

Revisiting the Terracotta Temples of Cooch Behar: A Survey on Iconographic and Architectural Features

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Abstract: Temple in India is considered as an abode of God Almighty, a center of reverence. The Hindu temple, in more than one sense, epitomizes the numerous sides and complex processes of the cultural development of Hinduism through its architecture. The history of Indian temple architecture since its beginning has witnessed various stylistic trends found in all parts of India. From late mediaeval period Bengal may be singled out as a region which massively followed the application of terracotta as a medium of art in its architecture. Actually the topographical characteristics of Bengal favored this kind of artistic movements by virtue of which Bengal holds an important status in the architectural atlas of India. Though this type of exclusive and unique architectural style was mainly prevalent in the Southern part of Bengal but Cooch Behar (a peripheral part of Bengal) was also influenced by this trend which is proved by the construction of two rare and unique terracotta temples dating from the late mediaeval to the modern period. Through this article an attempt has been made to explore, examine and perceive the distinguishable features of these temples by undertaking field survey in Cooch Behar.

Keywords: Regionalism, Pluralism, Hybridism, Quadrangular, Amalgamation, Terracotta Plaques.

“Architecture is the matrix of civilization”

-Lethabyⁱ

The Gupta period marks the beginning of structural temple architecture. As evident from the extant monuments, there was experimentation in a number of forms and designs, out of which two significant temple styles evolved, one in the north and the other in the south. The following well defined types may be identified: 1) Flat Roofed, square temple with a shallow pillared porch in the front. 2) Flat Roofed, square temple with covered ambulatory around the sanctum and proceeded by Pillared porch, sometimes with a second storey above. 3) Square temple with a low and squat Sikhara (Tower) above. 4) Rectangular temple with an apsidal back and a barrel vaulted roof above and 5) Circular temple with Shallow rectangular projections at the four cardinal faces.

Neither the fourth nor in the fifth type seem to have any marked effect on subsequent development. But the first three types are seen as precursors of later Indian temple styles. Illustrative examples of the first include Kankali Devi Temple at Tigawa and Vishnu and Varaha temple at Eran, all in Madhya Pradesh. The second type is seen in the Parvati Temple at Nachna Kuthara, the Siva Temple at Bhumara, both in Madhya Pradesh. The example of third type of temple architecture is a disputable issue. Some archaeologists said that the Dasavatara temple at Deogarh (Jhansi District) and the brick temple at Bhitargaon are the examples of 3rd type of temple architecture. But the other did not agree on their view in this issueⁱⁱ. But all the experts agreed unanimously on one point that the brick temple of Bhitargaon (erected approximately 6th century A.D.) was one of the earliest finest representation of terracotta temples in this subcontinentⁱⁱⁱ. The various terracotta plaques (special reference on the *Gaṇēśa* icon with *mōdakain* one of his hand) in this temple are really praiseworthy and influenced greatly on the future terracotta temples in Bengal

The second and the third type of Gupta temple to be called “Vimana” (Storeyed) and “Sikhara” (cruciform) types. In the following centuries, these two types supposedly underwent further improvements and crystallized to form two distinctive temple styles respectively in the South and North.

The major temple styles listed and described in the “Vastu Shasta” texts are the Nagara, Dravida and Vesara, of which the prime position is assigned to the Nagara of North India as the leading style. Next in important is the Dravida in South India. All the available texts are agreed on the point that the Nagara style was prevalent in the region between Himalayas and Vindhya. The Dravida country is well known and the texts rightly confine the

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Dravida style to that part of the country lying between the river Krishna and Kape Kanyakumari; while the Vesara style is sometimes associated with the area between the Vindhyas and Krishna River. Hardy points out that Nagara and Dravida Should be understood as architectural languages, in the sense that they provide a vocabulary, a range of elements and a family of forms which can be put together in different ways^{iv}.

