

Radhe Shyam and Radha Mohana Temples of Bishnupur

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Introduction

Which is the best 'Temple Town' of West Bengal? One group of elite travelers will award this title to Kalna; yet others will argue in favour of Bishnupur. I love both. I cannot decide which one can score over the other. Because the Editor has requested me to write about temples of Bankura, I zeroed on the photos of temples of Bishnupur in my HDD... And I decided to showcase Radhe Shyam and Radha Mohana temples – two among the less famous temples of Bishnupur – yet these two offer excellent oeuvre of wall-reliefs. These temples are of 'Ek-Ratna' (single spire) construction and made of laterite stone with thick white coating.

We find the finest among the 'Panch-Ratna' (five spires), 'Ek-Ratna' and 'Jor-Bangla' temple architecture at Bishnupur. I have visited many sites of terra cotta temples in West Bengal. What appealed to me most is the sense of proportion among the architects of Bishnupur. If I were younger and equipped with a professional degree in Architecture instead of Mechanical Engineering, I would have pursued a project of identifying the dimensional proportions of West Bengal's temples to arrive at the aesthetics of that of temple architecture!

History

A robbery in the Malla kingdom in 16th century changed the face of Bengal's architecture. Vaishnav guru Srinivas Acharya and two other greats, Narattoma Das and Shyamanand were taking three cartloads of scriptures from Vrindavan to Puri. The writings were priceless...these carts contained books by great Vaishnavites Sri Jeeva Goswami, Sri Rup Goswami and Raghunath Das among others. The dacoits knew that cartloads of great treasure were being moved from one location to another. They had no other clue. There were only ten foot soldiers 'protecting' these cartloads. The 'treasure' was easily looted during one night when all the travelers were asleep. This happened at Gopalpur village, within the territory of the Malla king.

Srinivas Acharya stayed back in Bengal determined to recover the books. The robbers' allegiance was to the local King Vir Hambir. Srinivas had a face-to-face interaction with his court's religious supremo Vyasacharya where Srinivas Acharya demonstrated his depth of knowledge regarding Vaishnav religion. King became his ardent disciple and the books were restored to Srinivas.

Vaishnav religion had strong impact on cultural life of Bengal. Malla kingdom was free from Muslim dominance and became a hub for Vaishnav religion and culture during 16th to 18th centuries.

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According to books and articles I read on temples of Bishnupur, the first 'Pancha-Ratna' temple built during 1639 AD did not survive. The next one to be built was 'Shyama Raya' temple - one of the finest in Bengal. Close to it came up 'Jor-Bangla' temple, Radhe Shyam temple and Lalji temple during the course of time. Radhe Shyam temple, opposite the new Lalji temple, was built by Malla king Chaitanya Singha in 1759 AD. This can be called the 'youngest' among the temples which were built during the heyday of Malla kingdom. 'Radha Mohana' temple was built by Srimani Devi, one of the consorts of King Vir Singha in 1737 AD. This temple is the 1st one a tourist comes across as s/he enters the ASI Complex, south of Lalbandh.



'Radhe Shyam' temple and 'Radha Mohana' temple

'Radhe Shyam' temple is 'Ek-Ratna' - single spire temple with a square base measuring 11.1 m and 10.7 m in height. The spire is cylindrical, with semi-spherical dome. The idea of installing a spire on top of the temple, according to some writers, came from the then prevailing Muslim architecture. The deity used to be placed in the spire during festival days so that a large crowd of devotees can view the idol from a distance. The work on this temple is most elaborate and aesthetically pleasing among the laterite temples I have come across.

Entrances to the sanctum for devotees as well as for services have three arches. The arches on the front side has lost most of the wall-reliefs. Ditto on the arches on the service side of the temple. Two rows of wall-reliefs set inside alcoves, each on right and left flanks of the front face, go up to the top. Two rows of alcoves connect these two verticals and offer the best of the oeuvre. Here, the wall-reliefs are based on Ramayana and 'Dashavatar' (Ten incarnations) of Vishnu.

