACOTTA TEMPLES BUILT BY THE ZAMINDARS OF BANKURA DISTRICT: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: *There were several zamindar families in Bankura district of West Bengal. Some of them became zamindars during the reign of the Malla dynasty of Bishnupur while others became zamindars after the decline of the Malla kingdom. These zamindars erected numerous small and big temples in their territories. These temples enshrining deities are in various forms. The Malla kings and the zamindars of Bankura district created a separate style of architecture from other part of India. This paper is an attempt to examine the unique features of these temples and to define their structural and historical importance. It is primarily based upon a personal survey of various temples built by the zamindars in different villages and towns of Bankura district of the present state of West Bengal.*

Keywords: *Ajodhya, Ratna, Chala, Deul, temple, zamindar*

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Introduction

The Bankura district of Bengal was part of Mallabhum, ruled by kings of the Malla dynasty from the last decade of the seventh century, right down to the advent of the British East India Company. Many feudal chieftains of the Mallas later became *zamindars* under the British. There were several families of *zamindars* or landlords that patronised the building of temples. Among them were the *zamindari* families of Ajodha, Patrabakhra, Simlapal, Chatna and Patrasayer all

of whom were patrons of art and architecture. The temples that have survived were primarily built of brick and embellished with terracotta plaques and sculptures. The present study on the historical and structural importance of different temples, built by the *zamindars* of Bankura district is the result of extensive field study undertaken in the last six months to garner information about the above *zamindari* families and the temples built under their patronage.

Discussion

We shall first examine the temples built by the *zamindar* family of Ajodha in Bishnupur sub-division of Bankura district. The family that governed over this area belonged to the Bandopadhyay family. This *zamindari* came into being after the fall of the Malla dynasty. The founder of the *zamindari* was Rammohan Bandopadhyay who came to power in circa 1800 CE. Rammohan used to frequent the office of Nilkar Sahib of Hooghly and earned the latter's favour. Before his death the sahib divided his property and gave half of it to his favourite Rammohan. With this wealth Rammohan brought many lands in Ajodhya and surrounding areas and began the *zamindari*. Around 1920 CE this *zamindari* started to decline. At present the palaces of the *zamindar* family are totally ruined but there are some temples in a place which are known as the *Devottar* - the tax free land dedicated to a deity. We find twelve small *deuls* or shrines side by side. They are mostly *rekha deuls*. All the *deuls* are dedicated to lord Shiva. A *Rekha deul* is a type of temples with a tall tower rising directly above the lower walls and curving inward at the top (Chandra: 2002: 93). Generally the base is square, and the walls invariably have vertical projections known as *ratha* that are carried through the tower, which is surrounded by an *amalaka*. All the *deuls* here have six *ratahas* (Fig.8.1).

There is a large *Rasmancha* and also two other temples for performing "Jhulan" and "Rash", the programmes associated with the eternal love of Radha and Krishna. These temples are found on the outskirts (Singha: 1384: 20) of the complex. Within the inner or interior complex there are two temples. One is dedicated to Goddess Durga and other is dedicated to the deity Vishnu. Generally the *Salagrama sila* or aniconic stone form of Vishnu is worshipped here. It is noteworthy that in the present temple two *Salagrama silas* are worshipped side by side. The names of the *Salagrama silas* are Sree Sree Radhadamodar Jiu and Sree Sree Bangsigopal Jiu. According to oral traditions initially there was only one *Salagrama*

sila i.e. of Sree Sree Radhadamodar Jiu. But once suddenly the *sila* was lost. Then a new *sila* was taken from Varanasi to this temple. The family members of the *zamindar* family started worshipping the *sila* as Sree Sree Bangsigopal Jiu. Subsequently, the *sila* of Sree Sree Radhadamodar Jiu was recovered from a rat hole in the temple. From that time onwards both *silas* have been worshipped in the same temple every day.

The most famous temple erected by the *zamindar* family of Ajodhya is the Girigobardhan temple that is related to a story in Hindu mythology regarding Lord Krishna. When the latter was in Vrindavan, he saw that the people of Vrindavan performed a *yajna* or sacrifice to worship Lord Indra, the God of storm and thunder. Krishna told them not to worship Lord Indra and urged them to worship the Govardhan Mountain beside Vrindavan as it gives them necessary herbs, sources of water and every year it helps in bringing sufficient rain to Vrindavan. As people of Vrindavan followed Krishna's advice, Indra became angry. He started thundering and pouring rain over Vrindavan. The whole of Vrindavan became flooded. In this condition, Krishna to save the lives of people of Vrindavan lifted the Govardhan Mountain with his little finger and protected the people.