The history of temple architecture in Bengal suitably categorized into two periods: I. Early Hindu (up to the end of the 13th century) & II. Hindu revival (16th to 19th century)^v. In the first phase Bengal temple mainly known as one of the counterpart of the Nagara style. The temples in this period have mostly disappeared but from the remains of the few structures we knew that the chief style prevalent in this period is the tall curvilinear *rekhadeul* with the common north Indian *latinasikhara*^{vi}. Bengal temples in this period mainly build under the royal patronage of the Pala & Sena rulers (8th -12th century A.D.) without some innovative and unique elements. Siddhesvari temple at Barakar in Burdwan considered as the chief example of the earliest temple still standing which undoubtedly belongs to this group^{vii}. The history of the construction of terracotta temples also commenced from this period which finally culminated into next stage. Some of the notable important temples build in this period are- *JatarDeul* (South 24 Pargana), *Sun Temple of Sonatpaul* (Bankura), *Deulghata* (Purulia) etc.^{viii}

Temple architecture of Bengal received a new impetus in its later phase (popularly known as 'revival phase') by the emergence of unique Bengal school which comprises of a series of analogous distinct temple styles. In this phase Bengal temple differentiate itself from the mainstream North Indian Nagara style by incorporating some local and foreign attributes. The key elements which mainly responsible for these innovative diverse stylistic trends in Bengal are **Regionalism, Pluralism & Hybridism**. These rudiments played a very crucial role to set the background which finally helps to culminate the appearance of a distinct Bengal temple school. For instance in the second phase of Bengal temple architecture probably marked by its distinctive regional identity which helped to reduce the influence of the leading North Indian Nagara style on Bengal temples. This was best illustrated by the origin of two completely new styles of temple in Bengal- I. *Hut* or *Chālā* style inspired by the general village house made by bamboo with sloping thatched roof and II. *Ratnaor Pinnacle* style inspired by the Islamic architecture^{ix}. Apart from these two major unique types of temple other minor styles of temple but unique in importance are- **3. DOMED Roofing**, **4. SPIRED Roofing**, **5. Flat-roofed (DALAN/CHADNI)**, **6. RĀSMAÑCHA, DOLMAÑCHA & TULASĪMAÑCHA** & **7. Miscellaneous** types^x. Terracotta temple building activity also received some new impetus in this period primarily by the active patronage of the famous Malla dynasty of Bishnupur along with some enthusiastic local Kings, *Zamindars* and merchant class who were influenced by the Vaishnavite movement organized by the famous Vaishnava saint Shri *Chaitanya* in mediaeval Bengal^{xi}.

According to Stella Kramrisch terracotta art classified in to two sections^{xii}-

a) The Ageless- executed 'in the round' shape mainly used in various ceremonial programs (example: several terracotta toys, bullock carts, icons of gods and goddesses found by the excavation work at *Pandu Rajar Dhibi, Chandraketugarh, Paharpur, Mahsthangarh*).

b) The Time bound- executed 'in relief' shape mainly created for the satisfaction of the artistic mind^{xiii}, used as a designing motif in the panels of temples (especially in 'revival age').

The artist generally prepares first the clay models from which moulds were made. After that these moulds were burnt in fire, then casting out and dried carefully and finally cut out^{xiv}. In such way the terracotta plaques were prepared and used as an ornamentation of temple art. Generally the use of terracotta as a medium of temple art may be categorized into following divisions^{xv}-

- a) Trimmings of stone relief works on brick temples
- b) Embellishments of terracotta decoration on laterite temples
- c) Mixed medium of terracotta and stone relief decoration
- d) Paintings as a medium of temple decoration
- e) Wood carving as a medium of temple decoration
- f) Terracotta- stucco as a mixed medium of decoration

Cooch Behar is an indispensable part of the north-eastern region of Bengal from very ancient times. Its geographical position is also very unique and interesting. Architecturally temples of this zone also demonstrated firmly its innovativeness along with hybridism from late medieval times. Socio-cultural-political context & geographical condition chiefly exerted its influences on the style of temple architecture in Cooch Behar. Categorically most of the temple in Cooch Behar belongs to the miscellaneous type. But an interesting point may also to be noted here that apart from its long distance from the Southern part of Bengal (especially Bankura, Bishnupur, Birbhum etc.) which considered as the prime center of the construction of traditional terracotta temples of Bengal, this peripheral part of Bengal also failed to dislocate itself from this trend and two miscellaneous type terracotta temples were built from late medieval to modern times. Before discussing the iconographic and architectural features of this temple it is very much important to know that there were two trends prevailed simultaneously regarding construction of temples in Cooch Behar. - I. Under Royal patronage & II. By Personal initiative. The construction of the terracotta temples of Cooch Behar also fall under same category.