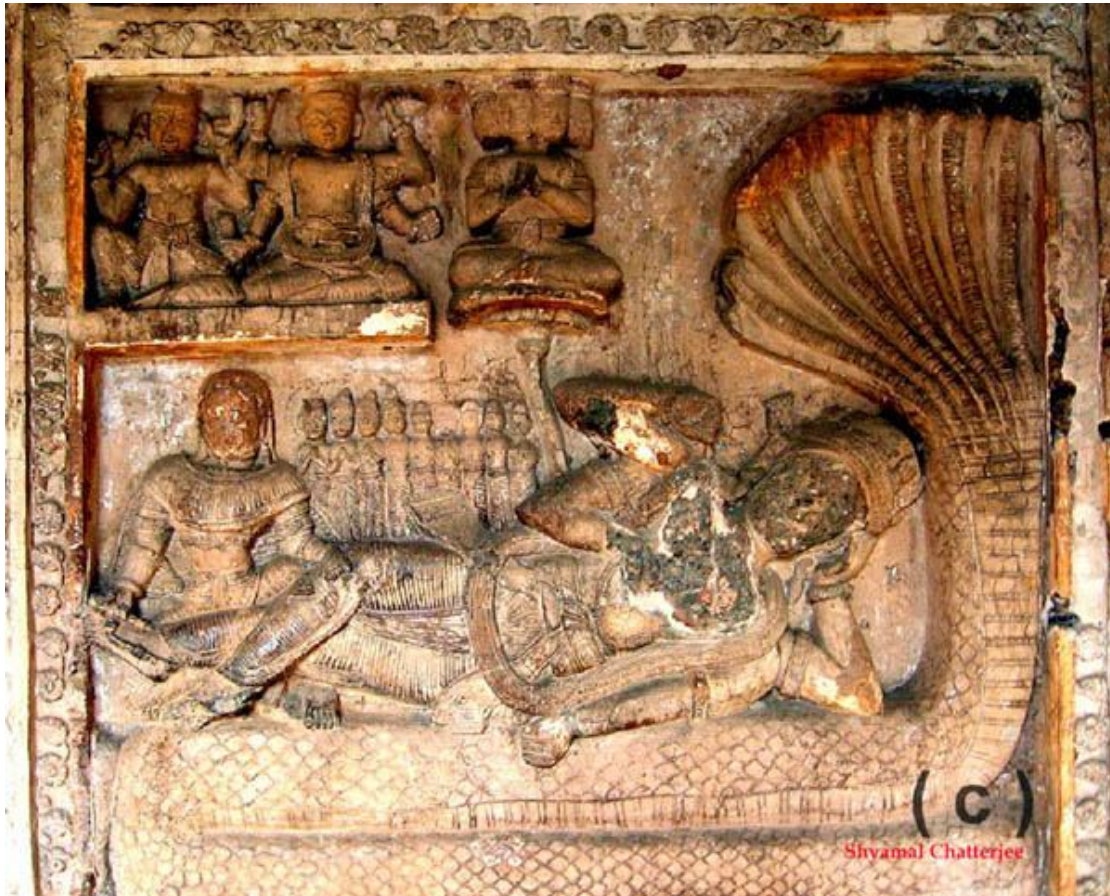


Clockwise from top LH: Balarama, Rama, Varaha and NriSingha Avatar

The walls inside have excellent wall-reliefs too - much bigger size than the ones on the outside. Among them, 'Ananta-sayane Vishnu' (Vishnu resting on Ananta) is very well-known. A favourite of mine too. I also like the 'Sharho-bhuja Chaitanya' (Chaitanya Dev with six hands) and a panel on 'Krsna Leela'. We find 'Sharho-bhuja Chaitanya' wall-relief in many temples including Madan Mohan temple of Vishnupur and 'Ananta vasudev' temple at Bansberia, Hooghly.



'ChaitanyaDev' with six hands. Top two hands hold a bow, middle two a flute and the lower two a stick and a 'kamandolu'- pot for holy water. Imageries of Rama, Krsna and merged into one. 'ChaitanyaDev' here is projected as an incarnation of Vishnu.



Vishnu resting on 'Ananta' the snake, his feet up on the lap of Devi Lakshmi. Brahma sits on a lotus emanating of Vishnu's navel. Siva and other gods are among the celestial onlookers.

'Radha Mohana' temple too is 'Ek-Ratna' - single spire temple with a square base measuring 11.1 m and 9.2 m in height. The spire is hexagonal, with 'rekha'-styled dome. We can visualize the beauty of the temple when it was new - the 'dochala'(two slanting rooves) three-arched entrance adding to



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the same. Both the front and the service side of the temple have three arches. Arches, pillars and inside walls were quite artfully done – quite apparent from the 3rd photo here.

Sadly, a lot of the wall-reliefs are damaged. The white coat has suffered erosion because of weather and human touch. Some of the details still are quite attractive, though the laterite has been exposed. We find an 'Ananta-sayane Vishnu' (Vishnu resting on Ananta) here too, which was definitely as grand as the one in 'Radhe Shyam' temple. Time has ravaged this wall-relief – I feel sad when I see the blow-up on my computer screen. Wall-reliefs in the alcoves are quite skillfully done, very appealing to the discerning traveler. We find scenes from Ramayana, KrsnaLeela, social scenes and various motifs on the pillars and arches of the temple. ASI tries to maintain green surroundings.



Details of work on the front façade. We find Krishna Leela scenes in the lower portion. On the upper side, we find scenes from Ramayana – mainly 'AranyaKando' to 'SundaraKanda' – Rama, Seeta, Hanuman, Shurpanakha, Maarich, Jatayu et all.

(c)

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The readers of Chitrolekha International Magazine who want to view more photos of these temples and/or other terra cotta temples of Bishnupur may please visit my blogs in

www.hubpages.com/shyamchat,

<http://przmm.blogspot.com>,

<http://tctob.blogspot.com>.



Two scenes from Ramayana - on top, Hanuman calls out to Seeta in 'Ashokbaon' as two female guards are in vigil. At bottom, we find 'Rakshasha' guards fight with Hanumana.



Shyamal Chatterjee is an Engineer by profession from IIT, Kharagpur (mechanical engineering, 1968). Presently, he is retired from professional life. He is now working on Iconography of terra cotta temples of Bengal. He is also associated with PANIIT and actively supports the IITians for ITI Project. His works can be viewed in: <http://przmm.blogspot.com>, <http://tctob.blogspot.com> & <http://hubpages.com/shyamchat>.