The Girigobardhan temple appears to be modelled upon the structure of a hill. The deity inside is also Lord Krishna in *trivanga* posture raising the Govardhan Mountain over his head with the little finger of one hand. The temple was built by Rammohan Bandopadhyay in 1835 CE. The temple also has a beautiful chariot made of brass and its wall was painted with motifs of the ten *avatars* or incarnations of Vishnu. There is also a small *char chala* temple in the exterior part of the Singha *darwaja* (the door on which one or two image of lion is depicted). This temple is dedicated to lord Shiva (Fig.8.3). The *char chala* style is a hut or temple with four sides to the slanting roof (Bandopadhyay: 1971: 48).

The Roy family of Patrabakhra, a village beside Ajodhya in Bishnupur sub division is

another *zamindar* family. Their ancestral home was in Murshidabad. Then their title was Basu. They came to Bishnupur and took up service under the kings of the Malla dynasty of Bishnupur. Paramananda Roy, one of the ancestors of the line, became a general in the reign of the Malla king Gopal Singha. Tradition says that once after winning a battle the king gifted two images of Radha and Krishna, made of metals and some acres of land to worship the deities to Paramananda. Another tradition says that the founder of the dynasty was Madhab Roy who was gifted the lands and the deities by the Malla king Bir Singha. An inscription of an *ek-ratna* temple in Namopara, Ajodhya, testifies to this. In the way this the *zamindari* started its journey. Paramananda set up a temple for worshipping the deities. He also set up a beautiful *Dolmancha* (Fig.8.4).

The earlier structure of the temple has been ruined with the passage of time and it has been renovated. The *Dolmancha* is in ruin. The temple has three rooms and the deities were founded in the middle room of the temple. But in 1975 CE the images were stolen. Recently, two new images of Radha and Krishna, made of brass were placed in the shrine.

The *zamindars* of Simlapal were initially feudal lords under the Malla kings of Bishnupur. But after the decline of the Malla kingdom, they declared their independence. They too built many beautiful temples, among which is the Balaram Jiu temple. The temple was built in 1666 CE. This temple is dedicated to Balaram, the elder brother of Lord Krishna. In the sanctum of the temple, there are two images, both in *trivanga* posture with a flute in the hand of each of them (Malley: 1908: 175). One is of Balaram and other is of Krishna. The deities are made of wood.

The temple is an *ath chala* temple with a *jagmohan* or preceding chamber. Unlike the *char chala* temples that have a slanting roof on four sides, in the *ath chala* shrines we find a double storied roof resulting in eight slanting roofs (Fig.8.5). The sculptures which have been found

nearby have been conserved inside the temple. There are stone images of Ram and Sita, Krishna between Gopis, a large image of Parsvanath, two images of Ambika and other Hindu and Jaina Gods and Goddesses. In this way the temple has become a small museum.

There is also a beautiful *pancha ratna* temple in Pathakpara of Bankura town. Now the question is what is a *ratna*? “Ratna” literary means jewel. It is a type of temple with pinnacles. A *pancha ratna* temple is a temple with a flat roof, upon which is a curvilinear tower at the centre and in the four corners of the roof there are smaller towers or turrets at the corners. The Pathaks, a local rich family built it in the later part of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. This temple is known as Radha-Ballav temple, i.e. it is dedicated to Lord Krishna, the beloved of Radha (Fig.8.6). The temple is made of brick and faces south. The façade of the shrine has a large number of small terracotta figures. There are terracotta motifs of ten *avatars* or incarnations of Lord Vishnu, some birds and animals, a wrestler and also of other Hindu deities.

There is another temple in Mishrapara of Bankura town. The temple was built earlier but was completely renovated in 1639 CE. Thereafter the temple has been reconstructed many times. Now the temple is a *dalan* roofed temple. The deities in the sanctum are lord Ram, Sita and Lakshman. It is assumed that Mishras, the local rich family, built it. There is also a *tulasimanca* or platform for the holy basil plant, and an image of Hanuman outside on a small *stupa*.

The *zamindars* of Chatna were mostly also subordinates of the Malla kings but after decline of the Malla kings, they became independent. There is a *navaratna* temple in Rajagram near Bankura town. Generally the temple is also known as “Sridhar Temple” or “Basudev temple” (Saha: 1995: 295). Though there is no ancient inscription in the temple, but it is assumed that the zamindars of Chatna built it. It is assumed that the temple was built in the 19th century CE from the structure of the temple and the styles of dresses of sculptures