Bhitarkuthi Terracotta Śiva Temple: The construction of Bhitarkuthi terracotta Śiva temple belongs to 2nd category. This temple was built by Gourinandan Mustafi approximately in 1720-1735 A.D., who was worked as a “Khasnobis” under Cooch King Maharaja Upendranarayan (1714-1763 A.D.) & later as a “Prodhankarbari” (i.e. Prime Minister) under Maharaja Devendranarayan (1763-1765 A.D.). The temple approximately 30 ft. in height and there is an amalgamation of Bengali traditional *Charchālā* style surmounted by Islamic dome with unique octagonal phase. This temple is a finest representation of Indo-Sarasanic architecture. A *Śivaliṅga* (2.5 ft. in height approximately) was also installed in this temple by Gourinandan Mustafi himself^{xvi}. Professor Bagchi draws our attention by mentioning one important noticeable item i.e. addition of latticed window in this temple which clearly signify the cultural negotiations with the Islamic tradition^{xvii} in this marginal part of Bengal. Another unique feature of this temple is its unique 93 quadrangular terracotta plaques which include the relief sculptural panel representation of Brahmanical Gods and Goddesses (example- Dasavatara of Vishnu, Mahisasurmardini Durga, Laxmi, Saraswati etc.). In these terracotta plaques the influence of religious, legendary and also folk art are also prominent. By the calamitous earthquake in 1897 the four-cornered pillars which elongated on the top of the dome (3 ft in height), broke into pieces and the temple also fall down to 8 ft. Since 1949 (after Cooch Behar merged with India) very long time this temple actually becomes an enclave of Bangladesh. But after the famous “India-Bangladesh enclave agreement” in 2015 this temple now becomes the part of India^{xviii}. In the context of this temple one important reference must be mentioned here that the construction of this octagonal Indo-Sarasanic terracotta temples may be one of the important part of the process of similar type structure build in Rangpur and Mymensingh district (now in Bangladesh) in same century (i.e. deul of Kashipur Rajbari in Mymensingh & Kali temple of Ulipur, Dimla in Rangpur)^{xix}.



Bhitarkuthi Terracotta Śiva Temple (Photograph taken by the Author himself)



Terracotta Plaques with various contents in Bhitarkuthi Terracotta Śiva Temple (women musician, a saint worshipping Śivaliṅga, floral motifs etc.)



Terracotta Plaques of Mahisasurmardini, Ganesha, Saraswati etc. in Bhitarkuthi Terracotta Śiva Temple

Siddhanatha Śiva Terracotta Temple: The next and last of its kind is the famous Siddhanatha Śiva Terracotta Temple at Dhaluabari (located 5 km away from Cooch Behar town on the way to Cooch Behar Sadar- Dinhata high road). Dhaluabari is the previous capital of the Koch Kings Since 1821.^{xx} This temple belongs to 1st category as because it was totally built under Royal patronage. But the main debatable issue is that under whose direction and supervision this temple was erected. According to Madhav Swaroop Vats (then [1950-1953] director general of A.S.I) this temple was constructed under the supervision of Maharaja Upendra Narayan (1714-1763 A.D.). But Harendra Narayan Chaudhuri in his book “The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement” clearly stated that the construction work of this temple initially started by Maharaja Harendra Narayan (1783-1839 A.D.)^{xxi} But finally completed by his son Shivendra Narayan (1839-1847 A.D.) & he also installed the Siddhanatha Śivaliṅga in it after a royal ceremony^{xxii}. From the famous “*Rajopakhyana*” of Joynath Munshi we found the same information^{xxiii}.

Another debatable issue is what the actual architectural style of this temple. Scholars and experts gave diverse opinion and explanation regarding this matter. On one side again Madhav Swaroop Vats opined that the architectural style of this temple is similar like the ‘Beguniya’ type of architectural style^{xxiv} of Barkar, Asansol. But on general viewpoint it looks like *ratna* type of temple. According to some expert it is a finest example of *pancharatna*

type of temple in this periphery but interesting point is that the central *Pinnacle* is absent here. Buchanon Hamilton also did not find this one when he visited this temple (1808 A.D.)^{xxv}. So on another viewpoint some scholars enumerated that it is a quadrangular temple which consisted by four *Pinnacle* in four cardinal points which resembles like the *Sarvatobhadra*^{xxvi} type of temple mentioned in the "*Vāstuśāstra*". Same type of temple also seen in the famous Kamakshya temple complex (Kali temple) in Assam which akin like this temple in respect of architectural details^{xxvii}. By undertaking field survey the authors directly noticing this temple and from this observation it is undoubtedly confirmed by us that this temple is a finest example of the amalgamation of two unique style i.e. fusion of traditional Bengali *Charchālā* type surmounted by four *Ratna* or *Pinnacle* style inspired by the Islamic architecture. Unquestionably this temple is a prominent and beautiful example of Indo-Islamic architecture which is also reflected by the introduction of *Mihrab* (i.e. semicircular niche) inside the northern wall of this temple. The *līṅga* (near about 4.5 ft. in height) installed inside the shrine popularly known as Siddhanatha Śiva and this aniconic object (headed by a hooded snake icon) with *Gouripatta* is the prime center of worship. The temple is south facing with the height of 25 ft. approximately & 2 ft. thickness of the wall having two gateways. Southern gateway considered as a main gateway. The upper section of the both entrance doorway are very unique because it reflected like the traditional *chālā* house of South Bengal^{xxviii}. The old and small typed of bricks were the main building materials used for the construction of this shrine.

But the main importance of this temple lies in its rich terracotta decoration which is very unique in this periphery. The terracotta decoration mainly covers the frontal wall (i.e. facade) of this temple and are well proportioned both vertically and horizontally^{xxix}. This temple has approximately 73 quadrangular terracotta plaques which reflects socio-cultural and political aspect in this periphery. Some important and noticeable plaques which contained - *VighnēśvaraGanēśa* , Joydurga, floral motifs, Indigenous(Koch) soldier holding gun, British soldier holding gun, dancing man etc. attracts the attention of the viewer. So undoubtedly the terracotta plaques of this temple covers wide range of varieties relating to the mythology and also folk art also. According to Professor Bagchi, the terracotta decoration of this temple though initiated in an experimental mode but unquestionably executed in a beautiful way^{xxx}.

In the context of this temple an important point which come to our mind must be mentioned here that the architectural style of this temple may be influenced to some extent by the famous *Radhabinod Temple of Joydev* at Ilambazar which was constructed at 1683 A.D. unlike it has triple arched doorway which was absent in Siddhanatha Śiva Terracotta Temple. But the arrangement of terracotta plaques and the amalgamation of traditional Bengali *Charchālā* type surmounted by *Ratna* or *Pinnacles* – are the same features which applicable on both temples.



Introduction of *Mihrab* (approximately 8 ft. in height) along with the famous SiddhanathaŚivalīṅga



Terracotta Plaques with various contents in Siddhanatha Śiva Terracotta Temple (*Vighnēśvara Ganēśa, Joydurga & Indigenous (Koch) soldier holding & aiming the gun*)



Terracotta Plaques with various contents Siddhanatha Śiva Terracotta Temple (*British soldier holding the gun & floral motifs*)



Siddhanatha Śiva Terracotta Temple (Photograph taken by the Author himself)



Radhabinod Temple of Joydev at Ilambazar (Photograph taken by the Author himself)

So from the above all discussion it is clearly recognized Cooch Behar though situated in the marginal part of Bengal but also has a few but qualitatively remarkable specimen of terracotta temple. It is undoubtedly prove that in building these temples influence of temple of South Bengal generally falls in it but on the whole these temples successfully retained their originality, assimilation and uniqueness by the inclusion of folk culture in its sculptural panel & introduction of some architectural features which clearly prove the cultural negotiations with Islamic tradition. So unquestionably we can say that the terracotta temples of Cooch Behar contributing impressively for the versatility & enrichment of Bengal & Indian temple architecture.

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^{xxvi}*Sarvatobhadra*- A type of building, pavilion, hall, a four-fold image one on each side of a four faced column- Acharya, Prasanna Kumar. *A Dictionary of Hindu Architecture (Manasara series I)*. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2015, P.624.

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