in the walls of the temple. In the temple, in modern Bengali script it is written that the temple is built in 1285 B.S. but we cannot be sure that the date is correct. Now what is *Navaratna* temple? If there is a single tower in the centre of the flat roof of a temple with four smaller turrets it is called a *pancha ratna* temple. If there is an additional storey, with four turrets at the corner, i.e. a total of nine towers, it is called a *nava ratna* temple. There are some terracotta motifs on the wall on the front side of the temple. The most interesting motifs are ten *avatars* of Lord Vishnu, the sage Narada, Lord Shiva, Vishnu reclining upon Seshnaga, a ghost, a man on a rhinoceros, Lord Rama and Sita, Vishwakarma on his elephant, Vishnu on Garuda, a master upon the shoulders of his servant, Devi Sati on the back of Shiva, a man on the back of an elephant and others. There are some floral and animal motifs also on the wall. In other side of the wall, some large figures including lord Krishna in *trivanga* position playing the flute accompanied by Radha surrounded by Gopis, Vishnu and Lakshmi surrounded by two dwarpalas and others. We also find a temple of Basuli in Chatna which was also built by the *zamindars* of Chatna. It is a *pancha ratna* temple. The image worshipped here is popularly known as Devi Basuli (Ghosh: 1950:21).

The village of Naricha under Patrasayer police station is eleven miles away from Bishnupur railway station. A *char chala* temple of Devi Sarbamangala is found here. It is believed that the local Choudhury family erected the temple. They were the generals of the Malla kingdom of Bishnupur. Based upon its style, the temple seems to have been built in the 18th century. The main deity here is an *astabhuj*a or eight-handed image of Mahisasuramardini- the form of Devi Durga in which she killed Mahisasura, the buffalo demon. It is 85cm in height and 52cm wide. There are also images of Devi Manasa, a local serpent deity, Devi Sarbamangala and an image of lord Vasudeva (Bandopadhyay: 1971: 62).

In the Ghosalpara neighbourhood of Patrasayer there are three temples adjacent to one

another. The first one is a *pancha ratna* temple of Shiva. On its façade there is a large sculpture of lord Shiva and Devi Parvati. The temple is 10 feet in length and 10 feet in width and 20 feet in height. The second one is an *athchala* temple and the third one is a *dalan* temple. There is also an *athchala* temple in Daspara of Patrasayer (Bandopadhyay: 1971: 68). It is dedicated to the *shalagram sila*. The inscription of the temple states that the temple was built in early 19th century CE. In Birsingha village under Patrasayer police station there is a *navaratna* temple of Radha Damodar Jiu. It is a brick temple. It was built in 1855 CE. It has some terracotta motifs on its façade.

In Saspur village under Indus police station we find a Damodar temple and 17 *ratna Rasmancha* or pavilions. The local Dey family built the temple. Though there is no inscription in the temple, there is an inscription in the Rasmancha. It records that the *Rasmancha* was built in late nineteenth century. There is a *dalan* temple in the north of the village. There is a *linga* form of lord Shiva who is popular as “Bunashiva”. The inscription in the temple clearly says that the temple is built in 1249 CE.

The village of Saharjora is under Barjora P.S. The village is famous for its tutelary deity Ambika. The temple of Devi Ambika is a modern *Dalan* temple. But the temple was perhaps renovated. There are also three temples of Lord Nandalal, Lord Madanmohan and Lord Kalachand respectively (Ghosh: 1950: 90).

Conclusion

In this paper we have given a brief account of some of the temples built the *zamindars* of Bankura district in West Bengal. Of the temples built by the *zamindars* of Bankura district we have been able to identify four different types: *Chala*, *Ratna*, *Deul* and *Dalan* temples. Generally *do chala* temples are seen to be more common, but few are also *athchala* temples. The *ratna* temples are mainly *pancha ratna* and *navaratna*. The number of *ratnas* increased over time. Generally each *ratna* is a *rekha deul* in shape. Sometimes



Fig. 8.1: Fourteen deuls in Devottar of Ajodhya in Bankura
(Photo credit: Author)



Fig. 8.2: The Girigobardhan temple of the Zamindar family of Ajodhya in Bankura
(Photo credit: Author)



Fig. 8.3: Charchala temple of Shiva in Ajodhya
(Photo credit: Author)



Fig. 8.4: Dolmancha in Patrabakhra
(Photo credit: Author)



Fig. 8.5: Balaram Jiu temple in Simlapal, Bankura
Photo credit: Tarasankar Panda



**Fig. 8.6: Radha-Ballav temple, Pathakpara, Bankura
(Photo credit: Author)**

some are different shaped. The *dalan* temples are of modern period. They were generally built after coming of British East India Company in India. There is a unique shape of architecture in Bankura and also some parts of Bengal i.e. *Rasmancha* or a pavilion. Generally, there are various types of motifs on the walls of the temples. Some of them are geometric designs; some are of the incidents from *Puranas* and various Hindu deities. Vaishnava deities and incidents from the

life of Krishna are very common. Some incidents are also taken from daily lives and local culture of the people. Thus we can conclude that though there are some developments or changes in the temples, temples built by the *zamindars* of Bankura district have continued the patronage of temple architecture of Bankura district which started with the Malla kings.

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